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What is This?

Decolonizing the pedagogy and practice of international social work

● Narda Razack

Introduction

... decolonizing pedagogy ... must be guided by a conceptually dynamic worldview; strategically utilize theorizations and understandings from various fields and conceptual frameworks to unmask the logics, workings and effects of internal colonial domination, oppression and exploitation ... (Tejada et al., 2003: 21)

Many university classrooms, especially in urban spaces, consist of students whose origins are in countries from all corners of the globe. Many universities have highlighted internationalization in their academic plans and many social work programs have courses focusing on international social work and development. The content of international social work and development courses tends to focus on deprivation and social ills which plague countries in the global South. Scholars have written on the challenges professors experience in the classroom especially when teaching in the area of diversity, race and oppression (Kobayashi, 1994; Razack, 1999). Pedagogical issues also arise when teaching international social work and these challenges can assume different characteristics. Reflecting on these challenges, however, allows for critical insights into creating new visions for pedagogy in an increasingly complex and diverse classroom terrain. Critical attention is needed to understand how we teach global issues, how we introduce content on particular topics, how students interpret and integrate the knowledge, whose voices are silenced and, more importantly, what gets discussed and what is erased.

Key words ● decolonizing ● international ● pedagogy ● postcolonial ● spatial

Such awareness is helpful to avoid making the classroom a colonizing space by creating a willingness to reflect on our normative values and beliefs and to embrace different ways of knowing (Robson and Turner, 2007). It is also critical to be mindful of whose voices continue to be privileged in such discourse and to be cognizant of how to make connections between the global and the local.

The international social work literature focuses on program content, strategies and procedures rather than on pedagogy (Haug, 2004). International social work is a contested body of knowledge that is growing and continues to be critiqued because historically the areas of exploration center on exchanges, comparative analyses and studying the cultures of the other to improve cross-cultural counseling (Haug, 2004; Razack, 2002). It is important to note that more salient issues are being introduced to this body of knowledge, with attention shifting to the changing terrain for politics and the economy due to migration (Lewis and Neal, 2005); querying issues and implications for a universal approach to social work (Gray and Fook, 2004); examining the neo-liberal context for social work (Sewpaul, 2004); and exploring new theories for international social work (Razack, 2005).

This article explores and highlights the tensions and contradictions that are present in the classroom when teaching international and development issues. These arise because international and development social issues, predominantly about the global South, resonate for many students in our classrooms in the North. Although this article elucidates the complexities of a classroom in an urban North American (Canadian) context, there are implications for many classrooms around the world. There has been a rapid increase of people moving across internationally recognized borders, resulting in tensions and ambiguities within nation states (Lewis and Neal, 2005: 429). Understanding our own involvement in global issues is of primary importance. These issues are critical for discussions irrespective of classroom diversity, to create political awareness and knowledge. Our ultimate responsibility is to engage in a 'process of effective teaching that is sensitive to individual students' readiness to be receptive' to discussing particular world issues (Lee and Greene, 2003: 2). I want to pose some questions for consideration. How do we hear each other's narratives in the classroom? How do we avoid benevolence and paternalism in discussions of global social issues? Are we unintentionally perpetuating colonialism and hegemony? What kind of subjectivity is produced in teaching international social work? I contest that the classroom can be a colonizing space where power and dominance continue to be enacted. In this article I use postcolonial pedagogy to conceptualize and theorize some problematic situations

I have encountered in the classroom. Decolonizing pedagogy includes theories and understandings from postcolonial studies, and spatial and critical race theory. I include students' stories in order to engage in a discourse on pedagogy and provide theoretical constructs to examine and critique the reactions to these stories.

Historical beginnings of social work and the international

Erika Haug's (2004) thesis critically examined the international social work discourse through an astute analysis of the elitism and exclusion inherent in the language of the texts and articles. Her analogy of the colonizer/colonized adds significant meaning to the international social work literature, especially from a Northern and Eurocentric perspective. International social work is an important part of the curricular development of social work and the literature concerns fieldwork, research and collaboration. However, international social work is not a neutral field of study and cannot be conducted from a homogenized approach with an apolitical analysis. Midgley's (1981) earlier reference to professional imperialism still resonates today, but current debates on the new imperialism provide more profound and relevant analysis to the global context. Hardt and Negri (2000) argue that imperialism is no longer appropriate to understand contemporary world issues, while Dirlik (2003) claims that we need to view imperialism differently from the past. We cannot dissociate social work from its historical role in imperialism. It is critical that we situate international social work within a postcolonial framework, in order to evaluate some of the complexities inherent in our classrooms as well as international practica and research collaborations.

The emergence of social work in Europe and North America is associated with charity work and settlement housing, as the profession became established during the era of industrialization and urbanization and later historical events (Midgley, 1990). The dominant ideology and economic realities were clearly driven by the power of Western countries. At that time imperialism and colonization included slavery and indentureship in many developing countries. Social work also operated through missionary activity, which resulted in controlling the minds of the natives through spiritual and religious conversion. Social work is not innocent of historical abuses associated with colonial practices, especially and foremost among Aboriginal peoples. It therefore follows that we incorporate a dominant ideology that is tinged with the stain of colonialism and imperialism. Knowledge of our history allows us to

make concerted efforts to avoid its repetition in our work with others, whether on a local or a global terrain.

Several authors detail the current colonial contexts for social work (Gray and Fook, 2004; Jeffery, 2005). The West continues to be the prime exporter of social work, so Western theories, concepts and practices seep through borders and enter countries in far-distant places. This desire for Western knowledge is so fierce and has been so cunningly enforced by the West that those in the South also view the North as possessing the ideal, in spite of their own gains through the achievement of independence from colonizing nations. Entrenched notions that Western ideology and practices are infinitely superior continue to reign even after the end of formal colonization (Gray and Fook, 2004; Midgley, 2001). This exportation of Western knowledge, values and ideology helps to sustain hegemony and control. We can argue that social work is constructed on universal ideals of human rights, social justice and advocacy, but just how these ideals became universal is suspect, and how these ideals get translated to fit local realities is debatable.

In the current literature on international social work, there is an emerging discourse that is beginning to trouble these uncritical approaches to the body of knowledge of international social work. Mohan (2008) critiques the lack of political debates in the profession as he interrogates the silence on the war in Iraq as an example. Lyons (1999) discusses refugees, migration and disasters, and Sewpaul (2003) challenges us to resist the reinforcement of Western hegemony and control in our attempts to formulate links through practice and exchanges. But there have been increasing requests from students to study abroad mainly to complete their practice requirements. At a certain level there is a meager attempt at reciprocity in some schools but, by and large, the exchanges are unidirectional. Abbott (2006: 330) argues for a more profound analysis of such activities because they occur through a 'complex set of social interactions that take place within multiple scenarios of shared spaces, where the historically ruled and the historical rulers, once again, come together'. International work abroad generates complex dilemmas. Northerners, including racialized and white bodies, are recognizing this superior positioning and are beginning to question the unequal divides. However, as I describe the superiority inherent in the international social work discourse, I want to unequivocally state that the indigenizing of social work in many countries in the global South continues apace (Osei-Hwedie, 1996; Schiele, 1996). There ought to be more theoretical considerations of the history, identity, knowledge production, spatialities and race of the underlying notion of helping and

doing that is applied to different contexts and countries. When we do not include a historical analysis of colonization and imperialism, the pedagogical and practice components of international social work are deeply compromised. Added to this dynamic is the fact that nationality and identity are significant in how we locate ourselves within the profession and in the larger global community.

Postcolonialism and pedagogy

. . . theorizing postcoloniality is not sufficient to making future . . . The focus therefore is on the role of the postcolonial teacher and the development of systematic forms of resistance in the face of socially unjust practices. (Lavia, 2007)

Earlier I referred to the classroom as a postcolonial space where the colonizer and colonized come together for teaching and learning. This is evident in the diversity in the classroom, as reflected in the following groups:

- students who immigrate to North America from countries with a legacy of colonization;
- students with a European background which signifies a history of colonization;
- Aboriginal students who have first claims to the land and whose experiences include genocide and continued forms of imperialism;
- students who claim Canadian status unequivocally;
- others who have tenuous holds on citizenship and national identity while we all occupy space in a settler society;
- those with different kinds of subjectivities relating to race, gender, class, ability, sexual orientation and age, within group differences and elitism;
- newer immigrants who originate from countries suffering from debt and structural adjustment programs resulting from the loans and operations of the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund;
- those who have suffered through political wars, genocide, ethnic cleansing and torture.

Students who participate in an international social work course do so for a variety of reasons. Some want to be able to practice social work abroad, some want to return to their country of origin to give back to the people from their country, some want to practice locally with a global understanding, and others want to aim to focus on human rights,

social justice, equity and anti-oppression. Many are motivated by a combination of the above.

These different subjectivities can produce discomfort which can be duly provoked when there are discussions on issues relating to global poverty and health, for example. As stated earlier, some students struggle with identity, citizenship and nationality because of their marginalized position in North America. Some share collective responsibilities to their country of origin and also contribute to the local economy. Post-colonial pedagogy provides discursive strategies to center the international social work arguments on history and present realities. One such strategy is to be able to historicize and articulate memories of an internal colonial past (Gandhi, 1998). In so doing we begin to unsettle the traditional theoretical canons and focus on how power relations unfold in the international context and also when teaching international issues. It is also critical to view how the self is constructed in postcolonial space and how we engage in current debates on resistance (Loomba, 1998: 306). According to Tejada et al. (2003: 24),

. . . there is a direct and material relation between the political processes and social structures of colonialism on the one hand, and Western regimes of knowledge and representation on the other . . . Western epistemology and systems of knowledge have been integral to the internal colonial domination suffered by indigenous and nonwhite peoples.

Postcolonial theory challenges dominant thinking and meanings as Western knowledge is exported across the globe and adopted uncritically in different spaces. In the classroom, knowledge must include a global context and be critically analyzed and reflected upon so that our assumptions do not go unchallenged and everyone's experiences are included in the debates. For example, an African student in my class was obviously unsettled when references were continuously made to HIV/AIDS in Africa which he felt erased the strengths and history of the various countries on the continent. The classroom therefore is a postcolonial space, consisting of persons who represent all the corners of the globe. Histories collide, many cultures are present, and differences are significantly visible in terms of power, skin color and privilege. Immigration and refugee status are embedded in the international discourses, and differences regarding the above realities are natural outcomes. Therefore, as we discuss global concerns within socio-political contexts, the discussions take on a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations. In order to demonstrate postcolonial reasonings for these shifting contexts, I share a couple of the narratives that students brought to our discussions.

Narratives of the 'other'

In a discussion and presentation on child labor some students reacted quite passionately to children working and taking on other labor-related responsibilities, primarily in the global South. A white student, with others in agreement, vehemently voiced her view that child labor is exploitation which we should categorically denounce. She further stated that this is in fact a human rights issue. There were students in the classroom who earlier in the term had already shared personal experiences of working in the field as children and others had discussed how many children in their own village had to go to work in order for their family to survive. Thus, as the white student shared her views I observed the looks of annoyance and disengagement of many racialized students in the class. This particular student's passionate beliefs help to illustrate Northern superiority in the classroom in the positioning of the privileged white body over the subordinate body of color, because according to Smythe (2001: 153), 'international rules per se are not the problem but, rather, the balance of interests those rules serve, and who has a voice in making the rules'. Let me analyze this story further.

Many students in the classroom are recent immigrants and refugees in the country and therefore their experiences are very fresh in their minds and bodies. The varied experiences of culture and histories in the classroom allow us to shape and shift our identities as we come to challenge what we know and how we come to know what we know. So, when we engage in discussions of complex issues like child labor, we need to historicize accounts of human rights to explore more appropriate ways to fight global injustices. An analysis of how corporations employ children and women in sweatshops in the global South might kick-start these discussions. Categorically denouncing global issues may not always lead to integrated approaches to combating injustices. Lavia (2007: 5) states that 'different historical conditions posit different problems and demand a range of diverse solutions'. We need to re-conceptualize perspectives and knowledge and look outside the West to assist us in our methods to frame and seek solutions (Lavia, 2007: 5).

Minority students are closely aligned with issues that exist in the global South which are usually studied in the classroom in the North. Therefore for me as a teacher, I wonder if students are aware of the spaces they occupy in the classroom with regards to power, privilege, knowledge, dominance and subordination. Are they aware of their own implication in the production of racialized spaces in the

classroom? How do students, minority and non-minority, constitute themselves in the classroom? How does their privilege unfold in the experience? What can I as a teacher contribute to decolonizing pedagogies?

We examine the privilege and dominance that is evident in the language and behaviors of Northerners, and we discuss how whiteness is an ideological formation that is built on its historical dominance over others. Whiteness remains invisible but at the same time characterizes and particularizes different races and racial groups. In the classroom and in Northern society, the racialized body is marginalized, and many share mixed feelings of being a naturalized citizen in a country that marginalizes them. According to Spivak (1999), home for people in the margins stands for a safe place where there is no need to explain oneself to outsiders, and home also stands for community. In the classroom, which I refer to as a colonizing space, minority status becomes more precarious in a dialogue on world issues. It is therefore critical for the professor to be knowledgeable on postcolonial subjectivities to recognize these various positionings and to allow students to engage in more productive conversations to minimize potential conflicts and volatility.

Spatial theory

Decolonizing pedagogy allows for the critical analysis of classroom spaces to examine how spaces are racialized and also gendered and therefore fundamental to our understandings of power and exploitation. Spatial theory allows students in the classroom to recognize how identity is produced through their interactions and responses to each other. I discuss this theoretical analysis with the students, so that they too begin to understand how they constitute themselves and are constituted in the classroom spaces.

Mohanran (1999: xii) states that 'place and landscape are not inert but things which actively participate in the identity formation of the individual'. Space therefore is central to the formation of racial identity. Critical space theory allows us to reflect on and analyze how we imagine, organize and socially construct spaces that we occupy, how these imaginings produce entitlement and disentanglement in terms of who belongs and who does not, and how one occupies a particular space and place. The stories shared in the classroom can produce spatial binaries of privilege and subordination. Thus when the white student shares her passion for social justice and speaks vociferously against child labor, can we engage in a discussion that allows her and the rest of us

to understand how language can be interpreted as privileged, although her intent is one of social justice and anti-oppression? Such critical understandings allow us in the global North to engage in meaningful dialogue to discuss how the realities of the lives of those whom we study in the global South differ from our relatively safe and privileged space in the North. Minority students come to realize that their countries are often interpreted as degenerate by those in the North and they become aware of their own marginality in Northern space. White students need to be challenged on how they occupy privileged spaces and they too come to realize how the North constructs those in the South as the 'other' and how spaces and bodies in the North also get constructed as the 'other'. In addition, 'postcolonialism bears witness to a process to decolonization that seeks to interrupt pathologies of preference for the *Other*' (Mohanran, 1999: 5), borne out in our classes on development and international issues. These are critical lessons to be learned in the classroom because it is here that many students begin to see their own implications in global realities.

Further intricacies of story telling

While conducting an interactive exercise using some case studies, an African student volunteered to describe a case scenario in order to learn how to practice social work in her home country. She said that in her village in Africa when a woman's husband dies she becomes a suspect. In order to prove her innocence the wife has to sit with the body and drink the water that is used to bathe the body to demonstrate her innocence. The student provided further details, but this is the gist of the story. (I have permission to tell this story.) She then asked how a supervisor could assist her to work in this situation. I noted alarm and some discomfort among the students. After a moment of silence I asked her some clarification questions, but I felt that my response to her was inadequate as we could not sustain our normative role play process. This situation stayed with me and I subsequently discussed these issues with African colleagues. At that moment in the classroom, I needed to further interrogate my response to gain critical insights into some of the troubling questions arising from our biased Northern perspectives. I also wondered what the student wanted to accomplish. Was she trying to tell the Northerners that in the global South practice realities cannot be compared with our social issues in the North, which would therefore beg the question of whether Northerners would be able to practice effectively in these countries? Was she also implying that our educational materials are limiting and cannot provide her with the tools

necessary to work in her country? And if so, what is the point of our students going abroad for exchanges or even to practice in these parts of the world?

Critical race theory for decolonizing pedagogy

Dixon and Rousseau (2005) state how narratives provide a 'counter-story' to challenge the dominant one. The African student's 'counter-story' challenged the dominant ideology in our classroom because our cases and examples do not normally extend beyond that which we normally know. It is therefore important to consider how many of our students' voices are silenced in the classroom, as they do not feel safe to share their particular issues. The same can be said when teaching about violence, incest, rape, etc. Critical race theory's mandate for social and transformative action requires that the analysis and awareness of differential voices must lead us to change our traditional ways of knowing (Dixon and Rousseau, 2005: 7). The voices of the students who come from different corners of the globe need to be heard and not silenced. Yegenoglu (2005) exhorts us to understand the connections between the global and the local and the 'co-productions, dominations and resistances these encounters generate' (p. 118). It is important for us to recognize that not only the bourgeois travel and migrate, but also a host of others who come as servants, helpers, refugees, asylum seekers and who now share our classrooms, work and social spaces (p. 118). However, how their voices get heard demands some critical enquiry (Butler et al., 2003). For example, a student shared her experiences in the wake of the havoc that structural adjustment policies have brought to her own country, which illustrate these juxtaposing realities and help to contribute to a race-critical postcolonial social work discourse. Students begin to see their own implication in perpetuating colonization and imperialism. For example, in Canada, Aboriginal voices are ignored, non-white bodies are racialized and many are viewed as sub-standard, not as good as the white ruling class. I am, at times, unsure if we can escape this racism and hegemony in the classroom.

In my efforts to allow students' multiple voices to be heard am I toeing the line of political correctness? When some stories are met with reactions that leave others unsettled, what then is my role in trying to bridge the divide of the Northern thinker, the Southern thinker and the Northern/Southern thinker? When these realities collide how can I create a bridging space? These tensions are not unique to us as academics. However, when we teach international work and the lives of those who

tend to be the focus of the subject matter occupy such spaces in the classroom, we tread a very slippery slope if we do not attend to how we manage these tensions.

Some concluding remarks

Given the complexities of the classroom terrain and the historicities of global social issues which engender messy debates, how might a post-colonial pedagogy contribute? It is imperative that our texts and articles traverse the global literature in order for our students to gain a broad perspective on social issues to challenge the saliency of 'contemporary education and its traditional pedagogies' (Lingard, 2005: 166). Teaching any course, and more so international social work, calls for understanding hegemonic systems in order to resist dominant practice perspectives. As we continue to teach from texts that are still by and large Western and Eurocentric we must strive for a balance through postcolonial critiques to resist the stranglehold of colonization and hegemony which could easily be sustained through complicity in benevolent responses to social issues. As stated earlier, the process of learning rather than the specific material covered is of ultimate importance (Wagner, 2005: 263). Thus, openly addressing critical and potentially unsettling issues will allow for critical reflection and action, leading to transformative ways for practice.

When there are competing narratives from different voices, decolonizing pedagogy can be introduced to eradicate the binaries of us/them, good/bad, privilege/subordinate – binaries which leave us stuck at opposing ends. Each person's view will be unique as it is based on a myriad of intersecting locations and therefore the competing binaries inherent in the good/bad dichotomous approach around child labor, for example, become a broader dialogue on access, privilege, power, justice, equity and the role of the North in the South. This dialogue leads to shifts to one's own former belief system and everyone's experiences are validated and discussed. Finally, engaging in decolonizing pedagogy will stir up defenses, create anxieties and unsettle students, which can make us more vulnerable as educators but more challenging for students' education. What I hope for us to achieve in the classroom is a continuous and permanent transformative and internalized method of accountability through decolonizing pedagogy to critically analyze how we are continuously shaped, implicated and intricately connected through our histories and current realities.

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