Big Brother Is Listening to You: Some Non-Privileged Thoughts on Teaching Critical Consciousness

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Abstract

For many educators, self-awareness for cross-cultural practice means critical consciousness. Students are told that they must examine their own cultural backgrounds from a critical perspective—in short, they must admit and confront their racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist thoughts and beliefs. In addition to reflecting on these thoughts in private, students are frequently required to confess them openly in the classroom. As a pedagogical exercise, this approach to critical consciousness has little empirical support, displaces the goal of self-awareness from good practice to painful confession, and denies students the rights they are told they must grant their clients.

Keywords: teaching; self-awareness; critical consciousness; students' rights

1.   Self-Awareness and Critical Consciousness

"Know thyself," inscribed over the entrance to the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, could equally well be chiseled over the entrance to every school preparing students for cross-cultural practice. According to Kondrat (1999), "The notion that social workers should be aware of the 'self' has been advocated as a practice principle for almost as long as social work has been a profession" (p. 31). Dettlaff, Moore, and Dietze (2006) agree: "Social work education emphasizes the development of self-awareness and the effective use of self" (p. 2). Referring to cross-cultural practice in all the helping professions, Dewees (2001) states that "probably the most salient maxim for any human service worker is 'knowing thyself'" (p. 39).

Identifying the competencies required for professional social workers, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2008) refers explicitly to the importance of self-knowledge for social work practitioners. Social workers, the council states, "practice personal reflection and self-correction to assure continued professional development" (EPAS 2.1.1). They "recognize and manage personal values in a way that allows professional values to guide practice" (EPAS 2.1.2). Moreover, social workers "gain sufficient self-awareness to eliminate the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse groups" (EPAS 2.1.4).

For many writers, self-awareness for cross-cultural practitioners—and that means practice across all boundaries, including racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, and class—now largely means gaining critical consciousness of the self (CrC) (e.g., Allen, 1995; Cain, 1996; Colvin Burque, Zugazaga, & Davis-Maye, 2007; Rozas, 2004; Van Soest, 1996; Wilkinson, 1997). The requirement that human-service providers critically examine their own cultural backgrounds "appears

to be the mantra in multicultural training and practice" (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005, p. 684).

Drawing upon the work of Friere (2000), Goodman and West-Olatunji (2009) state that "critical consciousness involves the ability to reflect on one's personal biases in working collaboratively with individual and community stakeholders to take action and transform obstacles to a satisfying quality of life" (p. 459). Suarez, Newman, and Reed (2008) further define critical consciousness as "a continuous self-reflexive process involving critical thinking in tandem with action whereby we challenge domination on three levels: personally, interpersonally, and structurally" (p. 408). They further assert that "vital components of critical consciousness are expanding our comfort zones, owning our power and privilege, and engaging in active self-reflection that interrogates what we hold to be true" (p. 408). In essence, having critical consciousness of the self means that students must become aware of their racist, sexist, classist and heterosexist thoughts and beliefs and attendant privileged identities. Know thyself has become know thy bad self.

Latting (1990), for example, believes it is important for students "to admit and confront their own biases" (p. 36). Holley and Steiner (2005) concur that students "must confront their biases and be aware of their values and beliefs" (p. 51). According to Nicotera and Kang (2009), students must "raise critical consciousness of their societal privileges" (p. 188). Rozas (2004) adds that a goal of classroom intergroup dialogues should be raising "the consciousness of the student's own role in the system and his/her perpetuation of oppression" (p. 236).

2.   The Pain of Critical Consciousness

Educators understand that students will find applying critical consciousness to the self hurtful. Pinderhughes (1989) notes that when people discuss racial issues, "the mood is one of discomfort, struggle, and pain" (p. 73). Harris (1997) sees that "whenever course content focuses on race, culture, or ethnicity, a myriad of emotional responses are evoked in students. Their responses include, but are not limited to, anger, guilt, fear, shame, hostility, and anxiety" (p. 587). Garcia and Van Soest (1997) say that students "may experience a loss of self-respect and have profound doubts about their self-image as they struggle to come to terms with the effects that privilege and oppression have had in their lives" (para. 8). Holley and Steiner (2005) want students to question their very identities: "To grow and learn, students must often confront issues that make them uncomfortable and force them to struggle with who they are and what they believe" (p. 50).

The students targeted for painful consciousness-raising are obviously going to be largely white, middle-class and heterosexual. There is suffering for other students as well. If a student defined as having a privileged identity is asked to confess his or her "underlying racist, classist, sexist, or homophobic perspectives," this can be "painful for students whose groups are being maligned" (Holley and Steiner, 2005, p. 52). Conversely if students in marginalized groups are asked to share their perspectives, this can be seen as "another form of 'voyeurism' that allows for the continued dominance of privileged groups within the classroom" (Saleeby & Scanlon, 2005, p. 5). Faculty, too, may be at risk during these confessionals. Nicotera and Kang (2009) warn instructors that they themselves may come under attack if "students expose biases related to any social identities through which we (faculty) experience marginalization" (p. 193).

3.   Does Critical Consciousness Work?

The rationale for any exercise in human-service education must be that it produces better practitioners. The proponents of CrC believe that if students are made to challenge who they are and what they believe, then the discomforting awareness will move them to become more culturally competent. The idea may have appeal, but there is little credible evidence to support it. Pitner and Sakamoto (2005) state that "much of

what has been written about critical consciousness is conceptually persuasive" (p. 687), but add that "there is a paucity of empirical research regarding this important practice component" (p. 687). They add further that pushing students toward critical self-consciousness may actually be counterproductive, noting that there is strong evidence in the social psychology literature suggesting "that when an individual's self-image is challenged to the point that it produces anxiety, he or she may be *more* likely to hold on to his or her own worldviews to reduce the anxiety" (p. 688).

It is unfortunate there are so few studies on such a salient topic, especially considering that the few that do attempt to demonstrate the value of teaching CrC are not convincing. As several authors acknowledge, the studies' limitations include numbers so small as to preclude generalization, samples that are neither random nor controlled, and contamination from the instructors being in the dual roles of teacher and researcher (e.g., Colvin Burque et al., 2007; Harris, 1997; Nicotera & Kang, 2009; Schmitz, Stakeman, & Cisneros, 2001; Spears, 2004; Garcia & Van Soest, 1997).

The factor casting most doubt on these studies is that they involve captive audiences: Students taking often-required courses in which they are asked to engage in some form of CrC. Students really have little choice here. If they decline to participate, to confess any unacceptable thoughts and beliefs, this becomes tacit proof that they must harbor them. Some results from these studies at first seem encouraging: Student course "evaluations were overwhelmingly positive" (Schmitz et al., 2001, p. 619); students were "significantly more aware of racial privilege and blatant racial issues at the end of the course than they were at the beginning" (Colvin Burque et al., 2007, p. 223); an assessment resulted in "a statistically significant change in students' understanding of the role that positionality and bias can play in social work research…" (Nicotera & Kang, 2009, p. 202). But what else would students in these courses say in their evaluations? That they learned nothing about their biases, nothing about being blind to their

privileged identities, nothing about their own perpetuation of discrimination and oppression?

Spears's (2004) study is a case in point. She discusses the impact of a multicultural course she taught on students' racial identity formation and cultural competence. The participants (N=22) reported that the course was valuable and that they experienced an increase in their sense of cultural competence; however, Spears appropriately notes that she was both instructor and researcher of the course, and that her students may well have felt under some pressure to provide politically correct answers in their evaluations. "Participants," Spears believed, "may have responded in ways that they thought she preferred or deemed appropriate" (p. 285). Spears's admission is a caveat in the assessment of any student evaluation of a course teaching critical consciousness. Students are not so much being educated in these courses as they are being indoctrinated in the critical perspective. They may be biased, but they understand socially desirable responses. They realistically reason that if acknowledging they have privately confronted their biases and privileged identities is good, and publically confessing them is better, then reporting the entire process was good for them must be best of all.

4.   Why Critical Consciousness?

If there is little creditable evidence to support CrC initiations and so much pain in the process for everyone involved, why do educators continue to insist on the *mea culpa* model of teaching CrC? There are without doubt well-intentioned educators who believe that CrC is necessary for good cross-cultural practice. Pinderhughes (1989) argues that the "development of culture-sensitive practice requires first an awareness and understanding of one's own cultural background and its meaning and significance for one's interactions with others" (p. 5). The goal of culture-sensitive practice is beyond reproach; but it is not clear why CrC has to be its first requirement. In a paper on cross-cultural empathy, Dyche and Zayas (2001) point out that "empathy requires a certain surrender of self, of one's own self-involvement,

and one's own preferences" (p. 250). If students are driven to focus first on a critical examination of who they are and what they believe, this may distract them from hearing who others are and what they believe. Students may understand others better if they first think about them and then later reflect on themselves.

A study on the impact of teaching CrC endorses the idea that the practice experience should precede self-reflection. Goodman and West-Olatunji (2009) looked at the use of critical consciousness as a training tool for the provision of culturally competent services to disaster victims (p. 458). They state that their "hypothesis was that an outreach experience would increase critical consciousness and thus inform participants' disaster response skills in culturally competent ways" (p. 461). The practice experience first—then the self-reflection.

Similarly, Suarez et al. (2008) stress that writers on critical consciousness should "give concrete examples of how social workers can use every practice situation to increase their own consciousness and skills" (p. 408). Practitioners absolutely should engage in critical self-reflection, but only as it relates to an actual practice situation. As Pitner and Sakamoto (2005) noted, if they are pressured into self-criticism before testing themselves in practice, it may be counterproductive (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005).

Despite the good intentions of its instructors, there is a profound unfairness in the CrC pedagogical exercise. As faculty, CrC instructors operate from a "category of social location" (Allen, 1995, p. 136) that is not only socially privileged but physically privileged as well. Faculty often work within the safe confines of academe, buffered from the world of actual practice; students, on the other hand, in their internships engage in what Michael Picardie (1980) calls "the dreadful moments" of doing human service work. They face neighborhoods that may be unsafe, and clients who may be physical and/or sexual abusers, threatening, and sociopathic. These clients may have strengths; but this does not negate their often dangerous

limitations. Working with them puts an enormous strain on anyone's capacity for empathy and tolerance, and severely tests the ability to avoid any kind of "biased" thoughts. CrC instructors rarely face these stressors.

The above may seem to treat faculty harshly, but it is not meant to tarnish all instructors who teach CrC. Most of them act from the best of motives. But students act from the best of motives, too, and those in critical-consciousness classes may feel they are treated quite harshly. They rarely have anyone to speak for them in this area, and they are unlikely to speak up for themselves.

5. The Critical Consciousness Flaw

The CrC approach has a basic flaw in that it takes place out of a practice context—in fact, it equates thought and action. When students are asked to engage in critical consciousness exercises in the classroom, to confess their biases and privileged identities, they are doing so before it can be seen whether or not these biases and privileged identities negatively affect their work. They may, but they may not. The proponents of CrC seem to operate on an *a priori* assumption that they must do so. This is like convicting a person of a crime because he or she admitted having thoughts of committing one.

Marsh (2004), in an editorial for *Social Work,* appears to sanction the CrC approach. We social workers, she states, must "take responsibility for our beliefs and attitudes" (p. 5). We certainly must take responsibility for our actions; but how do we take responsibility for our beliefs and attitudes, unless we accept the dangerous implication that beliefs and attitudes are the equal of actions? This is an equation that has caused people great trouble and pain. Many of our social work clients are in unnecessary misery because they believe what they think is the equal of what they have done or who they are.

Telling students that thought must result in action can be a confusing, destructive message. We teach students to help their clients realize that there is a critical difference between thought and

action—for example, to help parents realize that they can have angry thoughts toward their children, which all parents do, without acting abusively (Holman, 2011). Yet in CrC, students are being told just the opposite: Racist or heterosexist thoughts, conscious or unconscious, will make them act like racists and homophobes whether they want to or not. In doing this, faculty model for their students that they should tell parents who admit being angry at their kids that they are child abusers.

There are innumerable human-service practitioners who have never gone through the purifying ritual of CrC who are working ethically and constructively with clients from different cultures. It may be argued that they are operating under a false consciousness, blinded by their immersion in privileged locations. But the same false consciousness must then be attributed to the many clients who report being satisfied with the services they receive from these workers.

CrC advocates may think that clients want only "egalitarian moments" (Hopkins, 1986) in their work with practitioners. But as Pitner and Sakamoto (2005) point out:

> When social workers automatically frame service users' problems in terms of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, classism, ableism), they may inadvertently do so to the detriment of the needs of the service user. In fact, service users may not define their problems in these same terms (p. 439).

What matters to academicians may not matter to clients.

6. Conclusion

When critical-consciousness proponents demand that students reveal their beliefs and thoughts and change those found to be unacceptable, they can be seen as violating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a seminal text for the social work profession. "Everyone," states Article 19, "has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference…" (General Assembly of the United Nations, 1948). Students are entitled to this right. They do not waive it when they enter social work school. If anything, they should expect to find it modeled and exalted there. In fact, to return to CSWE mandates, every social work program is required to reflect in its learning environment "a commitment to diversity—including age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, (and) political ideology… ." (CSWE, 2008, p.10-11).

If we are to be true to our commitment to human rights and justice, we cannot without cause violate the freedom of our students to hold opinions—whatever they may be. When students are told their beliefs and very identities damn them from the outset, no matter how well they behave, this discourages them from reflecting on the possible effects of their beliefs at a time when it is essential—when they are struggling in class or practice. In class, students may cover their resentment at being unjustly condemned with the socially desirable overt admission of biases while inwardly holding even more tightly to a sense that what they always believed is still right. But then they are made to face "the demands of practice with little professional support or self-reflexivity" (Todd & Colohic, 2007, p. 18).

If and when students find they are struggling in practice, or having trouble grasping certain course content, then they need to consider if they have some biases that may be getting in the way. This is when critical consciousness is invaluable. If students want faculty help at this point, they should ask for it, and receive it—in private. There is no need for a public confession. Indeed, as Todd and Coholic (2007) argue, "the often irreparable loss of safety and the reproduction of harm to oppressed groups negate the classroom discussions of opinions that are antithetical to social work values" (p. 18).

As a result of their social work education, students may change some of their thoughts and beliefs, or they may not. They never have to—as long as they act as the values of their professions require them to act. As Patterson (2006) states, "the best way of living in our diverse and contentiously free society is neither to obsess about the hidden depths of our prejudices nor deny them, but to behave as if we had none" (2006, p. A25).

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