

Using Our Everyday Ethical Transgressions as Starting Points for Social Justice Education

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N.B. *This is not what I will be presenting at the 2010 International Summer School of Narrative Practice in Toronto. In that context, I will rather be presenting a concrete demonstration of the process that I describe and contextualize below.*

Abstract: This paper contextualizes and describes a process whereby learners explore an ethical transgression they've committed, and then others reflect on how this exploration resonates in their own lives, as 'Outsider Witnesses'. This process assumes:

- we all commit ethical transgressions;
- some of these transgressions cumulatively contribute to systemic oppression, when we're positioned on top of oppressive hierarchies;
- we all have skills and knowledge we use to navigate ethical situations;
- we learn from one another on an ongoing basis; &
- relationships of shared purpose can foster self- and collective-reflexivity.

Introduction

In this paper, I describe a model for using personal experiences of committing ethical transgressions in order to collectively learn from one another about ethics and systemic oppression. Although the model I describe was applied in a Graduate-level University classroom, it's based on Narrative Therapy and Community Work. Some version of what I describe has therefore been used in many different contexts, with variation across

factors such as geopolitics, economic class, literacy level, language, and culture (see, e.g., Collective Narrative Practice, n.d.). I developed skills in these practices as a therapist, especially working with men who perpetrated abuse (Augusta-Scott, 2009; Chapman, 2007; Fisher, 2005; Jenkins, 1990, 2009). I worked with predominantly low-income straight white men in Bridgewater, N.S., and with more intersectionally diverse men in Toronto. However, given the commonplace assertion in critical social work, disability studies and anti-colonial scholarship that the helping professions are a site of systemic oppression (e.g., Barton, 2001; Chapman, 2007, submitteda&b; Chrisjohn & Young, 2006; Fournier & Crey, 1999; Heron, 2005; Rossiter, 2001; Smith, 2005; Snyder & Mitchell, 2006; Spivak, 2004; Stiker, 1999; Thobani, 2007), I suspected that the kinds of conversations I'd had with men who perpetrated abuse might be relevant with social workers as well, in working toward ethically and anti-oppressively delivering social services. My experience of this class, as well as the feedback I received from my student/co-learners, suggests that this was indeed the case. I'd like to suggest that these methods would also be fruitful in more open contexts of people who can be said to personally/politically contribute to systemic oppression, such as white, able-bodied, class-privileged or straight people, employers, educators, men, and people who've never been incarcerated, institutionalized or apprehended from their families.

The Context: Interlocking Oppression and Claims to Innocence

If we take interlocking analyses of oppression seriously, then we can all find some aspect of our life in which we're exalted and privileged through someone else's denigration. This is *not* to say that we're all *equally* privileged through interlocking oppression – I'm

undoubtedly advantaged in many intersecting ways to a much greater extent than most people – but we can all nevertheless consider our own complicity in *particular* arenas of oppression. Anti-racist feminists have paved useful paths for us to do so (Ahmed, 2004; Spivak, 1999; Thobani, 2007) and Fellows & Razack have problematized ‘the race to innocence’ (1998) as one barrier to doing so. In this ‘race’, people foreground their experiences of subordination – resulting in *nobody* taking responsibility for their own complicity in oppression. They describe this amongst diverse women, who each have legitimate claims to subordination, but it seems that even people we might narrate as unambiguously oppressive ‘race to innocence’ too. Not everyone claims subordination in this ‘race’, but we may all contextually divide guilt and innocence so that we don’t seem so bad. It’s often said of perpetrators: ‘how does he live with himself?’ ‘How does he sleep at night?’ Below I tentatively offer what can only be, at best, a partial answer.

Most people agree that men who perpetrate abuse are unambiguously on the side of those who are violent and responsible for sexism. And of course I agree. However, while this is true on a sociological level, as well as on the subjective level of victims of violence, it does not seem to ring ‘true’ on the subjective ethical level of men who perpetrate abuse. And this level of analysis, which I’ll call ‘ethical narration,’ is crucial if we truly wish to end violence (see Ahmed, 2004 & 2006, for resonant analyses of racism and anti-racism). Counter-intuitively and – I think – *importantly*, probably half the men I worked with who perpetrated abuse introduced themselves to me by saying that they were ‘not like’ the other men I worked with. Like you and I, these men knew the discursive representations of batterers. And like you and I, they also ‘knew’ that this was a group that they did not

belong to – even when they were also taking responsibility for acts or generalized patterns of abuse. Research has confirmed that abuse perpetrators draw lines between their own behaviour and that of ‘real batterers,’ seemingly no matter what severity of violence they perpetrate (Goodrum, Umberson, & Anderson, 2001; Wood, 2004).

And if there’s any even more commonsensically clear-cut case of responsibility for oppression, it might be in relation to genocide. But, again, even those who have *admitted* some involvement in genocide seem to draw lines of guilt and innocence in ways that narrate their own relative innocence. Guatemalan activists distinguish between ‘material authors’ of genocide, who do the murdering first-hand, and ‘intellectual authors’ of genocide, who plan, organize, and command (Jesús Tecu Osorio, cited in Nakba, 2008). This same distinction seems to be mobilized as a claim to relative innocence in ethical narratives of those who have perpetrated genocide. Hannah Arendt’s (1964) Adolf Eichmann pleaded ‘Not guilty *in the sense of the indictment*,’ describing his responsibility as ‘aiding and abetting.’ He said: “With the killing of Jews I had nothing to do. I never killed a Jew, or a non-Jew, for that matter – I never killed any human being. I never gave an order to kill either a Jew or a non-Jew; I just did not do it” (p. 22). And Jean Hatzfeld (2005) interviewed Hutu men who described murdering Tutsis with their machetes all day, everyday, for a month, in the Rwandan genocide, and who also described themselves as relatively innocent compared to those who planned, organized, and commanded the killings. The easiest and most comforting thing to do with these accounts is to consider them aberrational. There’s something about the kind of man who perpetrates violence against women, there’s something about the kind of person who

perpetrates genocide. But Hatzfeld and Arendt both challenge this by carefully attending to what real perpetrators say and suggesting that they may not be distinct groups, in terms of their ethical narratives and navigation. And Barbara Heron (2004, 2007) describes analogous lines of culpability and innocence being drawn by white Canadian women who worked as international development workers in Africa. Including herself amongst this group, she writes that, recognizing the racism shaping international development,

by distancing ourselves from *those other* expatriates who make what we see as racist comments ... [t]hese encounters with *real* racism secure oneself as not racist, and therefore moral.... With a moral self-conception safeguarded through comparison to other whites, one's perpetration of racism becomes less detectable, and as Razack points out, there is then no need to take responsibility for it (2007, p. 84).

Furthermore, narrating perpetrators' ethical narratives as aberrational may itself perpetuate oppression – because 'there is then no need to take responsibility for it,' so nobody does so. Sunera Thobani, discussing Canadian Indian Residential Schools, writes: "By placing the blame solely on individual perpetrators when recognition of the extent of the abuse cannot be avoided, the systemic nature of the violence can be denied" (2007, p. 121). And this denial of systemic oppression can, furthermore, intersect with the normative perception that violence and irresponsibility are at one with psychiatric diagnosis, which ethically justifies systemic oppression in the form of forced incarceration and drugging of psychiatricized people. Goodrum, Umberson and Anderson, for example, who I cited above as describing the lines drawn by abuse perpetrators, mobilize psychiatry to reinforce their own line: "the denier group of batterers took the

most extreme measures to dissociate [themselves from ‘real batterers’], and this extreme dissociation suggests a psychological pathology” (2001, p. 236). But clearly this individualization of irresponsibility and harm deconstructs itself if similar moves of innocence are found amongst those who we’d generally consider ‘good guys,’ like international development workers. Perhaps it’s ‘normal’ to dissociate ourselves from those who do serious harm and evade responsibility – when we find ourselves in contexts in which we harm others. Perhaps we all tend to stress others’ ‘real’ agency, our intentions or ambivalence, or our limited range of options. If so, then this would significantly erode our efficacy in working toward ending oppression and violence. However good our ideas about what changes should take place, someone has to perceive her- or himself as implicated in the problems identified and thus responsible for some of the change that needs to happen.

I believe, then, that we need to transform our cultural discourses surrounding oppression and anti-oppression, and the ways that we translate these into concrete ethical practices, if we wish to fundamentally transform the material structures and acts that oppress (Ahmed, 2006; Chapman, submitteda). The pedagogical exercise I’ll now describe is one small way we can work toward this discursive and ethical shift.

Reflexive explorations of personal-is-political ethics

At the beginning of the Graduate-level Social Work Ethics course that I’ll now discuss, I shared examples from my own life in which I perpetrated ableism and racism (Chapman, 2007, submitteda). I also introduced anti-racist feminist understandings of complicity,

rather than innocence, which recognize that “[i]f oppression exists, then there must also be oppressors” (Razack, 1999, p. 23) – and analyses of social work that use complicity in oppression as a starting point (Heron, 2005; Rossiter, 2001; Thobani, 2007).

Subsequently, all twelve students were required to reflect one time, in front of the class, upon an actual ethical transgression they had committed. The transgression had to be either one in which the student had been positioned on-top of a professional/institutional hierarchy (as social worker or teacher, for example) or in which the student had been positioned on-top of a hierarchy such as class, race, gender, sexuality, or ability.

Three students reflected on an incident involving racism, transphobia, or ableism outside of social work. Most reflected on a social work practice example, intersecting with classism, racism, sexism, and/or colonialism. Reflections were facilitated through an interview conducted jointly by another student and I, which was generally oriented by the following questions:

- How do *you* understand that you came to act in that way?
- How do you understand that you were able to come to accept, acknowledge and work through *that you had*, in fact, acted in that way?

Collective Explorations of Resonance

Each student’s reflection was followed by a group interview in which several other students were invited to reflect upon the student’s original reflection. These were structured as what Michael White (2003) calls ‘Outsider Witness’ conversations. This structure shaped responses away from practices of ‘normalizing judgment’ (Foucault,

1995) – either about having done the harm or about the ‘quality’ of reflection. The focus of these reflections, instead, was on how the other students’ lives, values, struggles, and politics resonated with the original reflector’s story. We used the following questions for this process:

1. *Identifying the expression*

As you were listening to your classmate, did any words, phrases, or stories resonate for you?

2. *Describing the image*

What did those particular words, phrases, or stories suggest to you about what’s important to your classmate? What image did they give you about what she values in her politics, practice, or life?

3. *Embodying responses*

What do you think it is about *your own life* that might account for why you were drawn to that particular word, phrase, or story?

4. *Acknowledging transport*

If you’ll accept that to some degree we become who we are in an ongoing way through social interaction: where are you now, as a result of witnessing your classmate’s account, that you wouldn’t be now, if you had done something different during this time? (These are adapted from White, 2003, p. 55).

This facilitated a context in which these explorations – although they started from individuals’ stories – became collective processes for thinking and feeling about ethics

and oppression. As several classmates told stories resonant with the original one, it became less ‘about’ the original person and more about both systemic issues and concrete ethical practices. This collective approach, then, generated further ethical reflection and also reinforced the knowledge and skills that people had already been using to navigate complex ethical situations.

Conclusion

We all have diverse practical ethical knowledges that we draw upon in order to navigate everyday life (Foucault, 2006b, Mahmood, 2005, White, 2004). But because these knowledges are dominantly subjugated by the importance placed on abstract theories, codes, laws, and other forms of ethical governance “at a distance” (Neu & Therrien, 2003), we need to create contexts in which people are collectively supported in articulating, honing, and sharing these skills and knowledges (see Davis, 2007 on the important role of collectives in historical social transformations).

Consistent with critical social work ethics research (Rossiter, Walsh-Bowers, & Prilleltensky, 1996, 2002; Weinberg, 2005), students who had substantial experience ‘in the field’ noted how different our conversations were from discussions of ethics and oppression (however named) that they’d encountered in social work practice. This allowed us to collectively imagine – and work toward, however locally – a ‘social work,’ and a world, in which self- and collective-reflexivity shaped our everyday interactions with others.

This seems to have shaped the other half of our time together, which included discussing difficult theory (Ahmed, 2004, 2006; Butler, 2004; Derrida, 1994, 1995; Foucault, 1982, 2006a; Mahmood, 2005), and yet remained grounded in everyday life. In one class, students spontaneously applied Jacques Derrida's ethics to a child protection worker's dilemma about whether to apprehend a child who she believes to be at risk when she also knows that children of that child's race are much more statistically likely to be apprehended than white children, due to systemic racism (Fournier & Crey, 1999). Following Derrida, this was left impossibly unresolved, which I believe offers a *practically/politically* important 'counterpoint' (Said, 1994) to what can be a too-easy and *too-easily-dismissed* 'right' answer to complex situations. It seems to me that in social work schools that profess anti-oppression, students basically learn that it's racist to apprehend certain children, as but one example, and then often find themselves in practice situations in which they experience very little freedom to act in accordance with such lessons. I believe these students need, at the very least, support in maintaining their politics and values in complex situations so as to be able to mobilize agency within whatever context they find themselves (Mahmood, 2005). Only then will they be able to contribute to changing those structures and discourses that shape social workers' limited options – and the even more constrained options of social service *users*. Rather than ending with simplifying codified closed answers for all contexts, then, these conversations were often punctuated instead with Thomas King's haunting "don't say in years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. / You've heard it now" (2003, p. 29). Learning 'the story' that systemic oppression

exists, as difficult a process as that can be, is relatively easy – compared with navigating *what to do* with this knowledge.

The pedagogical process I have described aims to invite learners, then, to live reflexively *within* the everyday processes that constitute oppression. The questions that animate this process include:

- How do real people navigate complex relationships with others?
- How do we narrate such situations and what possibilities are shaped or constrained by these stories?
- And what strategies or ideas can we better articulate and learn from one another, if we start by accepting that we all do harm, that we're always actively navigating complex ethical situations, and that these everyday navigations both resist and constitute individual and systemic forms of oppression?

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