Adding the transformative: (thinking about) the impact of gender assumptions in transformative education and supervision

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Abstract
As an educator and professional supervisor I am physically located in Aotearoa New Zealand but also globally. We’re now in the connectivist age and in this past year, my real time inclusion in global events such as the Women’s March on Washington and increased access to online global discourses on feminism and social work has led me to critically examine the role of social work educators and supervisors, in particular in relation to the social justice imperative implicit in these roles.

In supervision, I’m interested in embedding a transformative function (to sit alongside Proctor’s (1987) normative, formative and restorative functions) and in education, I’m analysing the forms that transformative learning can take, especially in the context of blended learning in social work. As part of this and as a feminist, I’m interested to further explore how I know, monitor and manage my own internalised gender biases when working with women students and supervisees.

I’ll include ideas from literature alongside findings from my own explorations but the focus will be to encourage participants to explore and strategise from their own positions.

This presentation was, as stated, in part an interactive one and so is not completely replicable in PDF format.

It consisted of three main parts.

Part one: Context and motivation
A 20 slide presentation which gave an overview of the range of social media which provided the context for the relationship between increasing use of social media for global connections and consequent reinvigoration of the social justice/activist imperative in social work (Stanfield, 2015) and also for what is now named the fourth wave of feminism. (Leopold, 2010; Solomon, 2009; Baumgardner, 2011)

Part two: Critical reflection: Process and findings
Personal critical reflection on the question: To what extent am I, as a social work educator and professional supervisor complicit in maintaining unjust social relations by failing to challenge and teach/supervise in ways which are transformative? The focus is on gender inequality but can be extended to all oppressions.

This part of the presentation tracked my own process of critical reflection using a range of tools including individual supervision, peer supervision, using existing feminist networks, herstory, literature, particularly the supervision, decolonisation and white privilege literature, hanging out in online spaces where these debates take place, media analysis and logging and analysing comments of women students about their lived experiences.

One of the findings of my own critical reflections was that I find it harder to ‘see’ and therefore attend to gender inequality than other sources of oppression e.g disability, gender diverse minorities, Māori – in my practice. I wondered whether to an extent I internalise gender assumptions which serve to minimise or normalise aspects of women’s experience. If this is the case, how then do I identify, then monitor and manage these so that gender does not get missed in the overall picture of inequity and injustice?

Another finding was that the themes of poverty and inequitable distribution of caring work in families – both physical and emotional, appeared to have a considerable impact on my women students’ ability to study in the way
they wanted to. A further question emerged about whether the fact that the course I teach on is a distance/blended course and students are home based so do not have a clear separation of their roles as students, mothers, partners and caregivers.

Part three: Strategies for Transformation
I then moved to briefly examine the notion of the ‘transformative’ in both supervision and education and then involved the group in generating strategies for first ‘unpacking the invisible handbag’ of gendered identities and then purposively using strategies towards transformative practice within their own contexts.

See Appendix One for list of potential strategies generated from my reading and ANZSWERR workshop participants.

Close
I concluded with a reminder that although the structural injustice can seem overwhelming, it is important to remember and celebrate the fact that positive changes in the status of women have been significant in past decades and that we all have a part to play, no matter how small.

...shifts in, say, the status of women are easily overlooked by people who don’t remember that, a few decades ago, reproductive rights were not yet a concept, and there was no recourse for exclusion, discrimination, workplace sexual harassment, most forms of rape, and other crimes against women the legal system did not recognise or even countenance. None of the changes were inevitable, either – people fought for them and won them.

Solnit, R. (2016)

References


Appendix one

Strategies for action towards working with gender in transformative ways

The following have been generated as a result of reading and discussion with ANZSWERR workshop participants. They more or less fit into 5 main themes:

- Need for critical self-reflection as a starting point, unpacking the invisible handbag
- providing safe yet challenging environment
- ideas about how adults learn Constructivist/connectivist learning theory
- skills of facilitating critical reflection and discourse, use of tools such as reflective question sets, reflection cycles, role modelling
- curating and facilitating access to research/other sources of information

Students construct their own understanding by asking good questions to build a body of evidence that shows that our experience of the world is still heavily influenced by gender..’It is strategic to leave the analysis fairly open, to allow students to follow up with a desire for further inquiry:..’why is this so?’... (Phillips and Cree, 2016, p. 940)

Critical reflection on its own does not lead to transformational learning – need to also have critical discourse..’thoughtful assessment of beliefs feelings and values’ (Mezirow, 2000, 2003) Search for meaning

Supervisor must model process of empathetic listening, search for meaning together..

Dialogue an unending river..’unfolding process of creative participation’ So does not need to be just verbal ..visual and musical approaches can be powerful.

Space needs to be both safe and challenging need to feel comfortable feeling uncomfortable  (Garner, 2007, p. 405)

Reciprocal learning relationship ako issues of power get in the way..teacher’s role is to facilitate not profess (guide on the side) Students’ questions should be central.

Teacher and learner vulnerability..supervisors educators need to willing to transform (Taylor, 2008)

Develop a pedagogy of the privileged (Pease, 2016) What does the privileged group lose out on? Find a space they can relate to..we all have areas of relative disadvantage
Name it, call it

Provide a safe reflective space

Act as a role model be vulnerable Critically reflect out loud so students/supervisees see that it has value/role modelling

Help people collect good evidence – curate/facilitate access to literature/other resources.

Use tools such as reflective tools, processes, logs, journals, question sets

Hang out in spaces (online and real) where there is critical discourse