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Recommended Citation

Flynn, Jean and Morris, Beverley (2007). "What's it Like in There? Reflections on Being Educators in Military and Para-Military Settings in the UK and Canada," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2007/papers/35>

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What's it Like in There? Reflections on Being Educators in Military and Para-Military Settings in the UK and Canada

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Abstract: Drawing on the comparison of our work experiences within prisons and the British Army, we attempt to unpack and deepen our theoretical understandings of patriarchy, hegemony, power, and 'other'.

Ever gone to a party with a group of friends who've known each other for years? You sit by, listening to their in-jokes and shared history, trying to smile and nod your head at the right time so that you look like you're one of the crowd, but somehow you just don't fit. The relationship is fairly superficial whilst they work out if they're going to accept you. If you're asked out with them again, things are a little easier and the more you are accepted by the group the more you accept their 'ways'. This is the process that we feel we have been through as educators working within overtly male-dominated institutions, and, as such, we wanted to explore our positions within and our relationships to power in these settings. Jeannie works with the Canadian Correctional system and Bev works with the British Army. Our aim in this paper is to reflect on our experiences as feminist educational practitioners working in overtly patriarchal systems. We situate our practice and theory in different strands of feminism in order to understand our learning journeys in these environments and to expose the hidden forces impacting our work in patriarchal institutions. Key analytical concepts for us are patriarchy, hegemony, power, and 'other'. Drawing on these experiences and reflections, and examining from feminist and critical literature, we then begin to explore what we have *learned* – and importantly, what we have had to *unlearn*. Reflexivity is a key element of our learning as, like Taber (2005), we recognize that it keeps theory connected to our lived experiences and transparent subjectivity helps us to acknowledge the limits of our theorizing.

The Big Guns – Hegemony and Patriarchy

As educational practitioners, we both feel that our experiences are shaped by larger structural forces, particularly hegemony, gender constructs, and power, which can remain unnoticed and unchallenged without focused analysis. Although we work in different settings and have different roles, there are definite commonalities to our experiences which have brought us to a shared understanding of the need to challenge implicit assumptions and behaviors. However, viewed with a poststructural feminist lens, we must acknowledge our positionality in order to recognize that we can only provide a partial and subjective narrative. We are both white, heterosexual, middle-class, university-educated (and childless) women. Our experiences are reflective of this privileged positioning, even within overtly patriarchal systems. We recognize the importance of positionality as not only does it reflect our view of the world, it also indicates what we see and how far we can see (Tisdell in Hayes and Flannery, 2000). But being in a privileged position in one arena does not exclude us being cast in the role of 'Other' in another and it is this tension which we seek to examine using the concepts of hegemony and patriarchy.

Gramsci described two types of political control which are important for our feminist understanding of education which have a particular resonance for our work. Firstly, domination which is direct physical coercion by the police and armed forces. Secondly, hegemony which is both the ideological control and, more crucially, the consent of those being controlled. This hegemony permeates society with an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs and morality that has the effect of supporting the status quo in power relations and becomes ‘common sense’ because it is internalized by the population so that the philosophy, culture and morality of the ruling elites comes to appear as the natural order of things (Boggs cited in Burke, 1999; Brookfield, 2005). These concepts are both useful and poignant in prison and army settings. Clearly, the military and para-military environments are built (and maintained) on physical coercion, through incarceration, enforced regimes, combat training, and penalties for misdemeanours – all of which are accompanied by very specific value systems. The hegemony in these contexts is rooted in gender and ‘maleness’ as well as having its own hierarchy or class system. Women in the UK Armed Force cannot go into battle thus persistently depriving them of equality with male soldiers and denying them the opportunity to attain the status afforded a soldier who has been on active service. This is evident in both Bev’s daily practice and also in the literature (Taber, 2005). Prisons also serve to reify notions of anti-social behaviour, and in many cases, shield the larger issue of why so many individuals from marginalized communities find themselves incarcerated.

Brookfield (2005) speaks to the subtlety of hegemony; of how it is learned and not imposed upon us: it is “embedded in a system of practices – behaviors and actions that people learn to live out on a daily basis within personal relationships, institutions, work and community” (p. 94). So how did we, as self-professed feminist educators, learn hegemonic masculinity – how did we learn to accept, and in some cases, perpetuate the ‘ways things are’? As we try to answer this question, two things come to mind: an awareness of the gendered nature of power relations (Bierema, 2003) and the sense of belonging that occurs within identity formation in the process of learning (Wenger, 1998). We both found the need to ‘fit in’ was important to our credibility as educators and our ability to work positively within settings which did not offer us feminist environments. Did the need to ‘fit in’ and to be ‘safe’ as women in these environments mean that we unlearned our feminist or feminine behaviour? Did we collude with a deficit model of femininity?

Prisons and army bases are completely separate units that run regardless of the rest of society, yet they do not operate in a vacuum. Though our reflections are context-specific, these sites share similarities with other worksites: they mirror society’s power structures and oppressive forces. We are interlopers into these worlds and can only ever be tolerated as we are not essential to the running of the organization nor do we ‘fit’ the profile of the majority of staff and learners. As Bierema (2003) notes, women work and learn in contexts that have largely been created, maintained, and controlled by white men where they lack voice, visibility, and power. Yet not all men appear to take an active part in the hegemonic disadvantaging of women and this can often confound feminist arguments. Patriarchy as an overarching construct to explain the systematic subjugation of the needs, interests and experiences of women, becomes less convincing when we have found ourselves within overtly masculine institutions which have made us welcome

and apparently promoted our interests. Praetcher draws on Connell when she describes how “the number of men rigorously practicing the hegemonic pattern in its entirety may be quite small” (2006, p. 255). Connell is basing this explanatory framework on Gramsci’s thoughts that hegemony does not mean the “total cultural dominance, the obliteration of alternatives...Other patterns and groups are subordinated rather than eliminated” (Connell, 1987, p. 184). Yet all men are still able to benefit from the ‘patriarchal dividend’ afforded to them on the basis of their gender, regardless of their behavior, and women working against the hegemony and placated and sucked in to maintain the status quo whilst appearing to be compromising. As feminist educators, we would like to believe we may also bring with us ways of working and thinking which subvert the status quo and undermine dominant ideologies – but do we? Our personal reflections on our experience tell a different story. Rather than a glass ceiling, we conceptualize our practice as pushing against a malleable plastic wall; it bends to accommodate us and so allows us to work within the environment but there is always an invisible barrier preventing us from stepping into genuine positions of power within the institution. It also allows us to feel close to the locus of power within an organization because we can see it and almost touch it, but we are still kept away from actually being able to influence it in a way which would challenge the status quo in favour of a more socially just perspective.

Most discourses around teacher-learner relationships discuss issues of power within the classroom, often citing a white, middle-class male perspective as the dominant ideology within education and differing perspectives as ‘other’. Yet within our experience of the work we do, we can exercise power over our male learners, either by having knowledge or skills they require to achieve their aims or by being able to dictate a course of action which determines their future (i.e. offender release planning, allowing soldiers to sit national tests in order to access promotion training, allowing access to the internet for job search, providing formal dyslexia assessments) So who is ‘other’ in this situation? Do we remain ‘other’ because our gender deems us to be so, are we ‘other’ because the institutions are so heavily structured by a male hegemony, or does our position shift because we have power over our learners, albeit bestowed on us by men? We have tried, through our writings and reflections, to unpack this theoretical understanding of ‘otherness’ by using some examples from our work. What then, becomes of our awareness as feminist educators operating in ‘no woman’s land’? Do we become ‘closet activists’ (Bierema, 2003), amenable to small group or one-on-one change agents, or has this awareness rendered us paralyzed by the daunting task of challenging our specific patriarchal systems?

So What Have we Learned?

We both feel that we have had to learn acceptable ways of being women in our respective settings and that these do not include being defined as feminist or feminine. Taber (2005) notes that women in the Canadian Forces “could fit into masculine norms only until they became mothers, then they were seen as no longer committed” (p. 297). As we are both non-traditional women, pursuing careers in male-dominated environments, adopting strong feminist stances, choosing not to be married or to have children, wearing ‘masculinised’ clothing, does this mean that we can be more easily accepted by the men in the organizations as ‘honorary boys’ and that we if we opted to use our femininity in an overt way we would be ‘less acceptable’? Or is it that we are in

such a minority that we are not a threat and the men can ‘indulge’ us as trophies or tokens of their equal opportunities policies?

Bev has gone through a journey of resistance, being disarmed by the unexpectedly welcoming environment, colluding with the ‘enemy’ and a final step back towards reflexivity when she realized that she was too comfortable with situations that she would previously have challenged. As a feminist and pacifist, Bev found herself at odds with the idea of working in a male-dominated environment with an ultimate purpose of killing people. However, she was quickly charmed by the individuals she met and the feeling of ‘family’ that envelopes you when you become ‘accepted’. (Her measure of being accepted was when the male officers swore in front of her and when the male soldiers confided their fears about being sent to Iraq and Afghanistan). She was treated with respect and good humor by all of the male personnel and only had problems with two females (one a Major the other a civilian). This led her to question many of her own assumptions about the Army and to wonder how she had so easily been drawn into the community when she had a nagging feeling that sexism and racism lay beneath a lot of interactions she could see. She began to feel that she had become ‘an honorary boy’ by emphasizing her difference from other women (Praetcher, 2006; Taber, 2005), particularly as she was the ‘boss’ (she took on the external garb of seniority by wearing trouser suits, controlling the other members of the team and liaising with the most senior officers on a very relaxed basis). Does this indicate that she was ‘doing boy’ (Praetcher, 2006) or being a ‘shape-shifter’ (Twomey, 2005) by choice and acquiescing to femininity as a deficit model because she felt the need to adopt masculine characteristics to be given credibility?

Jeannie’s journey did not chart a similar course to that of Bev’s, however, upon comparison, there are commonalities. She was never disarmed by a welcoming environment: upon completion of correctional officer training, new staff were called ‘Jafa’ (just another fucking auxiliary), or ‘pond scum’ by some more senior staff who were quick to advise that she ‘knew nothing’. What she learned was that in order to “fit in”, she would have to accommodate to the current system. Though Bagilhole (2002) speaks in reference to gender discrimination, accommodating to the system “was seen as an inescapable part of ‘real life’, thereby effectively placing responsibility on women to change in order to successfully navigate current discriminating systems” (p.27). However, with years of service seniority, she became part of the system and wonders how her behavior reflects being an “honorary boy” within this patriarchal system. As a uniformed correctional officer and educator, she had an insider view of a closed organization, more so than contract educators or community members. However, as her experience shows, she was still an outsider in a patriarchal system. To successfully navigate the system, there were times when she had to distance herself from prescribed gender roles, and at times, outright reject these same roles. In this male-dominated industry, distancing herself from stereotypical femininity is a claiming of power (Praechter, 2006): “rejection of the feminine goes a long way with identification with boys, with the adoption of a form of hegemonic masculinity and a claiming of a share of male power through acting as an honorary boy” (p. 257).

Through her experiences in correctional institutions, Jeannie has learned that patriarchy is not simply contained in the bodies of men; in fact, men are not necessary to be present for its exercising. One of the institutions she worked in was a female

correctional centre where all but three staff were women. Though she would not have suggested it at the time, the workings of this institution were not substantively different than those workings of a male institution. The interlocking systems of gender, race, and class oppression were evident. At times derided by other institutions for a 'soft' approach to offender management (and often by staff members who had no experience within the female centre), the two institutions were, nevertheless, remarkably similar in how hegemonic masculinity is learned. When it came to 'fitting in', both institutional experiences highlighted the sense of belonging evident in identity formation. The hidden curriculum of her formalized training reinforced specific gender performances, and if you wanted to be accepted, then following accepted masculinity practices was advised covertly. As an example, women were often expected to draw on their communication skills to diffuse volatile situations whereas men could more quickly proceed to physical force in these same volatile situations. To overtly challenge established practices ("the way things are") could have dire consequences and would subject those change agents to targeting. Though rarely acknowledged, there can be severe consequences for staff members who speak out against "the way things are" – such consequences range from marginalization within the worksite, to false accusations, to bullying, to acts of physical violence. To maintain this 'sense of belonging' is a powerful motivator not to challenge the status quo.

What Have we Unlearned?

We have certainly moderated our behavior in order to accommodate the demands of hegemony and to survive in these settings and we have avoided frequent feminist challenges to the working environment and individuals within it by 'picking our fights' carefully. Confronting every issue would have led to an unworkable situation for everyone and would have led us to be bitter and disheartened. But we have also had our feminist expectations confounded; Jeannie in the way in which an all-female prison did not operate in an any less masculine way than the rest of the penal system and Bev in how easily she was drawn into accepting the patriarchal environment. Ultimately, we have 'unlearned' our unproblematic understanding and acceptance of theory as it relates to practice; we have 'unlearned' utilizing a single approach to differing contexts; and we have 'unlearned' some of our foundational expectations of ourselves.

Implications for Lifelong Learning:

Our intent on sharing our experiences as feminist educators within overtly patriarchal systems is multi-faceted: sharing our reflections, our stories, and our contexts is what promotes learning and change. It is our attempt to make visible the invisible; to put a face to the abstract body of ideas; to make real the practice of theory; to think aloud and give those critical, and self-critical thoughts a voice. Though our experiences may be 'out of sight, out of mind' behind perimeter fencing and security, these experiences are, nevertheless, discernable in other systems, institutions, and importantly, in our everyday lives. Prisons and Army settings may be the extremes of patriarchal institutions and behaviors in some ways but they serve to remind us of the continued need for challenging reflections and narratives as to the role of feminist educators in uncomfortable situations.

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