Inside Out: An exploration of the experience of feminist-educators in non-feminist learning communities.

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Turning ourselves Inside Out

Learning can be transformative, empowering, liberating. It can also be frustrating, confusing and soul-destroying. As feminist educators working within overtly male-dominated institutions, we have experienced a feeling of being turned 'inside out' by the conflict between our strongly-held feminist beliefs, commitment to an egalitarian view of education and the pressures brought to bear on our practice by the organisations in which we work. We perceive a conflict between the mechanisms of formal learning advocated by the institutions and policies of governments and the reality of how informal learning affects the learning experience, both for our learners and for us. These frustrations led us to reflect on our roles as practitioners and theorists and to explore our positions within and our relationships to power in the distinctive 'communities' in which we work. Bev works with the British Army and Jeannie works with the Canadian Correctional system. This paper aims to provide us with a way of reflecting on our experiences as feminist educational practitioners working in overtly patriarchal systems and to share our developing understanding of our position within these unique environments.

We situate our practice and theory in predominantly post-structuralist feminism to illuminate the darker pathways of our learning journeys in the specific contexts in which we teach and theorise and to expose the hidden forces impacting our work in male-dominated institutions. In order to do this we have used the key analytical concepts of patriarchy, hegemony, power, community, legitimation, and 'other'. We reflect on the importance of the informal learning communities which shape our experience as educators and draw comparisons across the UK and Canadian contexts to identify how masculine hegemony controls the different learning environments. Drawing on these experiences and reflections, and theorizing from feminist and critical literature, we then begin to examine what we have *learned* – and importantly, what we have had to *unlearn as* we interact with these communities. 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.

We use the work of Gramsci and subsequent theorists (Boggs, 1976, 1999; Fowler, 2003; Brookfield, 2005) to analyse the importance of hegemony in our chosen settings and we will look to the ideas of Freire and hooks as our inspiration to continue work for education as a transformative force for disempowered learners.

The Inside

As educators working in communities with restricted access we are effectively, 'on the inside'. This does not mean that we are necessarily part of that community but we are permitted access to it. Prisons and army bases operate as separate units that run regardless of the rest of society, yet they do not operate in a vacuum. While these institutions are closed, they are the privileged locus of learning. While self-contained, learners acquire knowledge, formal and informal, to be applied 'outside' as these institutions are part of broader social and learning systems. We are interlopers into these worlds and can only ever be tolerated as we are not essential to the running of the place 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. Learning within military and para-military communities is very 'formal', with learners being put on 'orders' to attend, yet it is the 'informal' learning that often has the greatest impact. The influence of peers, the group discussions, the extension activities that take learning beyond a set syllabus, all offer opportunities for us to influence the learning experience. As feminist educators we have tried to use both formal and informal learning to empower learners to gain skills for lifelong learning which can be transferred to any situation. 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? As we have reflected on our position 'inside' we have found ourselves frustrated by our inability to affect structural change. Whilst we have been able to influence the lives of individuals we have not been able to embed our feminist approaches into formal educational structures. Rather than a glass ceiling, we conceptualize our practice as pushing against a malleable plastic wall which keeps us on the outside, looking in; it bends to accommodate us and so allows us work within the environment but there is always an invisible barrier preventing us from stepping into true positions of power within the institution.

Bringing the outside in

In order to better understand the way in which the organisations in which we work influence our approach to teaching, we have used the concept of hegemony to problematise our positions and to provide a theoretical framework to interpret our interactions. We both feel that our experiences as practitioners are shaped by gender constructs, and power dictated by a masculine hegemony, which can remain unnoticed and unchallenged without focused analysis. Although we work in different countries and educational 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 behaviours. However, viewed with a poststructural feminist lens, we must acknowledge our positionality in order to recognise 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 issues of why so many individuals from marginalized communities find themselves incarcerated. In these contexts, it is never easy to bring the outside in as there will be tensions and flashpoints when our work challenges the hegemony.

Brookfield (2005) speaks to the subtly of hegemony; of how it is learned and not imposed upon us: it is "embedded in a system of practices – behaviours 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. But, 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? Being on the 'inside' whilst trying to remain aware of our reality on the 'outside' caused us to be conflict with systems that challenged us on a daily basis. We could never be comfortable in our own skins within these malestream environments.

Another component of our uncomfortable stature originates from the recognition that 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 Connnell when she describes how "the number of men rigorously practising 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 behaviour, 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 bring the 'outside in' by offering 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 and we remain trapped behind the plastic wall so that any ideas or practices which may threaten the hegemony are kept out. We may be allowed to feel close to the locus of power within an organisation 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 we also problematise this seemingly simplistic notion of power. Within our practitioner experience, 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? Have we turned ourselves inside out for no reason?

So what have we learned?

It's hard to kick against the pricks all the time. As feminists in non-feminist

environments we have both learned to temper our behaviour and to accommodate the hegemony more than we ever expected to. 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. 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' (Praetcher, 2006)? 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? We are unlikely to ever know how we are perceived by the men around us as this would need them to undertake a reflective and reflexive journey that questioned the basis of their own power and positions.

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 realised 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 humour 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 is "…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 behaviour 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 (Praetcher, 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 even 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. Though 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 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. In fact, despite the 'gender neutral' training, it was explained that female officers often brought a calming influence to male environments. 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 behaviour 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 ways 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' adopting a single approach to differing contexts; and we have 'unlearned' some of our foundational expectations of ourselves.

Building a Bridge to the Inside

Sharing our experiences, with each other and with other practitioners and theorists, has been our way of recognising the possibilities of our work through acknowledging the impossibilities. Using extremely masculine learning environments as our theoretical bedrock has allowed us to make visible the invisible; to make real the practice of theory; to think aloud and give those critical and self-critical thoughts a voice no matter how uncomfortable that has been for us. 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 behaviours 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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