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Clipped Wings: Professionalism Structuring Adult Educators in a Globalized Workplace

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Keywords: professionalism, international development, adult educator identity

Abstract: Through policy-oriented research and in-depth interviews, this research project investigated what kinds of discourses could possibly be structuring the lives of adult educators who work in international development. One significant theme that emerged in the data was the presence of “image” as a microtechnology of power that not only demanded silence around “controversial” identity-differences, but also encouraged adult educators to adopt a public identity that was more congruent to the accepted norms of the workplace.

There is nothing more troubling for a dedicated adult educator than feeling as though their wings of enthusiasm and love for teaching have been clipped by the employer. Indeed, for participants of my doctoral study, who were adult educators working in international development, nothing seems closer to the truth. For the purposes of this research project, I view a work circumstance situated within international development as an example of a globalized workplace because this type of workplace (re)presents a unique set of personal and professional challenges for an adult educator that is different than teaching within a domestic context. A globalized workplace means that educators are working within an agency that operates across differences in identity, citizenship, history, religion, language and culture (Singh & Shore, 2004).

This research project examined how unstructured interpretations of professionalism complicated the work experiences for some adult educators working in international development. Professionalism has been generally understood as a necessary and acceptable value by workers, such as adult educators, to mediate behaviours in the workplace. Professionalism is primarily a type of “work orientation” (Marshall, 1998, p. 527); it is used to standardize performance of individual workers, maintain productivity and erase “inappropriate” and “inequitable” discussions and behaviours. Rewards such as opportunities for further career advancement often accompany job performances that adhere to professional standards and successful completion of tasks (Deverall, 2001; Kerfoot, 2001). If someone is considered to be professional, then that person gains trust and respect, inherits class status and autonomy, and acquires greater power in the workplace. Significantly, the professional self becomes a “meaning-giver” whereby s/he is granted authority to validate others’ experiences, and a “meaning-taker” in the sense that her or his own experience requires validation from outside the self (i.e., by the institution or colleagues) (Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997). Being protected - or trapped - in such a way makes it difficult to adequately challenge the constraining type of language used by professionalism (Deverall, 2001). Indeed, Michel Foucault’s (1991) work on governmentality resonates with this perspective on professionalism.

According to Foucault (1991), governmentality stems from the way in which lives are governed or “disciplined” by technologies of power that are well-crafted practices to achieve

particular goals. For Foucault (1970/1990), a technology of power, otherwise referred to as “biopower”, is a means to control a group of people within a particular social setting. Foucault (1991) writes that governmentality is an “ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics, that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power” (p. 102). These tactics work toward disciplining people’s behaviours according to the governing “rules.” Usher and Solomon (1999), who apply Foucauldian principles to adult education, explain:

The aim of disciplinary power is not however to crush, repress, or inhibit but to create and develop capacity, inclinations and dispositions – in other words, to create ‘active’ subjects with an appropriate subjectivity who precisely because of this will be more efficient and productive. This is a ‘disciplining’ without coercion into a freely accepted particular form of life. (p. 157)

Oftentimes, this “disciplinary power” involves the strategic use of traditional virtues (e.g., wisdom, justice, respect for the rule of law, and human traditions) to use morality as a centrifuge for complacency. Through such power, institutions can then intervene into the activities of what Foucault (1977/1995) considers as “docile bodies.” Essentially, what is meant here is that individuals use these virtues to unquestionably self-regulate their behaviours, which causes them to become “docile” or, in other words, “both an object of power and an instrument through which power is exercised” (Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997, p. 77).

In the workplace, governmentality involves itself in all social systems, including areas where rules exist that question what it means to have appropriate conduct (e.g., discipline and conduct units) (Usher et al, 1997). Self-regulation techniques are largely formed as a result of a particular technology of power, which becomes operationalized through value-laden discourses such as “ethics” or “standards of conduct” (Rose, O’Malley & Valverde, 2006; Usher et al, 1997). This technology forces individuals to “come to understand and act upon themselves within certain regimes of authority and knowledge, and by means of certain techniques directed to self-improvement” (Rose et al., 2006, p. 90). Effectively, power becomes exercised or used within an unchallenged context rather than it being owned by people (Edwards & Nicoll, 2004; Usher et al, 1997). This decision-making power reinforces the dominance of institutional power because individuals are not considered capable of fully actualizing their work potential or themselves. Institutions then entrench their dominant power in the workplace by having workers self-regulate and self-educate themselves on institutionally-sanctioned practices, which results in a marginalization of individualism and autonomy (Edwards & Nicoll, 2004; Usher & Solomon, 1999). For the purposes of this research project, I viewed an international development workplace through the lens of professionalism as outlined above.

Statement of the Problem

Foreign adult educators working in international development enjoy some of the privileges that are associated with professionalism (e.g., being recognized as an authority figure in the host nation). While much of this privilege has been critiqued in international development literature as creating an uneven power dynamic (Escobar, 1992; Kapoor, 2008), foreign adult educators are still constrained by discursive practices of professional regulation, such as the demand to follow standardized procedures. The problem, then, is trying to navigate through these procedures while maintaining a sense of agency and an ethical commitment to address local needs. The result may mean experiencing disjuncture between *context* (i.e., post-conflict Kosovo) and *content* (i.e., adhering to institutional demands on teaching practice and

curriculum). With this point in mind, the research question that ultimately drives my inquiry is: In what ways do aid agencies create moments of disjuncture for foreign adult educators working in international development?

Research Design & Methodology

Using a case study approach (Lichtman, 2010) to facilitate this research project, I conducted policy-oriented research on two aid agencies working in Kosovo after the 1999 conflict. I renamed these two agencies as Agency 1 and Agency 2 and paraphrased their policies in order to protect confidentiality. Ozga (2000) explains that, “policy research can act as a commentary or critique of ‘official’ research outputs, and assist those who implement or mediate policy to orient themselves in relation to official research claims” (p. 2). By combing through policy text, I used this form of policy-oriented research to offer a critique of how professionalism that has individual and collective purposes marginalizes certain identities, while at the same time, privileges others. These two aid agencies include sexual orientation, gender and other social markers within their anti-discrimination frameworks and have a mandate to “develop capacities” of individuals through adult education. This inclusion of adult education practice is becoming increasingly commonplace in international development, and adult educators are viewed by some scholars as being especially useful to facilitating this kind of sensitive work (Arthur & Preston, 1996; e.g., English, 2004).

I also conducted informal, in-depth interviews with four foreign, gay male adult educators who a) worked with these two agencies and b) spent at least three months in Kosovo teaching and/or mentoring adults on different content matters such as democratic governance and media relations. To facilitate an interview with these participants “requires knowledge, interviewing skills, empathy and understanding on the part of the interviewer, who at the same time must pursue the collection of data in a systematic, valid and reliable way” (Mikkelsen, 2005, p. 173). An interview does not need to be a one-shot conversation; rather, I envisioned an interview to have multiple layers. Challenging participants’ responses, asking follow-up questions and having participants review transcripts were all helpful steps to obtaining valid and reliable data. These extra steps were done as a way to respectfully probe replies and not to cross-examine participants (Mikkelsen, 2005). I chose gay men because a) oftentimes the presence of openly gay men runs up against heterosexist understandings of masculinities in the workplace, b) they occupy both a privileged position through their gender and a disenfranchised position through their sexuality and c) it creates opportunities for me to locate “difference” in viewpoints, experiences, and values within “sameness,” that is, a shared sexual orientation. It was their experiences that helped me frame my analysis.

After transcribing all interviews myself, I began by first reading through the data and then identifying and assigning specific themes to parts of the data that were, as Lichtman (2010) says, “going from the responses to some central idea of the responses” (p. 198). The use of “themes” enabled me to identify the kinds of discourse that concerned navigating the politics that positioned gay educators working for these two agencies.

Image Discourses and Ruling Relations

As I continued examining my policy research and interviews, I noticed that the theme of *image* kept resurfacing in the data as a microtechnology of power. Typically image, which I define as being the public face which an agency creates and manages in the media, society and elsewhere, may seem to be an unconventional microtechnology of power in the workplace.

However, I argue here that image discourses are very much intuitive to a globalized workplace because these workplaces are often caught in a complex web of competition and capitalism in order to sustain a global presence. A failing public image could effectively result in the expulsion from a wider global community of donors, clients, etc. More specifically, there was enough evidence in the research to suggest that maintaining a positive image for the agency becomes a key priority for two areas of operation: staff conduct and workplace training. I explain both in turn.

Staff Conduct

I observed that policy statements from both agencies employ professionalism to maintain a certain public image that is a) courteous and polite behaviours to all cultures, b) draws focus away from personal views and behaviours and, c) is not limited to normal working hours. Encouraging employees to manage their conduct as a way to sustain a positive image in the public appeared numerous times as an image discourse in the policy research. For example, Agency 2 states in its policy *Managing Behaviours of International Staff* that in addition to their programs, their agency is judged by the physical appearance and behaviours of its foreign staff members (p. 2). Declarations such as this one are frequent throughout the data, and are without much explanation into what they mean. These statements do not acknowledge how they suggest some limitations to aid workers, and in particular, adult educators. This policy not only blurs private and professional lives by having aid workers self-regulate their behaviours in their personal time, but causes workers to always be mindful of the institutional gaze upon them and what they reflect outwards. The denial of examples, case studies or clearly explained policies could mean that policy text has an open interpretation, and that it relies on the competitive nature of the workplace to have its workers draw conclusions and act on them.

One possible clue to understanding these communications come from the policy text itself. The same policy states that foreign aid workers cannot share their opinions on “controversial” matters and that they must use tact and discretion at all times (p. 17). I observed two elements here. First, guidelines for agencies to respect their employees in the same way that employees must respect their agencies is unsurprisingly absent in the policy. Second, I observed how there is a great deal of vagueness in the terminology. What are considered to be “controversial” matters? What does it mean to be tactful and discrete? And for who? I am concerned here that since working in a post-conflict scenario already qualifies as being in an uncertain context, such ambiguous statements can be interpreted without boundaries to create further instability and disconnectedness. As a result, educators might feel that they need to censor practices in order to avoid the ill-defined concept of “controversy.”

Workplace Training

There was also extensive evidence that both organizations rely on training to “prepare” and “develop” the capacities of their employees before and during their mission to Kosovo. In order to be respected as professionals in the workplace, both agencies believe that aid workers must be adequately prepared for their mission abroad. Words such as “appropriate training,” “training standards,” “increased training” and “importance of training” are riddled throughout the data to signal that “training” forms a distinctive and somewhat technocratic culture. Training topics broadly ranged from gender awareness, report-writing, and context-related information. A possible connection to the theme of “image” is the significant presence of reinforcing institutional authority through the pre-departure orientation. More specifically, 73% of Agency

1's and 58% of Agency 2's instruction time is dedicated to explaining their agencies' history, role, activities, regulations, rules and performance appraisals. A training culture in this sense seems to contain a heavy focus on institutional matters with clearly laid out expectations that aid workers continue their training, achieve institutional objectives through training, and that training becomes a sustained effort in the workplace. I interpret image as being a part of these institutional demands because workers must thoroughly understand the agency and its functions in order to not place the agency's public face at risk through unsanctioned practices.

Adult Educators' Voices

The push to sustain image means the suppression of "controversial" particular identities and knowledges in the workplace. During my data collection, I silently listened to my participants' stories of hardship and difficulty when they wanted to introduce subject matter relating to sexual identity, practices, rights or freedoms, or reveal their "true" selves. The requirement of a professional distance brought such possible encounters to a halt, as they felt that the "controversial" aspects of policies were pointed towards them. Furthermore, they were too nervous, for fear of backlash, to raise their concerns with their employers. Unsurprisingly, three out of the four educators did not reveal their sexual identity to their students or colleagues. Although the fourth educator was open about his sexual orientation, he experienced homophobia from his foreign colleagues. As a response to the institutional demand for professionalism, most study participants created a false, heterosexual image in order to align their identity with the values of the aid agency. One participant shared with me:

I informed them [colleagues and students] that I'm a widower (which in fact I am more or less) for 20 years. In order to prevent further questioning I also informed them that my former "wife" was killed in a car accident and, to make it even more dramatic, on Christmas Eve. That prevented all further questioning.

Indeed, for this participant, the presence of elaborate characterizations and compelling false stories informs me that the image needs to be strong enough that it will unequivocally solidify a heterosexual image. This heightened focus on image then has direct implications on workers. In another interview, one participant tied his U.S. citizenship in with the need to be professional. He said,

If you are working for any U.S. organization, you have to remember that while you might not be a representative of the United States officially, you are indirectly representing 300 million people. And so, what you do and who you are reflects upon your fellow citizens. So while agencies might purport a professionalism that demands silence around "controversial" matters in the name of safeguarding image, sometimes interpretations of such policy text are so wide open that there might be spillage into re-presenting "other" aspects of identity and practice. What further interests me here is that this participants' interpretation went largely unchallenged by supervisors and colleagues. This encounter brings me back to Foucault's notion of governmentality, where decision-making power secures institutional dominance among work relations. Perhaps this is one example where institutional dominance has not only structured an adult educator's sense of sexual identity, but has also implicated representations of national identity to secure dominant power.

In short, there is indeed a relationship between professionalism and these adult educators' expression and understanding of identity. Although each educator arrived in Kosovo with a sense of passion, they soon became aware through professional expectations that their sexual identity,

and sharing knowledge gained by having this identity, may become perceived as a “problem” in the workplace.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

Given the data points revealed thus far, I suggest that aid agencies interfere with these educators’ behaviours by way of using image as a microtechnology of power. Sustaining a positive image does not become a consequence of working with members of the Kosovar community; rather, it acts as a by-product of the nature of working in a situation that has generated global interest. With this point in mind, institutionalized “image” discourses cause complacency so that workers do not taint their agency’s highly-public image. Through policy discourses that relate to conduct and training, study participants interpreted their agency’s demands for silence around “controversial” matters as being too threatening to the agency’s image. As a result, most study participants portrayed a false heterosexual image so that the organizations are not shamed by the presence of “controversial” identities in an international setting.

This result takes a necessary distance from ideas of inferiority and superiority and seeks instead to present a normative image of an agency characterized by how the agency portrays itself in the global society. Further, workers are expected to comply with normative demands to sustain a positive image. Given what has been presented through this research, I have no doubt that image becomes a technology of power in a globalized workplace. Cutting across differences in identity, history, religion and so forth may be a seductive lure to highly-qualified individuals, but, in the end, what it means to be “accepted” based on an identity or behaviours may pose too much of a risk for agencies. Therefore, discourses of image become one way for an agency to exercise power to “manage” the risk. Given the scandalous nature of homosexuality in some cultures, sexual minority educators may find their sexual identities too “controversial” for this institutional demand for a positive global image and, as a result, self-regulate their behaviours in the workplace.

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