Reflecting on Masculinity in a Multicultural Classroom

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The profession of social work in Canada has been constructed historically as 'female' due to the gendered social expectations of the caring and nurturing roles. Men, as a result, are perennially in a minority position both within the classroom and within the profession as a whole (Baines et al., 1998). Men within social work are faced with defining their competency within the field in a manner that may challenge socially sanctioned understandings of masculinity. If men do not challenge stereotypic roles of masculinity, they run the risk of replicating troubling gender relations so that the male remains dominant even in a female defined profession (Baines et al., 1998; Berger et al., 1995).

At the same time, the populations served by social workers have become increasingly diverse by sexual orientation, ethnicity, and race. The over representation of women and the poor on social work caseloads has required that social workers be sensitive to matters of class and gender. A contemporaneous development in Toronto, Canada has been the increasing diversity within the social work classroom. The classroom has become a site of multiple possibilities due to the diversity of the student population (Razack, 1999; Rossiter, 1996). Central to the task of multicultural learning and teaching is the ability of both the social work students and professor to reflect critically on their socially defined roles (Fook, 1999; Moffatt & Miehls, 1999; Rossiter, 1996). Social work educators have a complex task; they endeavour to teach social work practice while facilitating respectful communication across difference within the classroom (Moffatt, 1996; Moffatt & Miehls, 1999).

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between masculinity and
multicultural communication within the field of social work. We argue that a postmodernist
reflective practice process enhances cross-cultural learning and challenges traditional notions of
masculinity within the social work classroom. In the following paper we outline our approach to the
research. We outline a postmodern conceptual framework endorsed by the group during the analysis
of the data. With our broad parameters in place we sought to reconstruct our masculinities. Based
on our experience, we outline implications for social work education.

Approach:

The research group consisted of eight participants who met for eleven – three hour sessions over
a period of seven months (two academic terms). The eight research subjects self describe in the
following manner:

- Seven male graduate students and a male professor in a part-time MSW programme
- 29 to 48 years old
- Anglo Canadian, Croatian/Italian, Ethiopian, Goan, Jamaican, Kenyan, Scottish/Irish, and
  Sri Lankan
- Five participants were married with children, two participants were in same sex relations
  and one participant was single
- Seven participants defined themselves as working class and one as middle class
- The participants had full-time social work positions in the following settings: mental
  health, hospital, post-secondary education, child welfare and criminal justice

After the third group meeting, the research was closed to new participants. Discussion took
place in seminar form with a rotating chair. The chair was responsible for outlining the evening’s
topic. Participants were encouraged to explore the topic primarily through reflecting on their
personal experience. Through the use of personal narrative, participant’s shared their reflections
which were audio taped during each group meeting. The following topics were suggested by group members and were decided upon by consensus:

♦ What are the definitions of masculinity and our perceptions of the dominant view?

♦ What are the stereotypes of males specific to race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation and the profession of social work?

♦ What is male privilege? (a critique of male privilege specific to our own experiences of race, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation).

♦ How are we informed by our male anatomy and sexuality?

♦ What impact did our fathers or other male role models have on our masculine identities?

♦ Why males practice social work?

♦ What is the effect of males in a female profession?

Each group session was devoted to one of the topics. We stopped the process at a variety of points to reflect on both the content and the process. The data were collected on the audio tapes and were later transcribed and analyzed by group members. Topics were deconstructed and refined. The group met for additional meetings in the summer term to write the paper and construct a poster presentation for the international conference. Overall, the process evolved through consensus while allowing for disruption of opinion. Group members refused to draw arbitrary abstract conclusions if such a conclusion did not "wring true" for a group member.

Members of the group came to adopt a postmodernist conceptual framework for understanding masculine identity. The conceptualization of the research affected the process so it was defined as
The formulation of conceptual framework, the collection and analysis of the data and evaluation of theoretical propositions were part of the same process.

Research design was modified based on group participant’s observations.

An inductive process was key to the research

**Conceptual Framework: Postmodernism**

Through an evolutionary process, the members of the group came to adopt a postmodernist conceptual framework for understanding masculine identity. Over the course of the research there occurred an ongoing interaction between data collection and data analysis. That is, the formulation of a conceptual framework, the collection and analysis of data and the evaluation of theoretical propositions were part of the same process. Group members continually modified the research design based on previous observations and in the process came to endorse a postmodernist conceptual framework as a theoretical base for explaining both the conclusions drawn from the research and the process by which the research was undertaken. Through an inductive process, the group members developed a theoretical framework for understanding their observation and experiences of masculinity. The purpose of this section is to outline the postmodernist theoretical framework that was endorsed by the group during analysis of the data.

This framework was predicated largely on a post modern epistemology. From such a perspective reality is viewed as something that is made not found (Irving, 1999). Truth is contingent and historical. Knowledge, truth and reality are constructed out of language and cultural practices. Thus, there is no knowledge that is true in itself, that is independent of the languages and practices that we create. We come to observe, experience and understand objects including persons in specific
ways through culturally conditioned, historically specific paradigms.

Foucault (1980b) postulates that knowledge is inextricably linked with relations of power. That is, knowledge production involves a selecting out process among many competing readings or interpretations of the world available at any given moment. The ascendance of one representation entails the marginalization of competing interpretations (Visker: 1995). Inversely, knowledge also engenders power. Systems of power function by regulating our view of the world. Knowledge shapes the world it describes. And, the way people come to understand and interpret phenomenon from their experience and affect their behaviour. Dominant knowledge forms or representations of reality unavoidably endorse the position and interests of those individuals or groups who are able to influence the process of knowledge creation or selection.

For Foucault, power and knowledge are linked through discourse. According to Foucault, the establishment of relations of power is directly correlated with the production and circulation of discourse. Discourses are systems of thought and ways of carving out reality (Chambon, 1995). Discourse involves groupings of signs, words, and statements which have achieved a unity as a paradigm or as a science (Smart, 1985). It is only through discourse that we are able to perceive what is real (Irving, 1999). A specific discourse determines “what manner of perceptions and experience can exist within its limits, what can be seen, said and performed and thought in the conceptual domain it defines” (Geertz, 1992: 139). Things, including masculine subjectivities, do not exist beyond our naming them. It is the act of naming that brings into being things and identities. Foucault (1980) suggests that discourse engenders power precisely because they serve to condition social possibility. By circumscribing what may be thought or experienced, discourses limit the range of actions that individuals undertake. By shaping reality in a particular fashion, discourses induce
specific forms or manners of conduct. Thus discourses are both enabling and limiting. They are enabling because they grant human beings identities. They are limiting because at the same time they turn human beings into objects constrained by the logic and norms associated with them. In short, for Foucault, the human subject is not a given but is constituted through relations of power and forms of knowledge.

Reconstructing Masculinity

During the research process, the group members endeavoured to elaborate how the traditional or conventional notion of masculinity is constructed within society. The members also sought to explain their own ideas of masculinity and to share their experience of what it is to be male. During this process, members considered how their personal experiences and ideas of masculinity interface with the dominant message of what being male involves. From this discussion the following conclusions were drawn:

Masculinity may best understood as discourse. It is within discourse that we are offered subject positions which communicate what it is to be a man or a woman and constitute our masculinity and femininity (Pease, 1999). Discourse defines what a male is and, consequently, ascribes a specific role for men to fill. Discourses make positions available for individuals and these positions are taken up in relation to other people.

The dominant discourse of masculinity is patriarchy. The traditional or dominant discourse of masculinity endorses an image of man as being powerful, fiercely competitive, dominant, controlling, unemotional, rational and task-oriented. This conception of masculinity operates on the basis of individualism or individual achievement and hierarchy and promotes a sense of entitlement and privilege. In addition to specifying the conditions or traits associated with masculinity, the
dominant discourse of masculinity lays down rules for how men are to interact among themselves and with women. These rules are prohibitive rather than prescriptive in nature. For example, while clear forms of interaction are not explicitly sanctioned, communication styles based upon feeling, intuition and physical non-sexual contact are discouraged (McMaster, 2000). In this way of thinking, work and career success—success in the public world rather than the private sphere of the family—is the mark of a man. We self consciously struggled as a group with the limits of this discourse of masculinity and our own inability to communicate outside of the discourse. At the same time, our refusal to perceive masculine discourse as prescriptive created a potential for communication that some of us had never experienced among men before.

The experience of masculinity is not the same for all men. One can not meaningfully discuss the topic of men as a homogeneous category or a monolithic identity. Masculinity as experienced in the group was not categorical. Men are socially diverse and this diversity entails differences between men in relation to race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, age, bodily facility, religion, world view, parental/marital status, education, and occupation. Men’s experience of these social categories constitutes their masculine identity. There is no single discourse of masculinity rather a number of contradictory ones are currently available to men. Social identity can be understood as being formed through competing discourses. Differences are not only found across social location but also across time. Men undergo changes throughout their life cycle in relation to their experience of their bodies and in relation to shifts in value orientations. Men also differ in terms of how they place themselves in relation to feminism (Pease, 1999). Men vary in their level of awareness of their oppressive role in relation to women. As men, group members repeatedly attempted to make summary statements about masculinity but were confounded because of the diversity in our group. Often a summary
statement did not satisfy the self perception of a man within the group so we had to struggle against our tendency to take a results and production oriented approach to the topic. Since most group members perceived themselves to be "non conventional" males we became increasingly aware of the shifting and tenuous nature of male identities.

Though there are a number of discourses of masculinity available, not all are equal: Group members defined 'mainstream' masculinity as white, middle-class, middle-aged heterosexual masculinity. Men positioned within this social location dominate not only women but also men positioned in other social locations. This domination does not necessarily involve a conscious process of exploitation; it exists because of the relative privileges to which men in this dominant groups have access.

The endorsement of the existence of a multiplicity of masculine identities does not deny the reality of systematic gender inequality. The political and social domination of men over women persists in many diverse ways, partly through the differences in discourse of masculinity. That men are divided among themselves and enact competing version of masculinity means that the task of analysis is more complex. It does not mean that we lose sight of gender inequality between men and women. Group members felt that men in general are advantaged through subordination of women. But men’s social location influences the nature of their dominance over women. Once the group became more aware of a multiplicity of factors that affect identity, the dominant-subordinate relations between men and women was discovered to be more complex than originally thought by group members.

Masculine subjectivity is understood as a process involving constant negotiation of multiple subjectivities or fragments thereof in which men have unequal investments. Some identities will be
prioritised over others in certain situations. It is not possible to hold on to numbers to define identity or composite identities equally at the same time, across time. Thus, understanding one’s biography and the discursive practices of society is critical to understanding the impact of past experiences and how these shape the construction and interpretation of the masculine experience in the present.

During the research process, the subjects were mindful of how research practices shape the formulation of knowledge. Specific techniques for gathering and examining data ultimately determine the nature of the knowledge created and of the truth discovered. It was believed that the utilization of conventional methods of inquiry would likely reinforce the conventional or dominant view of masculinity. The challenge for group members was to utilize practices or techniques of investigation which would allow for the creation of a new type of knowledge of masculinity. From a Foucauldian perspective, the participants efforts to utilize unorthodox methods of research (such as, consensus, emotional engagement, self conscious reflection) can be interpreted as strategies of power aimed at resisting co-option into the dominant discourse of masculinity and creating a new type of knowledge about masculinity.

Traditional approaches to knowledge-building rest on positivistic assumptions about the nature of reality and its discovery. Positivism sees social research as the organized method for combining deductive logic with precise empirical observation of individual behaviour in order to discover and confirm a set of probabilistic causal laws that can be used to predict general patterns of human activity. Social reality is not believed to change over time and causal laws of human nature discovered today are believed to hold true for the future (Neumann, 1997). Positivists assume that everyone experiences the world in the same way. This approach involves the search for universal
laws that apply across cultures and time. Multiple perspective of the same social phenomenon cannot logically co-exist. Truth is formed along oppositional lines: propositions are either true or false. One perspective must ultimately prevail as the legitimate or real perspective. Thus, a unified logocentric view of truth is perpetuated (Fook, 1999). Competing theories of empirical reality are subject to rigorous empirical testing. Positivistic research involves the development of precise quantitative data and the use of experiments, surveys, and statistics. Positivism is negativistic in its approach. It involves looking for evidence that contradicts or disproves existing theories of social reality. Knowledge of observable reality is obtained by using our senses is believed superior to other ways of gaining knowledge (such as, personal experience, tradition). The purpose of social inquiry is to learn about how the world works so that people can control or predict events. Within positivism, the researcher is viewed as an independent observer who minimizes any relationship between the self and the subject of study (Swigonski, 1994). Positivism requires the subject and object of research to be treated as separate non-interacting entities to maintain objectivity.

Positivism is consistent with the dominant discourse of masculinity. It is objective, logical, task-oriented and instrumental. It is hierarchical, valuing specific knowledge forms over others. It reflects a male emphasis on competition and on dominating and controlling the environment. It discourages empathic connections between the researcher and those he or she studies and the incorporation of the researcher’s personal feelings and experiences into the research process.

A reflective approach to knowledge generation was used in place of a positivist approach. Research participants considered notions of masculinity by drawing on their own experiences. An inductive process of theory development was utilized. The group members explored issues of masculinity in the context of their own biography, family history and current social grouping.
Members considered how their personal biographies influenced their current thinking and interpretation of what masculine is. In short, the members dissembled themselves in the presence of others (Miehls and Moffatt, 2000). This process places an emphasis of interactional communication. The process of divulging one’s history involves exposing oneself and allowing oneself to be open to influence. Thus, through this method the dominant method of interaction between men which is characterized by power, distance and control was challenged. Through this strategy of power, conventional patterns of male interaction were resisted and, at the same time, a counter discourse of masculinity was put forth. In this way, the research was action-oriented in that it facilitated social change at a microlevel at the same time it sought to cultivate knowledge development.

The group endeavoured to reduce hierarchy within the group by utilizing the strategy of a revolving facilitator and by involving all members in the negotiation of the topics of inquiry to be covered. Each research session was facilitated or co-facilitated by a member of the group. The facilitator was responsible for outlining the process or exercises or inquiry that the group was to undertake during the session and for encouraging participants to explore aspects of the session topic under discussion. The selection of topics of inquiry for the research was an on-going process which involved all the members of the group. The members collectively modified the research design and areas of focus as the research progressed. We were cognisant of the fact that hierarchy in the group was impossible to make absent as power is inherent in all relations between individuals, however, through these techniques we sought to prevent the entrenchment of hierarchical relations among members. Through these specific strategies we endeavoured to keep relations of power among members fluid and dynamic and thus to avoid domination where one person is subjected to the
arbitrary authority of another.

In seeking an understanding of masculinity, a deconstructive approach was utilized. The research entailed a deconstruction of the constructed meaning of masculinity. This deconstructive process involved exploring the dominant discourse of masculinity and the power relations that this discourse supports and uncovering multiple perspectives on what masculinity entails. By elaborating different perspectives of masculinity, one increases the range of subject positions for individuals to consider and take up. In this way a unitary, logocentric view of reality was avoided.

**Social Work Implications**

- Social work theory and pedagogy need deal with the “non-traditional male” within post-modern cultures. Theory should be sensitive to a multiplicity of masculinities.

- Men benefit from the study of gender. Race, ethnicity, class and sexuality create endless masculine possibilities.

- A reflexive approach within the classroom can enhance social work education by allowing expressions of masculinity that are not molded by the dominant discourse.

- Identity is understood in reference to the “other”. We identify the self-according to how we conceptualize the “other”. Our imagination of the “other” may limit how we think of our “self”. In addition, the experience of the “other” may question one’s own categories of categories of self. How you create categories of the “other” can make yourself.

- The ascendant North American discourse of masculinity suggests a rigidity in the composition of the male identity. This limits the possibility of creating new masculinities. Our identities are ambiguous, multifaceted, and should be treated accordingly.

- Social work theory and pedagogy err in the imagining of an abstract unitary male separate from lived bodily experience.

- Recognizing our masculinities are fluid and impermanent enables us to challenge traditional notions of masculinity related to our anatomical make up. Gender/sexuality stereotypes and our bodies can be deconstructed and reconstructed.

- By refuting the notion of a “fixed” masculine identity”, “male” and “female” can be metaphors for difference, experienced through gender. Perhaps the masculine and feminine
principles could be thought of in terms of images expressive of difference in flux.

For our group the struggle over method was the struggle over our understanding of our masculine selves. As we experienced new strategies for knowledge creation we experienced new power relations and became cognizant of the glimmer of new possibilities for our masculinity.
Bibliography


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