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The World as It Could Be: Class, Race and Gender for and with Working Class Students

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Abstract: This paper discussed the results and implications of two workshops designed for a university based labor studies center. The goal was to create space for students to grapple with the complex nature of inequality and begin to explore possibilities of a broad based social solidarity.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, adult education, critical/critical race theory

Introduction

This is the second part of a research project which was first presented in its beginning stages at last year's AERC in Toronto. In that paper, two faculty members critically reflected on their experiences teaching a course entitled Class, Race, and Gender in a Labor Studies program at an urban public university that serves primarily members of unions in the building trades. Here we present a two part workshop series we designed for the same course. We also analyze these workshops in terms of their effectiveness in generating an honest and sustainable conversation with working class students (whom are predominantly male, roughly half white ethnic, ten to fifteen per cent African-American, the rest a mix of Asian, S. Asian, E. European, etc.) about the intersections between class, race and gender inequalities. Neither of us are currently teaching this course on a weekly basis, although one of us coordinates (the other was the coordinator last year) several sections and is still actively involved in the design and redesign of the curriculum. Thus we were guest facilitators in two different sections of Class, Race and Gender, roughly five weeks into the semester. Not surprisingly, each class we visited had a different dynamic, with different levels of student engagement with the instructor and the course material. Since all sections of the course work off the same syllabus we intend to also use students' and instructors' feedback to continue to refine the curriculum of this course.

Purpose

Based on the feedback we received during the presentation of our first paper (as well as our own ongoing dialogue around this subject), we decided to probe more deeply into the resistance we encountered on the part of our students regarding the subject matter, and to think through strategies that would shift that resistance so as to encourage students to grapple with the question of institutionalized inequality. To this end we co-developed workshops to open up spaces—otherwise very difficult to come by in this society—to discuss how structural inequities play out in racialized and gendered ways. The hope is that these workshops could lay the groundwork for a more comprehensive series that will sustain student-led analysis of the multi-dimensional nature of inequality in 21st century capitalism, and link this analysis to an educational project promoting the kind of social unionism that can build a more equitable and just society.

Theoretical Framework

As we see and practice it, education should move Freire's reading of "words and worlds" toward a collective critique of capitalism as an economic, political, and social system. Critical theory and an anthropological political economy therefore guided this study because both provide a

framework for the analysis of the production and reproduction of relations of domination and subordination under capitalism (Brookfield, 2005). The latter in particular allows for a close grained look at the process by which ordinary men and women understand, adapt to, and struggle against these inequalities at work, at home, in the community, or in this case, in the classroom (Crehan 2002; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Critical Race Theory (CRT) also framed our approach because of its emphasis on the institutionalized character of racism and on the mythic nature of claims that social and political life is racially “neutral.” (Delgado and Stephanic 2000) CRT is important in this study because even though not always explicit, issues of race often emerged in our conversations in the classroom.

Research Design

Collaborative Inquiry (CI), the primary methodology used in this research, allows participants to explore, critique, and analyze their perspectives as co-researchers. Alternating between cycles of action and reflection, CI offers a systematic structure for learning from experience, (Kasl and Yorks 2002; Heron and Reason, 2001). This study also contained many of the elements of a participatory action research (PAR) project: a commitment to looking at the world not the way it is, but the way it should be. PAR involves movement and transformation; it creates a fluid process of action and reflection. In identifying the constraints of the present reality, it allows participants to also envision possible new realities, and the paths that may get us there.

The Context

The workshops were designed to encourage students to work through some of the key concepts in one of assigned readings in the course, William Julius Wilson’s *More Than Just Race*. The important thing about this recent book is that Wilson assigns a good deal of weight to historically determined social and political structures (institutionalized racism, systemic inequality, and the political and social policies and ideologies that produce and reproduce them) when it comes to explaining persistent poverty amongst African-Americans. Furthermore, it argues that structural (rather than behavior centered) interpretations lend themselves to policy recommendations that would make tangible differences: interventions in the labor market, from living wage laws to increased unionization to affirmative action; housing market reform; an end to racial-profiling in police work; public subsidies for decent child care for working parents; affordable healthcare.

When adding the Wilson book to the syllabus, the hope was that an exploration of structural explanations for racial inequality would support students in confronting another deeper ideological assumption, one that is often racialized when it comes to discussions about why some people are poor and stay poor. And interestingly, it is not simply *white* students that assume that both poverty and rising out of poverty is an *individual* thing, the result of the choices and efforts we make or don’t make as *individuals*. In the classroom some students of color, if for different reasons, adhere to the idea as well. Overall, the notion that they have control over their own destinies is very important to our students, all the more so since established social, political and educational insitutions, with the possible exception of their union, have not only failed to support many of them, but have been outright obstacles to their personal growth. How then, to get them beyond the individual and move them toward the social?

Workshop 1: Microaggressions

In the first workshop students were asked to identify words or phrases they associated with the terms class, race, and gender. As facilitators, we wrote these down on the white board, and then encouraged students to search for connections across the three categories. The idea here was to

set the stage for the next step in the workshop, but also to establish how fluid and ever present the tensions and assumptions we associate with class, race and gender relations are in our lives.

Then one of the facilitators (a woman of color) tells a story about a recent experience she had while riding the Subway from Brooklyn to the Fort Tryon Park. Sitting across from an African American man with a large bag on the floor in front of him, she at one point checks her pocket to make sure her keys were still there. Noticing this, the man tells her not to worry, that he wasn't after her money. She responds by saying that, regardless of what he might think, she doesn't think he is a thief. He insists that she's just playing games. She responds by saying that she's sorry to disappoint him, but he's got it and her all wrong. The conversation is futile; in fact, it was not really a conversation at all. She leaves the train disheartened on an individual basis. But she is also troubled by it in a collective sense, since this exchange to her seems an accurate reflection of the state of race relations in the US today.

We intended this short anecdote to engender a conversation about the existence of micro-aggressions, and *perceived* micro-aggressions, in everyday life. Students were asked to speak in small groups about their perceptions of just what happened on the train that day, why this might be, and what else could have been said or done. We then passed around an abbreviated version of Peggy McIntosh's list of white privileges, and asked students for their reactions to it. Last, we asked who, in our society, *really* benefits from racial division and how social solidarity might be re-imagined to more effectively struggle against it.

Findings for Workshop 1

Students responded very interestingly in the exercise on the terms class, race, and gender. One white student said that while he wasn't racist, he was tired of Mexicans having the red carpet rolled out, a comment that spoke of an undercurrent shared by other white students. Another, for example, said that it seemed unfair that the poor in general had access to what he assumed was better health care. Such responses seem to reflect the notion that this class, part of a required curriculum, is part of an elite and liberal project that tends to blame "racism" for what are in fact individual actions and failures. To counter this we briefly explained that undocumented workers do in fact pay taxes when they make purchases here in the city, and when they collect their paychecks. Many indeed pay into social security, when unlike citizen workers they won't see any of the benefit when they retire, we added. But the conversation was difficult to move forward from here.

When asked if some people were born with certain advantages, one other white student said his family left their neighborhood when it started to change demographically. While he didn't confront directly the racial implications of such transitions, he did seem to want to let it be known that such a move meant that he had advantages, especially in terms of the school system. Another student suggested that it was hard to really talk about these issues, especially race. He didn't think he was racist, he said, but he was aware that he could sound racist. One student of color said that, being young and Black and male, his priorities were vastly different. He spoke movingly of how each day going home, he worried about being shot, about being arrested, about being mistaken for a thug. He said this was his reality.

Responding to the anecdote, there was a sense of general criticism of the man's behavior on the train by several students. Then some students began speaking of the ways in which this one individual may have felt stereotyped and his behavior on the train reflected this. Other

students spoke of ways in which dominant society wanted them to believe in stereotypes, which almost everyone in the room felt got amplified through the media. They spoke of ways in which structure and culture intersected, especially in zoning laws, etc.

Students had different reactions to the McIntosh piece. They mostly agreed with her list but couldn't really unpack it fully. Students of color seemed much more able to do this. One could argue that students of color lived this reality on a daily basis and didn't need a list to point out to them the ways in which white privilege had impacted their lives in ways both seen and unseen. They understood, it seemed, the notion of microaggressions – subtle insults (verbal, and/or visual) directed at people of color, often automatically or unconsciously.” (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2000, p. 60). Indeed, microaggressions are a reality for those that perceive and feel them, even if the power and privilege that drives them are rarely recognized and even less often acknowledged by society as a whole.

Workshop 2: the Discovery of the Sociological Imagination

We opened this workshop by asking students for lists of the words or phrases they associated with Wilson's definitions of culture and structure. Then, based on student comments, we created a set of oppositions between individual/local habits and behavior (“culture”) and larger historical/political/economic processes and forces (“structure”). We then passed around a short, fictional account Richard had composed of a woman in a crowded Bronx employment office, who while waiting for her turn to speak with a clerk, begins to ponder the circumstances of her life. Will she get a job? If she does will it pay enough to pay the bills, much less child care or the school she would need to advance? Why is does it seem she is always up against it? Was it her fault? Once they had read, we then had students discuss in small groups what they thought the “it” was, and whether or not they thought it was her fault. The idea here was to create some cultural space in the classroom, space in which **students** could engage with the concept of structure from the ground up, from lived experience to theory so to speak. As the students spoke, we made another pair of lists; on one hand, a set of terms that focused on this particular individual and the set of circumstances over which we *presume* she had some control, and on the other, a set of terms that focused on events and/or circumstances *beyond* her control, at least as an isolated individual.

From here the workshop moved to two passages from the introduction to C.W. Mills' classic *The Sociological Imagination*. Although Mills' language can be difficult, his definitions of the terms “trouble” and “issue” push us to think about how the things that happen to us personally, our “troubles,” are often at the same time “issues,” that is, *structural* forces or realities that affect many, many others as well. As Mills put it, the sociological imagination looks for the intersections of biography and history; seeing those connections, we think, is for our students an important step towards a clear understanding of the cultural and political value of a solidarity that extends beyond the boundary of their “Craft.” After a general discussion of Mills' terms and what they meant, we then returned to the example of the woman in the employment office, with the aim of getting past the more obvious “troubles” to generate a list of the less obvious “issues” that she, and others, faced. In the finale to the workshop, we asked our students what *issues* they faced. In teasing out the broader context of these, we hoped to establish that a group of ethnically mixed but predominantly male union construction workers had quite a bit in common with this anonymous single black mother from the Bronx.

Findings for Workshop 2

Both times we ran this workshop the first part went reasonably well. Students were acquainted with Wilson's definitions of culture and structure; that, combined with their own sense of what the terms meant, allowed us to generate pretty solid lists of associated terms and phrases. But when we introduced the anecdote about the woman in the employment office the first time we ran the workshop, the conversation went in a direction that proved hard to reverse. Off the bat, one student noted that her concerns were just "everyday stuff," a comment to which we were later able to return. But other students felt that a discussion about what she was up against, about the question of blame, and so on, was hard to pursue without knowing a lot more about the woman herself. What happened to her husband? Did she ever marry? How much education did she have? What kind of family did she come from? This desire for more information about her biography began to close off the conversation, or at least lead it toward the inference that she had made bad decisions, or someone close to her had.

To get around this, Dianne suggested to the students that they imagine this woman not as an individual, but as a member of a group of individuals which, though they all had their own stories, nonetheless were in the same basic predicament. This managed to turn things around somewhat, so that when we introduced Mills' discussion of "troubles" and "issues" we could begin to focus more on history and structure rather than behavior and biography, and get back to the task of drawing out the ways in which the "every day stuff" the woman faced was embedded in larger "issues." Based on this experience, when we handed out the anecdote the next evening to a different section of the Class, Race and Gender course, we stressed that the woman's story was important not for its unarticulated particulars but for its unseen generality. The shared social condition she represented, as evidenced by the worried voices she overheard at the unemployment office, was the important thing to see, to name, to understand.

Overall the discussion the second time around was livelier, its exploration of the key concepts of culture and structure, of "troubles" and "issues, more sustained and fruitful. In general, this was a more enthusiastic group. They had a stronger hold on the assigned material, and since there was an easy rapport amongst them they were willing and capable of taking over the discussion in a productive way. With the employment office anecdote, for example, there was less wrangling about the woman's personal biography. We were also able to settle on her identity: a working class or poor African-American woman. One male African-American apprentice did wonder about her "choice" to have children given her uncertain financial situation; others may have agreed. But another African-American apprentice eloquently connected her story to her neighborhood and a history of discriminatory housing policy and decades of official neglect of the inner city—exactly the kind of structural forces Wilson takes time to spell out in *More than Just Race*. A white apprentice, when asked whether or not the woman in the story had herself to blame for the predicament she faced, paused for moment. Then he said, "No. Look, she's making the effort to find work. It's not her fault if there isn't any."

After spending a few minutes picking apart Mills' discussion of "troubles" and "issues," and then listing on the board terms the students associated with each, we returned again to the example of the woman in the employment office. "What are her issues," I asked. "No decent jobs are out there," said one student. "No child care," said another. "Everything is getting more and more expensive, you know, inflation," added a third. Rent controlled or stabilized

apartments are harder and harder to find, said a fourth. And finally, most of the students agreed that the minimum wage is pretty much a joke, that it's not a living wage at all.

Implications

At the end of the workshops, students expressed a deep awareness of ways in which they weren't getting their fair share of the pie. Like many in the US, they are alive the powerful if rather vague idea that the 1% has too much money and influence. In trying to hold on the idea of a good life even when they were mostly scraping by, they recognized the importance of their union but worried about its ability to resist cooptation by the "system." When we asked them, after the discussion of immigration, if the solidarity they presently experienced within the union might be extended to the unorganized and the undocumented, they balked. The reality, as least at they understand it, is that illegal immigrants are taking their jobs and draining public resources. Therefore, there is a pressing need for workshops that acquaint students with the more complex empirical and historical reality of immigration and explore the enormous political potential of a labor movement that included the undocumented. How might these be designed?

Another implication of our experiments with these workshops is that, when we tried to guide the students toward a discussion of the structural, or institutional and systemic, nature of racial inequality, the conversation at first veered toward a focus on individual circumstances, choices, work ethics, etc. One could see this as an effort to change the subject, or perhaps better, as kind of instinctive reversion to the narrative that is most meaningful to our students. After all, they do all work very hard, in difficult environments, and then come to class afterward. They have a lot invested in the notion that the choices they have made will bring them a decent life, and to a certain degree they expect the same of others.

That said, we feel it is very important to push the students toward the recognition that there forces out there over which they have very little control as isolated individuals, forces that impact their lives and many, many others. While an honest admission, to say that one fears "sounding racist" is a position that reflects a quite limited understanding of racism, as if it were just a way of talking, a matter of words, and not deeply interwoven into the structural and institutional fabric of society. Indeed, we got the impression that, when students said that they needed more biographical details about the women in the employment office in order to move forward with a discussion about the circumstances of her life, they were trying to be "sensitive," trying to not "sound racist" when it came to their assessments. This confirms not only how delicate these conversations are, but also how far we have to go toward creating the space that will make these conversations sustainable.

We cannot expect that all the assumptions about persistent poverty in the inner city that often contribute to a racialized discourse of "blaming the victim" are swept away after one (or even many) conversation(s). Students were willing to share their experiences, which is a function of the security and common ground the union provides as much as anything else. And we learned that there is less an unwillingness to get a conversation going about inequality in its various forms than a kind of paralysis about where to begin. For to use one's sociological imagination is to begin the search for "root causes" of inequality. This is a process that is notoriously difficult in the American public sphere; indeed, given how constantly individualism is evoked, one might say it's downright un-American. But needless to say, we must learn how to use our collective sociological imaginations if a more progressive political culture is to take hold. Instead of racialized discourses of dependency, moral breakdown, and policies that focus almost

exclusively “law and order,” we might then be able to focus more on reigning in the power of Capital in the name of justice and social democracy.

More immediately, the workshop also showed potential in terms of encouraging our students to take a closer and more critical look at current notions of trade union solidarity which, especially in the building trades, tend to quite inward looking, defensive, almost tribal. At the end of our discussion of how Mills’ “troubles” and “issues” might apply to the example of the woman in the employment office, we ran down the list of issues the students ascribed to her situation. “Are these issues your issues,” we asked? Yes, the class replied.

So, where do we go from here?

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