Negotiating Identities Across Cultural Boundaries: Complicating Cultural Competence With Power and Privilege

RUNNING HEAD: IDENTITIES AND POWER

Negotiating Identities Across Cultural Boundaries: Complicating Cultural Competence with Power and Privilege[1]

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Dr Christopher lectures in the School of Psychology at Victoria University, Melbourne, Victoria. His research is in the area of sense of community and individual and community responses to intergroup contact. He is interested in explicating the multiple and often hidden resources, processes and structures groups develop to help protect valued cultural identities and ensure survival in the face of adversity and change. Several papers based on this work have been published in the Journal of Community Psychology and is in press in the American Journal of Community Psychology. Christopher has coedited a book titled Sense of Community: Research, Applications and Implications with Dr Adrian Fisher and Dr Brian Bishop that is published by Kluwer Academic Press.

Negotiating Voice across Differences: Considering the Role of Power and Social Identities In Advancing Cultural Competence

Abstract

The history and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Islander people in Australia has been characterised by colonisation and oppression. Academia, and psychology has played a role in the colonisation and oppression of Indigenous people through processes of othering and objectification. In the paper I explore the challenges associated with the process of situating myself, as a black South African man, alongside Indigenous people and developing an empowering praxis. Becoming engaged in true collaborative activity is not an easy task because the process of negotiation requires explicating and resolving issues of identity and power within a context of intergroup relations. I explore the dynamics of negotiation and the tensions that develop because of hidden assumptions and social identities. I conclude drawing theoretical lessons emphasising the importance of recognising our own group memberships and the implications of those for partnerships in the context of race relations.

Key words: Power, Insider-outsider, Oppression, Critical psychology.

Negotiating Voice across Differences: Considering the Role of Power and Social Identities in Advancing Cultural Competence

In this paper I explore the challenges associated with the process of situating myself alongside Indigenous Australian people and developing an empowering praxis. I locate this exploration within a broader discussion about intergroup relations and the ongoing challenges associated with developing cultural safety and competence. At one level, there are prescriptions about the knowledge, skills, and awareness that are required for cultural competence. Although useful at some level, cultural competence can be problematic because there are complex issues of power and privilege that often remain unexamined. I suggest that developing culturally competent practice requires moving beyond learning about the other, to examine and deconstruct our own social identities and the power and privilege afforded by those identities because these can impact our research and practice. That is to say, that there is a need to critically examine the implications of our multiple subjectivities for safe crosscultural transaction.

Cultural Competence and Cultural Safety

There has been a focus on developing cultural competence recognising the importance of culture, ethnicity and other contextual factors in the experiences of individuals and communities. To this end there has been considerable attention paid to the development of models and guidelines for delivering culturally competent services. Cultural competence is defined as the knowledge, awareness, and skills aimed at providing services that promotes and advances cultural diversity and recognises the uniqueness of self and others in communities (American Psychological Association [APA], 2002; Richardson & Molinaro, 1996; Sue, 1998). Although knowledge about our own cultural background is a feature of the development of cultural competence, it seems that insufficient attention is paid to examining the implications of taken for granted social and cultural identities and the power afforded by those identities for working with disenfranchised groups. The impacts of unexamined social and cultural identities can be particularly pronounced where there are large power disparities between groups because of historical, social, and political realities, including experiences of colonisation and institutionalised racism.

A failure to examine our own social positions can have negative implications and act as barriers to collaboration. However, recognising our own social, cultural and political realities, as well as our own power and privilege is a difficult and challenging task. My status of being an immigrant and being a member of an ethnic minority (black South African) in the Australian context has afforded me an opportunity to develop an understanding of psychological, social, and political processes that can negatively impact marginalised groups. In a sense, being on the margins provide a different vantage from which to understand dominant narratives that work to subjugate marginalized groups. I realize there are other dimensions of diversity that afford people differential levels of power, but in my own experiences issues of power became most visible for me in the context race relations and working as a black researcher with Aboriginal people. These challenges and different positions can impact negatively, but they can also contribute to the development of a deeper understanding of the ways exclusionary and colonising processes work.

In the US, as in Australia, there is a growing interest in addressing exclusion and racialised oppression through challenging Whiteness because it is a privileged position (e. g., Fine,

Weis, Powell, & Mun Wong, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993, Kincheloe, 1999; Tannoch-Bland, 1993; Twine & Warren, 2000). For example, Fine et al., (1997) suggested that white European culture and worldviews is often taken for granted and used as an implicit standard for comparison. Jones (1990, 1997) wrote about this as cultural racism. Those who belong to this group are typically not asked to reflect on their cultural identities because their culture is the norm, the dominant group. Thus, Whiteness is often invisible and members often blind to the privileges that they have by virtue of their group membership. The invisibility of whiteness is what makes it so powerful; people are rendered blind to the ways in which culturally sanctioned social and psychological practices can work in an exclusionary and often colonising manner. From my viewpoint, the privileges associated with Whiteness are very visible; I am outside it because I am a black person and keenly aware of how it is significant in the lives people of colour. It is vital that specific attention is given to how identities afforded to us because of our group memberships can impact in the context of intercultural relationships because they are invisible to us, but very visible and harmful to others.

Models of Cultural Competence

The development of models and guidelines for cultural competence can be considered within a broader set of disciplines concerned with issues of social diversity and justice (Fowers & Richardson, 1996; Taylor, 1994). For example, many have set the challenge for the reconstruction and development of a psychology that can positively contribute to social justice for Indigenous and other minority communities in Australia and elsewhere (e. g., Comas-Díaz, et al, 1998; Davidson, 1992; 1998; Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997; Sanson & Dudgeon, 2000; Sloan, 2001). Psychology, along with other social sciences, has been criticised because of its role in colonisation and oppression of different groups including many First Nation peoples (see Nicholas, 1993). In fact, psychology in Australia has been slow to attend to issues of diversity and equity. However, there has been an indication that psychology and other human services are keen to engage social issues. For example, the Australian Psychological Society (APS) has released a series of position papers that signals its commitment to contribute to the development of a psychology that is socially responsive, culturally inclusive and sensitive, and will pursue social justice (Sanson et al., 1998; Sanson & Dudgeon, 2000).

There is a growing literature that addresses the issue of culturally sensitive and inclusive research in community based research and action (e. g., Hughes, Seidman, & Williams, 1993; Prilleltensky, 2001; Segall, Dasen, Berry, & Poortinga, 1999; Trickett, Watts, & Birman, 1994). This work focuses on identifying research strategies, methodologies and techniques that are sensitive to the realities of the individuals and communities (Hughes et al., 1993; Sinha, 1997). There is strong recognition of the centrality of culture in the entire research endeavour. What is often not given sufficient attention is an explicit recognition that there are often power relations between different groups that can influence ways of working. For example, critical race theorists (see Twine & Warren, 2000) strongly argue that issues of race are central to understanding intergroup relations that have been characterised by racism and oppression and continuing social inequity. To this end, there is a need to make explicit the social identities and positions that afford us power because these influence inclusive research and practice. The scholarship on Whiteness is one domain among others that is about making explicit the dynamics of dominance in contexts that have histories of colonisation and the

subjugation of groups because of their colour. It is about examining how issues of race are manifested in intergroup collaborations and act as barriers to or facilitators of genuine partnerships.

Smith (1999) reviewed some models that guide how non-Indigenous people in New Zealand who wish to work with Maori can conduct research in a culturally appropriate way. The models reflect different levels of involvement, different power relationships, and different processes and outcomes. The *mentoring model* typically involves Indigenous people sponsoring and guiding the research, while the *adoption model* is characterized by a sustained life-long relationship in which the worker or researcher is adopted into the community. The adoption model in some ways reflects a resident researcher model (Wicker & Sommer, 1993) -- someone who participates in and is considered a member of a community.

The *power sharing* and *empowering outcomes models* are probably more in line with those reported in community psychology literature and characteristic of action research. In the power-sharing model, researchers seek guidance and meaningful input from a community to support and develop research, practice, and other community initiatives. In the empowering outcomes model, activity is typically focused on the sort of outcomes the Indigenous community wants to know about. Finally, the *bicultural or partnership* model means both parties are involved in the conception and delivery of programs and projects. Smith (1999) warns that adopting these models do not necessarily ensure cultural awareness or appropriateness because there are other levels of analysis that needs to be considered. These other levels can include considerations of what constitutes knowledge and on whose terms and critical reflection on our identities and situatedness.

In fact, Smith stated that: 'Research is implicated in the production of Western knowledge, in the nature of academic work, in the production of theories which have dehumanized Maori and in practices which have continued to privilege Western ways of knowing, while denying the validity for Maori of Maori knowledge, language and culture' (p. 183). Thus, an essential feature of the models proposed by Smith is that it suggests to non-Indigenous researchers that cultural competence require more than knowing the cultures of 'other' groups. In her perspective, it requires deconstruction and negotiation of our own identities and positions and the accompanying power and privilege in our work with marginalised people because this will have implications for how we work. She also warns that cultural competence is not necessarily unproblematic because the notion may be imbued with assumptions and values that can result in different forms of control, disenfranchisement, and colonisation.

Given this, it is imperative that we develop an understanding of power and privilege in context, as part of the task of working for social change. Feminist theorists (e. g., Bhavani, & Phoenix, 1994; Lykes & Mallona, 1997, Moane, 1999), critical psychologists (e.g., Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984) and other scholars (e. g., Comas-Diaz, Lykes; & Alarcón, 1997; Dudgeon & Pickett, 2000; Riley, 1997; Sloan, 2001; Smith, 1999) have advocated for the critical analyses of existing social practices and arrangements as part of a broader social change agenda. That is, our attention is drawn to systemic issues that manifest in and impact interpersonal and intergroup relations. They emphasise the challenging process of situating and recognising ourselves as social and cultural beings. The process is challenging because it often undermines what we take for granted. In engaging in the process we reveal the multiple resources and narratives that inform our own social, cultural, and professional identities – that is our multiple subjectivities (Henriques, et al.,

1984; Mama, 1995). Importantly, through this process we reveal the different positions of power and privilege we occupy in different contexts and how these can work in empowering and disempowering ways.

Mama (1995) offered discourse analysis as a strategy for analysing and interrogating our own subject positions. Discourses she defines as "historically constructed regimes of knowledge. These include common-sense assumptions and taken-for-granted ideas, belief systems and myths that groups of people share and through which they understand each other" (Mama, 1995: 98). She goes to say that discourses position individuals in relation to one another socially, politically and culturally, as similar to or different from; as 'one of us' or as 'Other' (Mama, 1995: 98). Discourses are similar to narratives, where narratives provides guidelines for "how lives should be lived, how blame and merit should be allocated" (Harris, Carney, & Fine, 2001: 8).

In the following section, I draw on my own research and teaching experiences to highlight some of the issues and challenges that emerged as I negotiated a space for involvement alongside Indigenous Australians. These experiences reflect different ongoing struggles associated with developing models of praxis that are reflexive, and cognizant of power and privilege. I use the notions narrative and discourse in a similar way to Mama (1985) and Harris et al., (2001). In this paper I use these terms to help identify identities/subjectivities and the power and privilege afforded by different social identities, as well as the social and psychological tensions that are experienced in the context of working across cultures.

Reflecting on Practice: Challenges and Lessons in Negotiating Differences

Local context

The Centre for Aboriginal Studies at Curtin University of Technology (CUT) has been at the forefront of responding to the needs of Australian Indigenous people and developing ways of working that are empowering and emancipatory. The CAS is an Aboriginal 'enclave' within CUT that has been operating since 1983. In 1994 the Centre was relocated into a purpose-built building. This building was designed with a number of Aboriginal symbols in mind to reflect the relationship of Aboriginal people with the land. It is a circular building with a large open space in the centre that features wood, stone and ochre tones. The guiding philosophy of CAS is Aboriginal Terms of Reference (ATR). ATR can be defined in contrast to the mainstream worldview that largely reflects a British Anglo-Celtic heritage. In Ogbu's (1992, 1994) terms this would be framed as an oppositional culture, one that resists dominant cultural hegemony and that provides the basis for community resilience (Sonn & Fisher, 1998) and cultural renaissance. ATR is derived from Aboriginal people's worldview that includes history, culture and ways of being (Oxenham, 2000). ATR recognizes the rich diversity of Indigenous Australians. It is about making explicit the terms of reference, processes of doing, thinking, and feeling for a group of Aboriginal people (Mallard & Garvey, personal communication, 21.01.2000). I worked in this context on different research and curriculum development and in had different roles including research supervisor and liaison between Schools and Departments.

An initial encounter: Questioning our place

I recall one of my first experiences with Aboriginal people at the CAS. This is where I first met Darren Garvey. Darren invited me to present a guest lecture on a cross-cultural topic to Indigenous Australian students in a unit he taught on community mental health. I was not sure what to present and finally decided to present some data from my doctoral research in which I explored sense of community among 'coloured' South African immigrants. Many of the themes generated in that research related to oppression under Apartheid and the different ways in which individuals and the community adapted, resisted, and created opportunities for positive development. I wanted to talk with the students, but was I was hesitant. I could not quite put my finger on the source of my uneasiness. I did the presentation and throughout my tentativeness must have been very transparent. One person commented during question time: "It sounds to me as if you are looking for a place to belong"; another replied: "you can be one of us". Participants shared many questions and observations including that practices used in Australia to oppress Aboriginal people were similar to those used in South Africa to subjugate black groups. For example, participants commented on the similarity of the laws that were put in place to segregate black and white communities in the two countries. This comment and observations was an invitation to reposition myself, to become an insider. It felt a sense of relief, a sense that my views and experiences were legitimate and valued.

The comments of the participants had a profound impact and reflected deeper issues and questions that I had working with Aboriginal people as a non-Indigenous person. The issues emanated from my own experiences of disenfranchisement and of holding a minority status. I knew how social practices could work to exclude, especially those discourses that positioned black people, including me, as other in the Australian context. At the same time, however, I knew that the overly inclusive black 'other' was problematic. In the Indigenous context, I am an outsider because I am not positioned in same way as indigenous people are by oppressive dominant discourses. I am positioned as a black person, but not an Indigenous black person, and this positioning has implications for privilege and power. I wanted to make a contribution, but knew that my place had to be negotiated. However, in this context, there were deeper level concerns beyond my position that were structured by institutionalised racism and the role of academia and psychology, in particular, that required negotiation. I had several questions and concerns about working in an Aboriginal context, including 1) How can I work with Indigenous people and not perpetuate disenfranchisement, and 2) What role can a non-Indigenous person have in the pursuit of Aboriginal self-determination? Moreover, I had to examine my own motivations for engagement.

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Uncovering Hidden Barriers: Some problematic discourses

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These questions along were at the forefront of my mind as I went into the CAS. For the next few months I spent a considerable amount of time at the CAS. While at the CAS, I learnt about its mission and aims, about ATR, day-to-day activities, and the people. I spent considerable time familiarising myself with the social setting through spending time with the people and observing the day-to-day activities. In fact, I realised I did more than familiarise myself with the setting and the people. I had to become a learner, not to learn about their culture, but to learn about the struggles for identity and voice and the ways in which processes of research and practice often usurp and undermine self-determination. In fact, it became clear that there is much to gain from the learning about the struggles for identity including alternative discourses and counter stories, and stories about resistance, strength and

resilience. Harris, et al., (2001) argue that counter stories present challenges to the dominant assumptions and stories.

Multiple Identities: Being outside and inside.

I developed a deeper understanding of my own positioning and social reality and implications of these for research and practice. I clarified aspects of my identities. I knew that I shared a minority status with Aboriginal people because of colour, but I was not an Aboriginal person. I was still an outsider, a non-Indigenous person in an Indigenous context. The discourses that position indigenous people did not apply to me in the same way. Although we were all subject to discourses about black as other, immigrants are often subjected to a different set of discourses compared to Aboriginal people. This complicates the notion of black as other, suggesting there are multiple social, cultural and historical sources that are relevant and available to different groups and that position groups with the broader Australian society.

Being a black person means that I am a social minority in a predominantly white context, I am to some extent outside whiteness. I have a level of sensitivity and awareness of racial oppression that is based on lived experience. The initial interaction that I had at the CAS suggested that this reality facilitated my entry into the community. Arguably, I did not have to overcome the same racialised boundaries that would confront a member of the white majority. However, the fact that I am a migrant who has a different history, culture, social and psychological reality means that I am situated differently in the broader social context. I can empathise with the experiences of Indigenous people, especially experiences of racism. However, I am still an outsider, I am not an Indigenous person. This is an important issue that challenges a simplistic oppressed-oppressor, white-black dichotomy. Thus, in this context there is a shared dimension of oppression, but my identity as an outsider, an immigrant, allows me to be differently positioned, suggesting other dimensions of power and privilege. Elsewhere, I (Sonn & Fisher, 2001, 2003) have argued that dichotomous conceptualizations often work to mask other dimensions of power and privilege, resulting in simplistic understandings of the complex operations of oppression.

Through ATR they are asserting their worldviews in a mainstream institution that is still viewed as assimilationist and that privileges western culture. These worldviews and culture provide the filters through which people experience the world and attribute meaning to everyday events. Therefore, I have to be careful that in my desire to be involved that I do not assume to know their culture, worldviews and politics and in the process undermine their project and usurp their self-determination. That is, I had to recognize that even though I understood the impacts of colonization because of my own experiences I did not undermine their story, by imposing mine own story. I had to learn that their reality and worldview was different to mine and that I had to acknowledge and hear their story. This is a central issue because more than understanding is required, but we have to listen and hear. Insensitivity to worldviews, identity, and cultural practices can undermine the process of self-determination and empowerment because oppression involves systematic removal cultural practices and the undermining of knowledges and experiences. This is a crucial issue because it requires us to consider deeper level struggles and challenges related to racial politics in our intercultural relations. Apfelbaum wrote, "the only way to truly hear is to acknowledge the unbridgeable gap between the two worlds, and to assimilate the impact of this unbridgeable difference." (2001: 31).

Psychology and individuals as a culturally-bound

I heard and participated in conversations about psychology. The general theme was that psychology and mainstream education more broadly has been and continues to be culturally inappropriate and part of an assimilationist mainstream agenda. People would say that psychology is individualistic and in conflict with Aboriginal worldviews which are often collectivistic. That is, they wanted to emphasise, among other issues, that psychology is rooted in a different epistemology and cultural framework and that research has often been conducted in an exploitative manner. This conversation, along with other activities, is about resistance, about offering a different story, and claiming a space within the broader discourse of psychology, it is about redefining psychology and its relations with Aboriginal people (Garvey, Dudgeon, & Kearins, 2000). This story was part of my own agenda, an agenda that derived from my own realization through my work in my community that psychology has been linked with colonization of communities in South Africa. I wanted to tell a different story, one about strength, resistance and resilience (Sonn & Fisher, 1998).

Ethnic and other minority groups have made similar arguments and this has contributed to the development of population-specific psychologies (Watts, 1994) and critical approaches (Henriques, et al., 1984; Mama, 1995) through which groups can explore, understand and legitimise their experiences and realities on their own terms and work toward emancipation and transformation of oppressive systems (e. g., Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997; Prilleltensky & Austin, 1999; Smith, 1999). The place of non-Indigenous people in the working for social justice with Indigenous people and the issues associated with the colonialist history of psychology were very powerful concerns that impacted me as I negotiated a space in this context. This negotiation occurred through *conversation with colleagues and critical reflection* about my own social positioning the implications of this positioning for genuine and safe partnerships. This was facilitated by my willingness to be a learner, not an expert. This was not a straightforward process, in fact it was quite unsettling and challenging because it involved recognizing that I was part of a discipline with a tainted history.

A deeper analysis of the challenges reveal the conflict between wanting work with those in marginalised positions, but being a member of a profession and part of an academic institution that has been part of the colonisation process. Psychology has been criticised for normalising and privileging the experience of the white male middle class group while omitting the experiences of those outside these parameters because of the assumption that everyone's experiences will be similar (e. g., Bond, Hill, Mulvey, & Terenzio, 2000; Trickett, Watts, & Birman, 1994; Dudgeon, & Pickett, 2000). There has also been criticism levelled at mainstream approaches of inquiry and psychology because it fails to recognise that knowledge is constructed in a specific social, cultural, and political context (e. g., Smith, Harre, & Van Langenhove, 1995; Swartz & Gibson, 2001).

I struggle with this reality and had little else to guide me. The literature about cultural competence was of limited value; the issues were deeper. I wanted to detach myself from psychology because of its role in the oppression of numerous groups. My main desire was to find a place among Aboriginal people where I could assist in their struggle, as well as find my own voice. This disappointment can be overwhelming. I needed to disrupt my connection (Bond & Pyle, 1998) with psychology and strengthen my connection with the Indigenous group around the shared experiences of exclusion based on race. From that shared position

'we' could begin to challenge psychology's understanding of 'us' and explicate the cultural, social, and psychological processes of 'othering' that is deeply rooted in individualistic and decontexualised models for understanding human behaviour.

Implications

I have had to come to terms with my own privilege and power through the process of working with Aboriginal Australians. I have learnt that the power that I have because of my privileged position in the academic setting affords me opportunities to use power in empowering and transformative ways. Given my role as an academic psychologist, this includes incorporating courses that deal with cultural issues into mainstream curricula, mentoring minority students, writing about the impacts of oppression, collaborating with Indigenous staff to promote their research and action agendas and so forth. It is in these spaces where the complexity of our subjectivity plays out and where the relations between the dominant discourses and counter stories are revealed. The critical element is that we have to come to terms with power and how it is moderated by social positions because this has implications research and practice. Thus, we need to move beyond static and narrow understandings of cultural competence, but adopt a more reflexive and critical stance that is concerned with understanding the ways in which our multiple subjectivities play out in the context of intercultural relations and can undermine decolonizing activity.

Apfelbaum (2001: 32) suggested that the "issue of communication across cultural boundaries is a major challenge to the very foundations of our dominant theoretical frameworks." Crossing cultural boundaries is challenging and will require more than cultural competence. It will require a willingness to feel uncomfortable, lost and uncertain, vulnerable, and to feel powerless. These emotions are not permanent, but they are part of the journey, part of the process of opening up oneself to new and different experiences and challenges. In order for us to work alongside others there is a need to examine our own subjectivities and the discourses that positions 'us' and 'others'. Through this process we are able to make visible those dominant narratives that serves the status quo and those counter stories that are indicative of resistance and voice. Therefore, cultural competence is more than learning about others, it is about learning about ourselves, our subjectivities and the numerous ways in which the different discourses available can undermine cultural boundary crossing.

Summary

In this paper, I discussed power and identities as key constructs in negotiating across differences. I also argued that there are deeper challenges for working across cultural spaces in the context of institutionalised racism that will involve making explicit our own cultural embeddedness and the privileges afforded because of our group memberships. These are essential to consider because a failure to do so may result in the ongoing oppression of minority groups through the privileging of dominant ways of research and practice. This is not necessarily an easy task because it requires us to make visible and challenge our own assumptions, values, and positions and to reconsider them in the different spaces we seek to work to effect social change. An important task ahead is to remain vigilant to the deeper sources of oppression and to guard against replacing orthodoxies. For the time being, I feel that I have found a process with which I am comfortable. I realise that this is only temporary and have to be on guard and to negotiate identities and subjectivities because these hidden issues are often the most damaging.

Notes

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