

Epistemology and community-worker
education: Questioning the knowledge we
value / valuing the knowledge we question

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Epistemology and community-worker education: Questioning the knowledge we value / valuing the knowledge we question

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Abstract

An appreciation and respect of how knowledge is created, classified and perpetuated is integral to community-work praxis. As community workers, ensuring that we have an epistemological foundation that guides our practice in a way that focuses on the systemic challenges and oppressions of those we serve is central to how we engage with communities. What we are taught, formally and informally, is grounded in the epistemic foundations of those who teach us. We in turn use that knowledge in our everyday engagement with the communities and individuals we serve. These epistemologies can and will cause harm if we are not careful to ensure that those we teach are taught the skills to engage with others in a way that does not eliminate or diminish their ways of knowing and creating knowledge.

Introduction

Much of what I know about the practice of helping others comes from my grandmother. She believed in a Christian God. For her, that meant total and absolute adherence to the Ten Commandments, being good to everyone – even the ones you could probably justify being tossed down a stairwell – and living a life free of fear. We lived in a small community where there was not much electricity and after Wednesday Night Meeting at church, my grandmother would accompany a group of women home, in the dark, and then

make her own way home. On occasion I would accompany her. One particular trip stands out.

The last stop before returning home was about a 20-minute walk from our house. On our way back, when she blew out the zinc kerosene lamp, I grew alarmed and asked her why she was blowing it out when it was so dark. She told me that there was nothing to be afraid of because God was with us. I pondered for a moment and asked her why she needed to take “these people” home if they believed in the same God. She told me that we all had a responsibility to take care of each other and to be good to one another, judgement free.

Although I am quite sure she had no idea, and perhaps would not have cared much, about epistemology, she, like many in her church, believed in what Koch (2005, pp. 1-23) refers to as the exclusivity of text, the Bible, in the creation of truth. The foundation of what my grandmother knew and understood to be true drove how she interacted with the people and systems around her. A large part of recognizing the empowering value of what others know and the ways others come to know (Bernal, 2002; Hunter, 2002) is a valuing of those differing epistemologies. My aim here is to call upon community-work practitioners to resist a hierarchy of knowledge in which the ‘learned’ practitioners are the only ones able to know. The term community work is used generically to refer to people who work with communities.

Central to community-work praxis is an epistemological foundation that shows an acceptance of, and appreciation for, the differing ways that community members, and communities, come to know. This appreciation and acceptance creates space for an understanding that there is inherent value in not only what community members know but in how they come to know. When community workers position this knowledge in a space that does not delegitimize it, a space is created for better engaging with community. Since what is taught, formally and informally, is grounded in the epistemic foundations of the educator (Bernal, 2002; Sinclair, 1999; Hunter, 2002), community workers then must also be careful not to intentionally or unintentionally engage in delegitimizing praxis gained from those who teach them.

What is epistemology?

Broadly speaking, epistemology is the branch of philosophy to do with questions of what we know as humans and how we come to know (Anastas, 2002; Williams, 2001; Hunter, 2002). Our epistemic foundations generally fall into one of two categories – objectivism or subjectivism. Objectivism looks at observations as the way of gaining knowledge and suggests that what we consider to be truthful and meaningful can only be defined through those observations (Crotty, 1998; Levers, 2013).

Subjectivists, on the other hand, argue that what we know or come to know is “always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 21). This approach suggests that “unaffected and universal knowledge of an external reality is not possible

beyond individual reflections and interpretations” (Levers, 2013, p. 3). For example, a classification of a neighbourhood as ‘bad’ is achieved through particular lenses. ‘Bad’ also means something. ‘Bad’ may mean gun violence or substance abuse, for example. It means something negative, and such an understanding comes from a perception or a reality that is filtered through a particular lens.

Problematizing the foundations of how we come to know

We come to know in different ways. Generally though, an educator’s epistemological framework provides the lens through which every lesson is taught. A framework highlighting the supremacy and infallibility of Western thought and thought processes – of who can know and who is capable of knowing, what is valuable knowledge and how that knowledge is seen as valued – continues to govern everything community workers do as practitioners. Sinclair (2004), in looking at Aboriginal social-work education and its implications for practice, highlights the intellectual colonization that can occur when education is used as a tool of oppression and assimilation. The removal of Aboriginal children from their families, for example, destroying the fabric of generations of Aboriginal families (Sinclair, 2004; Smith, 1999; Fast & Montgomery, 2016; Blackstock, 2016) has roots in an epistemological framework that normalizes White Western educational thought and institutions as normalcy. Arguably, we are now experiencing a similar challenge with the removal of children from Black families in many Western countries.

Community-work educators who engage in the process of knowledge making from a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens, for example, create spaces where there is acknowledgement of the centrality of systemic racism and perpetuated knowledge that demands the analysis of race at that level. Such an epistemic framework rejects ideas like colour-blindness, neutrality, meritocracy and objectivity. It positions the experiences of the oppressed at the core of contextual and historical analysis; it sees racism as a core contributor to the manifestation of pockets of disadvantaged and advantaged groups; it insists on the validity of the experiences of peoples of colour in knowledge making; and it works towards the end of racial oppression and subjugation (Aylward, 1999; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Abrams & Moio, 2009). While there are inherent dangers to espousing a single ideological approach to community work and community-work education, having a foundation that does not ignore the ways of knowing of peoples historically perceived as less than human creates a space for community workers to work with communities in an equitable context.

A problematic alternative to this is a Eurocentric epistemology. A cornerstone of a Eurocentric epistemology, which drives our capitalist mentality, is meritocracy. The capitalist mentality of our meritocratic system perpetuates the notion that all individuals get what they deserve based on hard work and merit (Bernal, 2002). Such a view leads to belief systems that people of all races, genders, abilities, sexualities and so on ought to be able

to engage with systems in the same way. A community worker who works with communities from this perspective will believe that all people are able to thrive and survive if they are just empowered do better, and want better. The strategies used will be limited in their ability to support communities with complex needs. It is not until practitioners engage with and respect other ways and others' ways of knowing that they can engage with communities from an equitable space.

Practitioners' consciousness must be raised to ensure that working with communities is done positively. Cappiccie et al. (2012) raised the consciousness of their Bachelor of Social Work students by facilitating dialog about the ways in which Disney perpetuates micro-aggressive stereotypes in its animation films. In looking at *The Lion King*, for example, they note the way Disney played on the audience's fondness for royalty and the fear that those on the margins – the hyenas – would take over and destroy everything. We know that only certain bodies are characterized as royalty while others are perpetually relegated to the margins, like the hyenas, where they are feared. We need only look at the experiences of many African Americans who moved or tried to move into 'white' communities in the 1950s and '60s to see how these stereotypes have taken root. Using an approach that does not lend credence to the existence and challenges of racism, for example, renders these discussions meaningless and leaves the consciousness of practitioners in a less-than-optimal space.

Questioning the knowledge we value / Valuing the knowledge we question

The historical underpinnings of social work as a profession are not dissimilar to my grandmother's sentiments, and have at their base principles of community development and practice. In the nineteenth century social work and social workers focused on helping the 'poor' through the lens of 'deserving and undeserving poor', where people were classified according to the social worker's own moral code. Those deserving of help were people who found themselves in poverty through unfortunate circumstances – loss of a job, loss of a spouse and so on. They were not the people to walk into poor houses, where those existed, seeking assistance. Implicit in the 'deserving poor' was a 'fallen' class identity. They experienced a change in circumstances, not in 'proper behaviour'. They were clean and neat people with a modicum of respectability. The underserving poor were those people classified as lazy and dirty (Stokes, 2016).

Just how the social-work profession came to classify people as underserving or deserving was tied directly to what social workers classified as knowledge and how practitioners went about creating, normalizing and perpetuating that knowledge. Such perceptions of the ways people come to know often get wrapped up in ideals and begin to colour the ways practitioners engage with communities. As Hunter (2002) notes, the story for Blacks and other peoples of colour "reads something like this: Blacks do not

do well because they think of themselves as victims and are lazy [never mind the 300-plus years of unpaid labour of colour that built much of the British empire]; many Latinos (and some other immigrants) do not succeed because they refuse to assimilate and learn English..." (p. 126). Such an epistemological foundation views race and ethnicity as ephemeral obstacles to progress. Community workers who embrace this mentality in any form run the risk of perpetuating mythological stereotypes of the very people and communities they want to help. Their work, in essence, will focus more on the individual and less on the oppressive systems we know wreak havoc on the lives of peoples of colour (Anderson, 2016; Bernal, 2002).

Though not focused on traditional community work or community-development work, Bernal's (2002) excerpt from Angela's (a Chicano college student) story is fitting here:

I have to say that my high school was pretty discriminatory because I feel that I wasn't tracked into a College program and I think I had the potential to be. Except because I was from the other side of the tracks, no one really took the time to inspire me... I had a high school English teacher who had asked us to write an essay. And I had written it about the death of my sister. And when she gave it back to me she gave me a D. And she said it was all wrong. And I just couldn't get how she was, first of all, insensitive and then second of all, criticizing me on an experience she didn't have and that only I could write about. And so that's when I think I started to feel the discrimination, almost in the way, I guess in the experiences of what you talk about or what you don't talk about in school. And what's academic and what's not academic (p. 105).

Colonial domination of what is acknowledged and respected as knowledge continues to govern our systems, making it ever harder for peoples with different and non-conforming experiences to be appreciated as having the capacity to gain and create knowledge. My aim here is not to characterize Angela's experience as irrefutable knowledge; rather it is merely to acknowledge it as knowledge that can be interrogated, appreciated and problematized where necessary, not dismissed. Community-work practitioners will engage with similar types of knowledges. When practitioners dismiss this knowledge, they disregard the ways the knowledge was gained and become indifferent to those who hold it. Interrogating and problematizing certain knowledges begins to show a certain level of knowledge valuing.

Colonization of other ways of knowing is a characteristic of Eurocentric epistemologies that inherently devalue the ways of knowing of the colonized. Smith (1999) argues that it was, ironically, during the enlightenment that the worst kind of imperialism took place. Systems of oppressions were canonized with the positioning of Western ways of knowing as the dominant method of gaining knowledge. Aboriginal lands were 'discovered', people, plants, animals and land were tagged, pacified, eliminated where warranted, categorized and claimed. After this, Western ideologies turned to the colonization of the systems of knowledge through the systemic theft of African, Asian, Aboriginal and other ways of knowing as new Western 'discoveries'. It was not until late in high school that I was taught, in a single class, that there were kingdoms in Africa and there was such a thing as Black royalty. Until then all I knew was

that Blackness started at slavery.

Community workers must understand that community members who do not fit with prevailing ideologies of learnedness do have knowledge that can be useful in the fight against systems of oppression. Such an understanding will position practitioners in a manner that will aid in helping communities to engage in effective community development. Community leaders like Saul Alinsky believed in the need for the people to take an active role in tossing off the veil of their oppressors. He believed that oppressed people had a responsibility and a right to do what needed to be done to get at the rights that are often kept from them. It is only with an epistemology that recognizes that anyone can come to know, and that anyone has a right to know and to create knowledge, that we are able to challenge systems of oppression. Experiences of racism and sexism and homophobia and xenophobia, and so on, by people who do not have a voice, must be respected and treated as real and legitimate knowledge in order for community workers to engage with those people in a meaningful way.

Concluding with implications for practice

A community worker's epistemic foundations have a profound effect on the practice of community work. The work of engaging and developing communities is a challenging one. My grandmother's ways of helping people were inherently respectful. She believed that anyone could learn how "to fish". At times, small victories are often accomplished after much hard work of pulling together multiple competing priorities. Practitioners engage in this work with bodies that are not traditionally positioned as bodies that are capable of knowing. And they certainly are not often positioned as those capable of generating usable knowledge. Positioning the knowledge of those we serve as inferior to our own learnedness can be dangerous when we are faced with situations that require contextual knowledge. My grandmother, for example, knew her community well enough to walk at night by herself. Although she believed in God, she also knew her neighbours and knew where not to travel by herself during the night. There have been times when I have leaned, considerably, on the knowledge of community members who had greater understanding of the political workings of their communities.

A practitioner's understanding of epistemology, of who can know, what they can know and how they go about knowing impacts what we choose to perpetuate. Community workers will choose approaches that fit with their own epistemic foundations. If they believe in a feminist approach then they will practice from a feminist perspective and explore not just those pieces of our world having to do with ideals of masculinity or femininity, they will instead explore our whole world from that perspective. If they use a CRT lens they will do the same with a focus on the centrality of race. They must look at what we mean by community work and community work education from their epistemic lens, and clearly identify what it is supposed to be as a practice, so that they can provide the approach necessary as practitioners.

There are many places and spaces where community's challenges

come together to form an often impenetrable trap of oppression. Community workers must work with community to gain a better understanding of the issues at these intersections. In order to do this, practitioners will need to engage in praxis that values the ways that communities come to know. An appreciation of how a community's different and differing ways of knowing must be appreciated. Such an appreciation helps workers to understand that economically maligned communities did not just magically appear, already impoverished. Reflexive workers recognize that there are historical reasons for such levels of poverty, often having to do with marginalization, exclusion, greed, fear and a myriad of other prevailing forces of oppression. This appreciation, for example, leads practitioners to a greater recognition of the exclusionary tactics used by White middle-class Americans to keep Blacks from coming into their neighbourhoods, which forced them to gather in often overpriced ghettos that bred many of the issues Blacks face today (Anderson, 2016). Practitioners ought to be careful to not engage in the continuation of ideologies that perpetuate systems of oppression.

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