SOWK 697 S01

Assignment 1: Reflective Writing

Submitted to Hieu Van Ngo

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**Entry 1: Oppression and Power**

In recent years, I have been focusing on social work with immigrants and refugees, and for the class on oppression and power, one of the things that came immediately to mind is the oppression of visible minority newcomers in Canada by employers. I most recently worked with refugee and immigrant youth and their families for the Moose Jaw Multicultural Council in the small city of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. Here, the population is predominantly white but the demographics are slowly changing as increasing numbers of visible minority immigrants and refugees flow into the community. While the parents in the families I worked with had wide ranges in their level of education and work experience, essentially all were confined to entry-level jobs such as hotel housekeeper, fast food service, and factory worker at the local pork plant. When a new restaurant opened last year, only white individuals were hired for the positions in the front of the restaurant whereas the newcomer parents were hired as dishwashers hidden in the back.

To me, this is a prime example of the form of oppression that Mullally (2010) identifies as exploitation, or the “social processes whereby the dominant group is able to accumulate and maintain status, power, and assets from the energy and labour expended by subordinate groups” (p. 55). I completely agree with the argument that there exists a “race-specific form of exploitation resulting from members of non-white groups performing menial labour tasks for white people” and I feel that the experiences of the newcomer parents in Moose Jaw exemplify this (Mullally, 2010, p.56). And hand in hand with this oppression is the lack of power that these newcomer parents have as both visible minorities and as refugees or immigrants in Canada.

As part of the class group that is focusing on racism, one notable topic in my group’s discussion was on the term ‘visible minority’ and power. Some found the term itself oppressive and would prefer the term ‘person of colour’ whereas I personally choose to use the term ‘visible minority’ and identify myself as a visible minority. A friend of mine always jokes that I, as a Chinese-Canadian, cannot say that I am a visible minority when I am in my hometown of Vancouver because there are now many Chinese people living there. However, my argument to her and in the group discussion was that I do not find the term oppressive because ‘minority’ can also be understood in relation to the issue of power. In my previous studies, I had read an article that really resonated with me and in it was the argument that visible minorities are not just minorities in terms of their skin colour but also in terms of their power.

An example we discussed in the group was the ethnic relations in South Africa. I previously lived in Cape Town and experienced first-hand how white South Africans, while they are the ethnic minority in terms of numbers, are the majority when it comes to holding power in terms of capacity and resources. Therefore, even though the white population in South Africa is then arguably the ‘visible minority’ when it comes purely down to ethnicity and skin colour, they are still the majority when taking into consideration issues of power. And so, going back to my friend’s joke about how I am not a visible minority in Vancouver, I feel that the term ‘visible minority’ encompasses much more than just numbers.

As a visible minority, I recognize my own oppression and unequal hold of power in my accommodation response to oppression as, while I am highly critical of oppression based on ethnicity, I also have internalized significant dominant values and norms (Van Ngo, January 18, 2013). For example, I feel that I need to emphasize that I am Canadian-born and honestly feel that, on some occasions, I have been more inclined to get a job over a foreign-born individual because I speak English with a Canadian accent and I have an English name that can be easily pronounced by Anglophones. As one of the effects of oppression, internalized oppression is something that I think about often and I have spent a lot of time reflecting upon my own privileges and oppressions in order to better understand the complexities of power and oppression (Van Ngo, January 18, 2013). And connecting to social work, self-reflection has served for me to better appreciate the barriers faced by the immigrant and refugee clients that I have worked with in the field.

**Entry 2: Human Dignity and Human Rights**

As I started the assigned readings for the class on human dignity, human rights and social justice, I was struck with the realization that I did not *really* know what human rights actually means. I found this almost amusing because, other than my current MSW program, the only other graduate program I applied to was a Master of Science in Social Work and Human Rights program in Sweden. And now I thought to myself, I was contemplating getting a degree in human rights when it turns out that I would not know how to even begin to explain what human rights mean if someone were to ask me! And so I wanted to explore more on what I understand about the subject of human rights by writing this entry (p.38).

Beitz (2003) argues that whether “it is best to think of human rights as natural rights or as something more ambitious – for example, as the rights of global justice – is ultimately a question about the kind of world we should aspire to” (p.38). After reading the article, although human rights turns out to be a very controversial subject, I find myself inclined to think that human rights should be considered the “basic requirements of global justice” and are necessary and important to have amongst other values (Beitz, 2003, p.44). Honestly though, while I feel more informed about the subject of human rights, I also feel perhaps even more lost. So, at this point in time, if I were to explain to someone what human rights means, I would say that they are the ideals that essentially provide the framework for establishing the conditions necessary for all people to live with human dignity. On how ‘correct’ this explanation is, I am unsure.

As confused as I am now, I find that I gain the most understanding from either my own or other people’s experiences and stories and so I really appreciated Hieu’s sharing of his personal story about his brother’s experience of being attacked. As human minds often self-centeredly function, I immediately connected this story to my own life. One incident that I thought of occurred years ago in Vancouver when my family and I went out for a dinner on Canada Day at a nice restaurant atop of Grouse Mountain. There were a lot of people celebrating there and on our way into the restaurant, a man yelled out at us, “Go home! This is Canada!” None of us said anything and just went into the restaurant and did not discuss it but to this day I can remember this incident as if it happened yesterday.

My point here is, that I never connected such stories of what happened to Hieu’s brother and to my family that day to human rights and dignity and rather just always connected them to racism. And beyond that, I also never previously saw the connection between racism and human rights and dignity either. I know that these two stories are very different from each other but now I feel that I can understand perhaps more so why such experiences are so incredibly hurtful. In class, we also discussed the story in which a man changed his name to an English name in order to get a job and connected this to human rights and dignity. This is also not a connection I would ever have made on my own.

As I touched on in my previous entry, I do feel that my English name has been somewhat of a privilege to me in terms of getting employment but it is not something that I am happy with. I often think about whether or not I would have gotten the same opportunities if I used my Chinese name on my resume instead. Both my sister and I have legal English middle names that sound like our Chinese names but I suppose our parents felt that it would be to our advantage to have legal English names since we live in Canada. This actually makes me feel very sad that my parents felt that a Chinese name would be a disadvantage to us but what is even more striking is that it is in many situations probably true. While my grasp on human rights could still definitely be improved, it has been very enlightening to reflect on how human rights are incorporated into both my own and others’ lived experiences.

**Entry 3: Experiences of diverse groups and practical implications**

Of the readings for the class on the experiences of diverse groups, I found the Radermacher, Sonn, Keys and Duckett (2010) article on disability and participation most striking because some of the findings from the study discussed caught me off guard. Specifically, considering the organization in the study is a disability advocacy organization that promotes itself as controlled by people with disabilities, I found it rather surprising that staff members were so highly critical of the board members who, in order to sit on the board, have to identify as “’high support needs associated with physical impairments’” (Radermacher, Sonn, Keys and Duckett, 2010, p.336).

Comments made by the staff that board members were “’not worldly enough’”, are “’nearly illiterate’”, are lacking “’life experience’” and “’experience of running and organization’” I find offensive and oppressive, especially in the context of the organization that the staff are working in (Radermacher, Sonn, Keys and Ducket, 2010, p.338). Clearly, while the organization aims to be inclusive of people with disabilities, this goal is greatly hindered by the exclusive attitudes that remain within the organization. To be honest, it was very disheartening to read this article.

It was really great then to hear from the guest speakers from Disability Action Hall and see that people with disabilities can be valued members of an organization. I feel that so often in social work there is an emphasis on being critical which can lead to a lot of negativity surrounding issues and positivity and brightness then get lost in all of it. I took a class on working with disabilities during my BSW program at the University of Victoria but we focused heavily on oppression and barriers to full participation and so it was really refreshing to hear about how people with disabilities *can* and *are* actively participating in society. Just from spending a brief period of time with the guests from Disability Action Hall, you could feel the excitement and positivity that has been generated by their self-advocacy and activities in the community.

For example, it was definitely inspiring to hear about the guest speakers’ creative use of various art forms to both express their experiences of oppression and help overcome oppression. I have not created any art in quite a long time now but I once did an acrylic painting to accompany an essay on internalized racism and I remember now that it was a very empowering and gratifying experience. I feel reminded now that art can be a powerful way to convey emotions, messages, experiences and stories. I would argue that using this way of communicating can be very beneficial in the social work field when both learning from one another and working with clients who may choose to or feel better able to communicate through different mediums than just words. Thinking beyond the area of disabilities, dancing, acting and singing and other such activities can be very useful and engaging in, for example, working with children and youth or across cultures with immigrants and refugees.

Connecting back to the Radermacher, Sonn, Keys and Duckett (2010) article, I agree with the authors that it is necessary to support all members of an organization and ensure that everyone can participate in their own individual ways which are all equally valued (p.345). And so, for example, if an individual does not have a high level of literacy, they can still be equally contributing members of an organization through other forms of communication such as art. From listening to the stories from our Disability Action Hall guests, I can only agree with the Social Model of Disability that it is not people with disabilities who are the problem but it is “society’s inability to accommodate and include them” (Radermacher, Sonn, Keys & Ducket, 2010, p.334).

**Entry 4: Discourse analysis**

In the class on critical theory and discourse analysis, I really enjoyed our small group discussions regarding the discourse found in newspaper articles. In my group, we read two articles from The Globe and Mail regarding immigration in Canada. As Van Dijk (1993) discusses, critical discourse analysis allows us to critique social inequality by looking at the role of discourse in reproducing or challenging dominance in society (p.249). Also, Medina, Pokorny and Weigelt (2009) make a great point, arguing that discourse is an indirect way of exercising power as the subtleties and different layers of power are not readily apparent (p.393). In my group’s analysis of the discourse in these articles, it was evident that these authors made very solid arguments.

Examining the discourse used in the article, *Canada must actively recruit the best and brightest immigrants*, it was apparent that immigrants are being considered purely in light of economic contribution and as people whose sole value is how much they can contribute to Canada’s economy and prosperity. For example, the article uses language such as “global market for human capital”, “competition”, “upwardly mobile citizen”, and “seller’s market” (The Globe and Mail, 2012). Immigrants are described in terms of how desirable they are as measured by how well they can contribute to Canada’s economy. For example, the language used to describe ‘desirable’ immigrants includes “highly educated”, “entrepreneurial instincts and in-demand skills”, “talent”, and “technologically savvy” (The Globe and Mail, 2012). The article also discusses how Canada needs headhunters to recruit “the right kind of immigrant” (The Globe and Mail, 2012). In sum, the discourse in this article thus conveys that there are desirable immigrants, namely those who will generate profit, and undesirable immigrants, which are those who have lower incomes (The Globe and Mail, 2012). In my interpretation then, immigrants are being turned into powerless commodities that those who hold the most power in Canada, should be able to pick and choose from.

In contrast, the discourse in the article, *Changes to immigration policy will affect nearly all aspects of Canadian life*, does not so readily reproduce dominance over immigrants and attempts to describe immigrants in more equitable terms. In this article, the author warns against choosing “transience over inclusion”, “head-hunting over nation-building”, “homogeneity over diversity”, “exploitation over fairness” and “efficiency over human rights” (Omidvar, 2012). Pitting such terms, that have clear negative and positive connotations attached, against each other makes clear the author’s stance and argument. Also, in contrast with the other article’s portrayal of immigrants as economic commodities, this article humanizes immigrants, discussing how immigration policy “determines who our neighbours are, who we sit with on the bus and who our children go to school with” (Omidvar, 2012). By analyzing these two articles alongside one another, it is evident how much of an effect differing discourse can have on one subject.

Also on this topic of discourse, I found the Bannerj (2000) article on multicultural discourse very thought-provoking. What I take away most from this article is that no matter what terminology one chooses to use, language is never neutral and the very words that we use can be considered ideological concepts (Bannerj, 2000, p.550). For example, Bannerj (2000) discussed how talk of ‘diversity sensitization’ or ‘diversity training’ has to a large extent replaced talk of sexism and racism, which, in result, “helps to obscure the structural relations of power” (p.549). After reading this, I thought about how true this was but I had never previously critically problematized the terms diversity sensitization or training, which are indeed increasingly commonplace.

In my last job at the Moose Jaw Multicultural Council, we talked about and coordinated ‘diversity training and workshops’ or ‘cultural-sensitivity training and workshops.’ Now that I think about it, ‘cultural-sensitivity’ is just a more polite and, I suppose, purposefully less aggressive way of referring to racism. Perhaps the discourse of ‘cultural-sensitivity’ is easier to swallow since most people, I assume, do not like to think of themselves as being racist. However, after thinking about this, essentially sugar-coating racism with terms such as diversity and cultural-sensitivity really can be problematic as it most definitely serves to obscure the structures and experiences of racism. Overall, I found the readings and discussions in class regarding discourse very interesting and prompted me to think more critically about the language that both others and myself use and how language can create strong impacts even if one is not aware of it.

**Entry 5 – Experiences of Indigenous Peoples and practical implications**

I have often felt very outraged when discussing Indigenous peoples in Canada and the very current and significant results of Canada’s history of colonialism and residential schools. It seems to me that there is a general lack of awareness about the devastating impacts of colonialism that are very much so experienced today by many Indigenous peoples not only in Canada but around the world as well. Just today, there was a news article released entitled, *At least 3,000 native children died in residential schools: research*, which discusses the tragedies of Canada’s history of residential schools (Perkel, 2013). While I think it is important for such articles to continue to be published to spread greater awareness, I think it is a tragedy in and of itself that many Canadians are still not as aware of their own country’s very recent history.

Having said that though, I feel that if it were not for my education background and various life experiences, I would also not be as aware as I feel everyone should be about colonialism and its impacts. With my first degree in Sociology, I first started really learning the truths about colonialism and residential schools in Canada. It was during this time that I started volunteering in Vancouver’s low-income Downtown Eastside community where there are a highly disproportionate number of Indigenous peoples. I started learning more about the impacts of colonialism in other countries when I was living in Australia in 2008, which is when the Australian Government issued its formal apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples. Then, in my BSW program in Victoria, there was a very heavy emphasis on Indigenous peoples and mandatory classes we had to take on working respectfully with Indigenous peoples. And now in this class, we have had a guest lecture regarding residential schools and intergenerational trauma.

When taking all my experiences into account, I recognize that not everyone has had the advantage of having such experiences that would help educate them about colonialism and residential schools and their heavy implications. Therefore, I am incredibly grateful that I have had these experiences. However, I still cannot help feeling immensely frustrated when speaking with people who talk of how Indigenous peoples are ‘lazy’, ‘looking for hand-outs’ and should not keep blaming their problems on things that ‘happened a long time ago’. I have had conversations with individuals who say to me something along the lines of, “alright then, explain how colonialism is connected with being unemployed and alcoholic” and I would like nothing more than to sit them down for a couple of hours to really discuss the matter but that situation never materializes.

As the Bombay, Matheson and Anisman (2009) article discusses, 64% of residential school survivors become diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (p.10). Arguably one of the most significant implications of this history is intergenerational trauma as, for example, the parenting skills of generations have been negatively impacted stemming from the generation that were in residential schools (Bombay, Matheson & Anisman, 2009, p.14). That negative parenting practices are carried on from generation to generation seems like a very logical causal sequence. And then taking into account this causal sequence combined with a forced loss of one’s culture and essentially genocide, I cannot really understand how the impacts of this can remain so greatly underestimated.

I feel that perhaps there is a combination of overlapping reasons as to why the impacts of colonialism and residential schools are not readily acknowledged by many people even today. I would argue that at the forefront of such reasons are lack of education, ignorance and racism. All the difficult and ‘bad’ parts of Canada’s history, whether it be residential schools, the Chinese head tax, or Japanese internment camps, are generally only vaguely and briefly covered in the Canadian education system. My partner who is born and raised in Canada had only a very vague knowledge about residential schools and had never even heard of the Chinese head tax until I brought it up the other day. I feel that Canadians are not particularly eager to acknowledge and be more aware of these negative aspects of Canadian history either. And for some reason, it seems more socially acceptable for people to make racist comments regarding Indigenous peoples than other ethnic groups, at least in my own personal experience. With that article on residential schools making only today’s news, I feel that Canadians still have a very lengthy journey towards greater acknowledgement that there are direct relationships between colonialism and many of the issues faced by Indigenous peoples today.

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