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Power as resistance: Using students' subjugated knowledges to inform the Social Work curriculum

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This paper makes use of a Foucauldian theoretical framework, referring to Foucault's (1977a) concepts of 'disciplinary practices' and 'subjugated knowledges' to examine the changes made to a social work curriculum on Child and Family Care at the University of the Western Cape, an historically disadvantaged higher education institution in Cape Town, South Africa.

Keywords: students' subjugated knowledges, social work curriculum, disciplinary practices

Introduction

For many years, I had been concerned about the appropriateness of the social work curriculum, particularly in the field of Child and Family studies, both as a social work student myself at various historically advantaged institutions in South Africa and then as a supervisor and teacher at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). This was further verified by interviews I conducted with students at UWC who complained that the theory that they were exposed to in the course on Child and Family Care was not useful or relevant for them in their practical work which they have to engage in as social work students. Most of these texts were based on functionalist theories which had been critiqued in sociology and anthropology, but which still had (and still do have) currency in social work and psychology, but which are not compulsory in terms of accreditation. These functionalist texts view 'the family' as an entity and tend to decontextualise family from external social issues, focusing on internal dynamics only, rather than regarding family as cultural or social practice. Furthermore, texts to which the students were exposed dealt with sophisticated family therapy techniques and I questioned how applicable these were to the South African situation where the majority of the population were struggling with bread and butter issues of survival.

The paper is based on the assumption that students' reflections on their own family life circumstances can provide valuable insights for the social work curriculum. I was interested in developing innovative learning practices which incorporate students' experiences and their critical thoughts on these. I based my approach to learning on socio-cultural, poststructural, critical and feminist pedagogies (Biggs, 2003; Ropers-Huilman, 2001; Hildebrand, 1999; Light & Cox, 2001; Minton, 2005; Sanchez-Casal & Macdonald, 2002; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). Feminist teaching can be seen as 'good teaching practice' which seeks ways to encourage students to express their personal experiences and then compare these to theoretical approaches – which is what I attempted to do.

This paper examines the limitations of traditional social work texts and offers an alternative to these - the Family-in-Community profile assignment, where students' subjugated knowledges can be used to inform the curriculum. The Family-in-Community profile

described in this paper was developed to give students an opportunity reflect on their own families in relation to issues of gender, race, class and generation. It thus tapped into the students' situated knowledges in relation to their prior learning experiences and provide tasks which would facilitate students' active involvement in a sense-making of their experiences and their interactions with critical literature (Dysthe, 2002). This assignment was developed with a sensitivity to the various forms of knowledge – cultural, personal, theoretical and utilised all these forms of knowledge in engaging the learners or students with the tasks. Johnstonn & Olekalnns (2002) found that deeper learning and critical thinking are more likely to occur where students reflect on their own learning and where the stimulus for learning are issues from previous experiences and where assessment practices reward critically analysing material. Students not only reflected on their experiences of family-in-community, but through critical texts were able to reassess their experiences. Boud and Knights (2004:27) emphasise the importance of learners being capacitated to reassess their experiences and the assumptions under which they are operating through means of challenging or confronting their experiences. I contend that the students were able to engage in deep learning experiences through this module.

In this paper I elaborate on the Foucauldian notion of disciplinary practices in social work and proposing an alternative to these by examining how students' own perceptions of how the social inequalities of race, gender and generation have impacted on their own lives and those of their family members has potential to inform the curriculum.. In so doing, the paper gives legitimacy and currency to students' own knowledges which I argue, have until now been subjugated in two major ways: Firstly, as students, they are not given the opportunity to contribute their own life experiences to inform curriculum content, but are expected to engage with contemporary textbooks used in social work, in this way, they are viewed as consumers rather than producers of knowledge. Secondly, social work students at the University of the Western Cape (hereafter referred to as UWC) are drawn from the previously and, I would argue, still disadvantaged majority in South Africa whose voices remain marginalised and their experiences have not been documented. The major purpose of this paper is to show that useful insights for the social work curriculum could emerge from the process and product of the students' written reflections on their own family circumstances, mediated through a critical stance towards race, gender and generation.

UWC is an Historically Black University (HBU) or as it is currently known, an Historically Disadvantaged Institution (HDI). This reflects its history as an apartheid-state creation, as it was specifically designed to be a university for those categorised as 'the coloured population' of South Africa. The Western Cape is also home to the better academically resourced and respected Universities of Cape Town and Stellenbosch. These are both Historically White Universities (HWUs) or Historically Advantaged Institutions (HAIs) reserved under apartheid for White English and Afrikaans speaking students respectively. The Western Cape was specifically regarded by the apartheid authorities as the place where those classified as coloured were supposed to reside and this was enforced by the Coloured Labour Preference policy, implemented in 1954, which allowed employment possibilities to those categorised as coloured, while excluding those categorised as African, who had to apply for permits to work in the Western Cape (Ramphela 1993).

Initially UWC was referred to in a derogatory manner as a 'bush college' by those who studied there, and regarded as an apartheid-style inferior form of tertiary education institution. There was much activism at UWC against what students regarded as apartheid education by government-appointed conservative lecturing staff. During the 1980s, however,

UWC became a respected institution, which attracted into its employ progressive anti-apartheid academics, and it became known as the 'intellectual home of the left' under the rectorship of Professor Jakes Gerwel. Since then there has been an affirmative action admissions policy which has encouraged students from the 'disadvantaged majority' to study at the university. This disadvantaged majority includes African language speaking students from all over South Africa, particularly women from poor, rural backgrounds. Thus the current student population is different to that of the previous era, when the vast majority of students were coloured and from the Western Cape area.

The Prevailing Paradigm in Social Work Child and Family Care Texts

Macro-social, cultural and economic factors were and still are generally ignored in social work courses on Family and Child Care in South Africa. This is reflected in the fact that the predominant theoretical approach to teaching courses on Family and Child Care in South Africa was, and has remained, systems theory, which occludes various issues in analysing social problems. The systems theory approach constructs families as systems rather than as specific cultural and social practices. Socially produced practices and relationships are treated as properties of individuals who are then held accountable for whatever position they find themselves in. My own experience and that of the students was that, in many cases, the socio-political and -cultural circumstances in South Africa had a significant impact on how people behaved and on what people were able to do.

My concerns about the relevance of these perspectives and the possibility that they pathologised students' experiences provided a starting point for my interest in how students engaged with reflections on their own family circumstances. Furthermore, I was interested in the interrogation of these experiences in terms of how privileges and disadvantages in relation to race, gender and generation have affected students and their family members' ability to flourish as human beings.

I draw upon Foucault's (1977a; 1980) notions of 'discourse', 'disciplinary practice' and 'regimes of truth' to ascertain the potential impacts of traditional texts presented in Child and Family Care courses on students such as those from UWC. I argue that typical traditional texts can be viewed as what Foucault (1977a) refers to as a 'disciplinary practice' in that it creates a sense of what is normal and proper to do and think about 'the family' and social work's response to this situation. I propose that students' accounts of their own family practices represent forms of subjugated knowledges which are potentially useful for the social work curriculum and which are in opposition to expert knowledges such as are presented in these traditional texts.

Social workers as arbiters of the 'normal'

Building upon Foucault's critique of the human science professions, Jacques Donzelot (1979) and Nancy Fraser (1989) have written about social workers as professionals who intervene in the realm that has come to be known as 'the social'. Donzelot (1979) described the realm of the 'social' as neither public nor private. Rather, he claimed, the 'social' constitutes a new hybrid realm in which professions like psychiatry and social work exert power through scrutinising and weighing up the intimate details of people's lives and intervening with suggestions and prescriptions for behaviour. In this way, social work as a discipline determines for its clients what is normal. As a profession, social work has also developed various forms of 'assessment' (to determine whether family members are 'normal') and of

‘treatment’ (to deal with those who fall short of the norms). The social work practices and principles behind these methods are made to appear timeless and natural, in such a way that social work educators, practitioners, and students come to accept these norms without questioning their socially and politically constructed nature. A consequence is that social work texts make it possible, or indeed require, in particular times and places, that students accept what should be regarded as ‘the truth’ about ‘the family’ and what social workers should do in relation to deviations from the realisation of those truths.

Because social work texts have conveyed the idea of ‘family problems’ as ‘pathologies’ which can be ‘repaired’ or ‘cured’ by social workers through their giving attention to the communication patterns of members living in a household, they represent what Foucault (1980) would term a ‘regime of truth’, or a dominant discursive regime. This ‘regime of truth’ creates the types of discourse it accepts, and purports to function as ‘the truth’ about what family life is supposed to be. In other words, it exercises power over, regulates and governs the reader’s thoughts on family life and, in so doing, organises the reader’s experience. As Nancy Fraser (1989:145) has put it, such discourses lend to the received idea of what family life is an ‘aura of facticity that discourages contestation’, thus excluding alternative ways of understanding family life. The underlying assumptions behind much of what is presented as ‘truth’ in the readings set for courses such as those in Family and Child Care programmes is not made accessible to students, nor are they ever explicitly interrogated as part of such study programmes.

Nancy Fraser (1989:156) also sees the ‘social’ as a site of discourse about people’s needs, specifically about problematic needs which have broken out of the domestic and/or official economic spheres that earlier contained them as ‘private matters’. In this terrain of the ‘social’, Fraser identifies a number of competing discourses or ways of talking about such problematic needs. One is the needs discourse of experts – the social workers or ‘family therapists’ whose *raison d’être* is to intervene in a situation defined as problematic. This is the needs discourse implicit in traditional texts presented to social work students in Child and Family Care courses in South Africa. A second discourse identified by Fraser (1989) is the oppositional needs discourse in which social movements such as black, gay, lesbian, clients or workers articulate their views. Such a discourse subverts official discourses in that it reflects the voices of those ‘from below’, as Fraser (1989:171) puts it. She is referring to those who have been marginalised, disdained or ignored and are regarded as deviant in terms of societal norms.

I contend that students’ accounts of their families form part of this latter type of social discourse because they give voice to those who, at least implicitly, are resisting and contesting expert visions of how they are positioned. They also give voice to the needs of people who have been marginalised in various ways and to a set of articulated alternative and politicised views of family practices.

Subjugated knowledges

Alongside the official body of social work knowledge contained in texts, is the knowledge that students have of their own lived experiences which is often at odds with what they read. The knowledge that social work students have of their own families could be considered to be what Foucault described as ‘subjugated knowledges’. He defined these as:

...a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity..... It is through the reappearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work (1980:81-2).

UWC social work students' descriptions of their family lives are of particular interest in the South African landscape as many of their families are located on the margins of society and have been the targets of various forms of 'disqualification' as Foucault (1980) would term it. Their accounts have certainly been unrepresented, and diverge considerably from official accounts of family lives such as those described in conventional social work texts.

Students' accounts have the potential to challenge the meaning-making of social work experts. Because traditional textbook notions of 'the family' subject students to normalising truths, which have the potential to shape their ideas of themselves as students and potential social workers, I wanted to provide opportunities for students to resist being complicit in their own subjugation. I tried to create these opportunities through the revision of the Family-in-Community Profile, an assignment which second year students conducted on their own family circumstances at the end of their second year. In viewing their family lives and circumstances critically through the lenses of race, gender and generation, students are given the opportunity, as part of their training, to actively engage with the normative assumptions or 'doxas' about 'the family' in relation to their own situations. The validity of this process is emphasised by Foucault, in the context of prisoners' subjugated knowledges:

When prisoners began to speak they possessed an individual theory of prisons, the penal system, and justice. It is this form of discourse which ultimately matters, a discourse against power, the counter-discourse of prisoners and those we call delinquents – and not a theory *about* delinquency. (Foucault 1977b: 209)

Power as resistance: Using students' subjugated knowledges to inform the curriculum

While Michel Foucault wrote about the disciplinary nature of power, he also noted that power can be exercised as a form of resistance (Foucault 1979). If the nexus of power and knowledge is acknowledged in the curriculum, students can be alerted to how normalising discourses, found in mainstream texts on 'the family', attempt to socialise social work teachers and students into specific types of knowledge.

It is generally social work educators whose knowledge is given public credit and credibility as being professional and 'expert knowledge', rather than students' own ideas and experiences, which, as I have already discussed, remain hidden and unacknowledged as valuable sources of knowledge. Those who occupy privileged positions, such as social work writers and educators, are generally unaware of how these positions have influenced their lives (Hardy 2001; Tronto 1993; Swigonski 1996; Schiele 1996). For example, race as a category has been considered in relation to black families, but white families have not been seen or named as such, being the centred norm in the social sciences and the popular imagination (Frankenberg 1993; Kincheloe et al. 1998; Chambers 2001). 'Other' families, once raced, are seen as exotic and worthy of study, whereas white families are 'normal' – just families (Yuval-Davis 1997). My contention is that traditional Family and Child Care texts

are premised on claims to truth which are actually historically and culturally limited and specific, but not acknowledged as being so. Instead they are decontextualised and presented to students as generalisable, universally applicable, objective and neutral treatises on 'the family'. As Swigonski (1996) notes, privileges make people feel at home in the world and take for granted that they are the centre of their world where social, political, economic and other resources are available. Exclusion, on the other hand, de-centres or marginalises individuals who have less access to such resources. Moreover, those who are marginalised are commonly deprived of the discursive space to define themselves in their own terms and have, therefore, to subscribe to the definitions of themselves by those who are in power in order to survive. I attempted provide an opportunity to students, as those who have been marginalised, to open up discursive space to which they have not previously had access in two ways: a) by presenting alternative perspectives and images which offer another non-hegemonic, image of what can and often does constitute family practice; and (b) by exposing the ways in which conventional representations, as seen in the standard texts, effectively marginalise these alternative images by othering them as non-normative.

In order to give visibility to the diversity of student voices that have been ignored in conventional textbook notions of 'the family', I focus on the specificity of students' accounts of practices in their own families. Creating such a discursive space can give both social work students and social work educators a context in which to focus upon possible approaches to social work with regard to family practices in South Africa. In having students conduct their own research from the perspective of race, gender and generation, the possibility exists for students and educators to develop a more reflexive account of family relationships in South Africa. Through giving students access to alternative readings on 'the family' and having them reflect on their own circumstances in the light of these readings, I have presented students with an opportunity to unravel the discursive power of traditional texts. In this way, they are able to reconstitute their ideas of 'family', family practice and family experience through a reflective process, and to resist the positionings made available to them in dominant discourses (White and Epston 1990; White 1995, 2000; Pease and Fook 1999; Pease 2002). This process creates spaces for students to think critically in relation to their own families. Thus, as part of the curriculum, students are provided with opportunities for what Foucault (1988:155) termed the 'exercise of freedom': thinking critically or in opposition, questioning the way in which they view their circumstances and developing the possibilities of oppositional or alternative counter-hegemonic discourses. This exercise of freedom promotes 'reflective indocility' by providing the means to unmask assumptions in 'expert discourses', and thus resist them (Dahlberg et al. 1999:79). I will now discuss the findings of one section of the Family-in-Community Profile, that of institutional racism in order to give an example of the results of students' reflections on the impact of racism, gender and generation on themselves and their family members.

Students' Accounts of Institutional Racism

The institutional racism which students' accounts revealed, constituted an interconnected series of public displays of state power, similar to what Foucault (1977a) would refer to as 'old power', using public spectacles such as torture to mark the bodies of the victims with infamy, presenting them as dangerous and deviant and thus socialising and disciplining the bodies and minds of the public through example (Adair 2001; Tangenburg and Kemp 2002). Although incidents described in students' accounts of public humiliation, punishment and exposure through the sanction of apartheid policies happened from the 1960s to 1980s,

students' vivid descriptions of the impact of institutional racist practices on their family members indicate that the effects of these practices are still very pervasive.

In Foucauldian terms, these effects are indelibly inscribed on the bodies and minds of both those who have suffered and their kin. As members of particular racial categories that continue to be salient in South Africa, people continue to experience the effects of past instances of institutional racism – apartheid's legacy thus continues to haunt.

The type of social work described in traditional social work texts can be regarded as a more modern disciplinary power than apartheid was (Sawicki 1991). Yet its apparent benevolence hides a subtle form of disciplinary power that is as much damaging to those in whose lives it intervenes as the crude racism of apartheid was. This is because it opens the way for social workers to judge their clients' lives against norms which would render them pathological and deviant in a myriad of ways. And teaching students to work from such a perspective leads them to view their own and their family's lives as equally deviant and pathological.

Through the lens of such a perspective, the family forms which have emerged from students' accounts of their experiences of and responses to institutional racism, the impact on communication between family members, the material circumstances in which family members now find themselves, and their internalised rage and hatred, can all be interpreted only as forms of intra- and inter-personal pathology. In rendering invisible the bodily experiences of institutional racism, as described by students, social work students (and by implication, clients who share similar marginalised positions) are potentially controlled through the construction of their situations by dominant professional discourses used in traditional social work texts. The students' accounts, which can be seen as appropriations of contested spaces in social work, are important for the curriculum in two ways: firstly, in the identification and acknowledgement of the impact of institutional racism and its multiple effects on their lives and those of their family members, which in itself is significant in contesting invisibility and denial of these effects, and secondly, in the recognition of their methods of coping with and being able to survive institutional racism.

Conclusion

The Family-in-Community Profile assignment has given some indication of the possibilities for students and lecturers to be co-authors of the curriculum and thus of the potential to democratise curriculum and knowledge development in South African social work. Attempts to work towards a degree of participatory parity in the classroom means that students have to come to respect their own abilities as learners and co-creators of knowledge. Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald (2002) refer to this kind of attempt to transfer epistemic authority from lecturer to a shifting community of knowers which include both students and lecturers. These shared constructions of knowledge are capable of providing richer epistemic frameworks than those provided only by the frame of reference of the lecturer in that they are able to 'cultivate a diversity of socially embedded truth claims out of which epistemic wholeness develops' (Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald 2002:3).

It is very important for social work students to be able to define themselves as co-producers rather than merely as consumers of knowledge, as their knowledges have been previously silenced and dismissed (Humphries 2002). Through having them share their stories about their family practices, it is possible for them to valorise images of family life that are different from those presented in conventional social work texts. Having their stories of

family acknowledged and valorised will lessen the chances of students feeling compelled to adopt ideas which they cannot relate to and which marginalise their experiences, but which they feel they must express in order to please their lecturers or supervisors. Instead, they Johnstonn & Olekalnns (2002) distinguish between surface and deep learning in that with the latter the learners only engage in a task for short-term goals of passing a module, whereas with deep learning they become personally invested in their learning experience and obtain significant meaning from the learning. I would add in addition to achieving this, students should be positioned as experts on their own lives and as producers of important narratives that can inform the curriculum.

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