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Institutional Racism and Individual Agency: A Case Study using Foucault's Disciplinary Power

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Abstract

Institutional racism is a principal factor in the exclusion and oppression of racialized groups. Social work scholars have examined the organizational indicators, attitudes, and actions of staff that contribute to institutional racism in order to elucidate its function. However, an understanding of the interplay between institutions and individuals within institutional racism has remained largely elusive. This paper aims to address this gap. Using the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault and his theorization of disciplinary power, this paper presents a case study of one social worker's efforts to address racism in her organization. The result is a unique understanding of institutional racism that considers the dynamic interactions between institutional constraints and individual agency. Such an analysis enables those in direct practice as well as in leadership roles who are committed to anti-oppression social work to understand the barriers and routes to anti-racist institutional change.

Keywords: Institutional racism, Foucault, disciplinary power

Institutional racism is a principal factor in the exclusion and oppression of racialized groups. Social work scholars have argued institutional racism can be found in family services (National Association of Social Workers, 2007), child welfare (Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004), mental health (Tam, 2012), and settlement services (George, 2002), among others. However, social workers committed to critical, anti-racist practice are often frustrated in their attempts to bring about institutional change that addresses racism. As a community social worker myself for five years, my efforts at institutional change often fell flat.

In order to pinpoint the pathways to change and bring about progressive models of social work, this case study aims to refine our current understanding of institutional racism and its persistence when challenged. According to Henry and Tator (2010), “Institutional racism is manifested in the policies, practices, and procedures of various institutions, which may directly or indirectly, consciously or unwittingly, promote, sustain, or entrench differential advantage or privilege for people of certain races” (p. 44). However, Henry and Tator go on to warn that the notion of institutional racism “does not differentiate the structural features of institutions in society from the actions of groups of individuals” (p. 49). Other scholars who have argued the conceptualization of institutional racism conflates the role of the individual and the institution (Anthias, 1999; Bradby, 2009; Philips, 2011) have echoed this point.

The academic literature on institutional racism reflects these conceptual tensions: generally, discussion focuses on the role of the organization or the role of individual with little analysis of how the two interact. For example, the literature focused on organizational activity often proposes indicators of institutional racism, such as staff representation, human resource policies, and issues of accountability (Agocs & Jain, 2001; Griffith, et al., 2007; Thomas, 1987). Tator (1996) identifies types of organizations and associated organizational activities so that we may understand the stages of change and have criteria for assessing progress toward an anti-racist approach. Scholars have also proposed a model of Multicultural Organizational Development that, among other things, addresses decision-making power in organizations (Gutiérrez, 2001; Hyde, 2003). Research undertaken in this vein includes case studies that track the progress of an organization’s policies and practices toward greater inclusion (Badwall, O'Connor, & Rossiter, 2004; Greene, 2007; Miller, 2002).

Scholars concerned with institutional racism have also examined the role of the individual. Research demonstrates the resistance and anxiety that individuals experience during the process of organizational change to address institutional racism (Donner & Miller, 2006; Thomas & Plaut, 2008). Cooper (2010) extends this argument by suggesting that “organizational resistance” to addressing racism may be due in large part to individual psychology (p. 486). Still, scholars have warned against a narrow focus on individual’s attitudes and behaviours. Researchers have pointed out that once individuals complete some form of anti-racist training they are likely to feel absolved of racism even though organizational mechanisms remain intact (Bradby, 2009; Griffith, et al., 2007). Furthermore, research has identified contradictions between practitioners’ expressed values and their actions in that their efforts seldom resulted in broader organizational change (Hyde, 2003).

More research is necessary to understand *how* institutional racism proceeds allowing for both individual actions and structural constraints. In Bishop’s (2005) case study examining her

Lavoie

own experience of the “institutional patterns” that shaped oppression, she highlighted the challenge:

I believe that we are powerfully shaped by the structures, systems and institutions around us, but I also believe that we have individual free will and moral responsibility. Sometimes I find it difficult to explain to others how these concepts can co-exist. Sometimes I even lose my own hold on this intricate balance of ideas. (p. 70-71)

By using Foucaultian theory to account for individuals as well as organizational norms and practices, this case study aims to identify the interplay between the two, thus allowing for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of institutional racism along with the challenges and pathways to organizational change. Using Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary techniques, this paper presents a critical analysis of one social worker’s efforts to address racism in her organization. The result is a dynamic understanding of institutional racism that considers both the role of institutional constraints and individual agency.

Foucault’s Disciplinary Techniques

Foucault’s conceptualization of disciplinary power serves as the theoretical framework for this case study. Foucault proposed that social control in modern societies relied on a form of power referred to as disciplinary power. Discipline “is the specific technique of power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise” (Foucault, 1977, p. 170). In other words, disciplinary power harnesses the power of the body by working on it as the target (or object) of power and by working on the self as the instrument (or subject) of power. Disciplinary power targets individuals, rather than the population as a whole, so that the power of the individual can be harnessed and controlled in the interests of the existing system.

[T]he body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. This subjection is not only obtained by the instruments of violence or ideology; it can also be direct, physical, pitting force against force, bearing on material elements, and yet without involving violence; it may be calculated, organized, technically thought out; it may be subtle, make use neither of weapons nor of terror and yet remain of a physical order. (Foucault, 1977 p. 26)

By controlling “the body,” its location and actions, disciplinary power makes it possible to extend the effects of power into the most infinitesimal elements of people’s everyday life (Foucault, 1977). Disciplinary powers function as a dispersed and complex web of power embedded in the home, the classroom, and the workplace through control of the body’s mundane and routine activities.

Foucault (1976) identified a number of techniques through which this control is achieved. He argued that, with the shift to a focus on disciplining the body (“bio-power”) as a means of social control, there was an “explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault, 1976, p. 140). “Observation” is the technique often discussed owing to Foucault’s analysis of the Panopticon, a prison design in which the captive is always visible and the guardian is always invisible (1977, p. 170). Extrapolated to modern society, Foucault’s point was that the potential for observation by those

with greater authority is sufficient for individuals to choose to self-discipline and modify their own behaviour without the need for external enforcement. Foucault adds to this discussion with the notion of “hierarchical observation,” which he suggests occurs when the power to make decisions or control behaviours is affixed onto certain individuals (such as a supervisor), and compliance is affixed onto others (such as a front-line worker) (Foucault, 1977, p.170). The disciplinary power of observation is augmented by the “organization of space”- that is, the introduction of a system of order which contains activities to specific spaces (such as offices) and groups individuals according to specific activities they must perform (such as social workers and receptionists) (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p. 55).

According to Foucault (1977, p. 177), such disciplinary powers proceed aided by what he referred to as “normalizing judgment.” Normalizing judgment functions to delimit activities to behaviour or talk that is normalized, that is, the behaviour or talk preferred by existing relations of power such that it becomes common sense and some might say just “what we do.” Foucault explained normalizing judgment is administered through precise functions, targeting exact behaviours and/or talk, such that anything is subject to some type of penalty. The result is a matrix of what Foucault referred to as “micro-penalties,” such as the precise ordering of work tasks, allowable conversation during work, and rules about inappropriate workplace gestures (1977, p. 178). Measures of normalizing judgment are pervasive: “We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the ‘social worker’ judge, it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based” (Foucault, 1977, p. 304). The effect of normalizing judgment on social work practice is a pressure towards conformity. Deviant behaviours, such as disobedience and disloyalty, can be isolated and quickly brought under control (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982).

Such techniques contribute to a matrix of disciplinary power that Foucault argued is both “intentional and non-subjective” (1976, p. 95). Owing to the diffuse and pervasive characteristics of disciplinary power, it can be experienced as both constant and difficult to pinpoint at any one time. It is a system of infinitesimal commands, assertions, reinforcements, and penalties that are purposeful and yet lacking authority, that is, subject-less.

This matrix of disciplinary power that Foucault outlines does not suggest the operation of power is predictable; there is, in fact, continual resistance to it. In Foucault’s own words, “[w]here there is power, there is resistance” (1976, p. 95). Exerting disciplinary power is (ironically) dependent upon the freedom of the object of power to be able to act (i.e., as subject) so that, by extension, they may reproduce *or* resist power relations. For Foucault (1994) this means it is possible for ideas and practices that once seemed self-evident to be then understood as “contingent and arbitrary” (p. 502). Such forms of resistance, regardless of their effectiveness, do not necessarily entail precise counter behaviour nor full comprehension of that which is being opposed (Foucault, 1982).

Methodology

The events reported herein are part of a larger study undertaken for the purposes of doctoral research. In 2007, a case study was conducted of community work in one neighbourhood in Québec, Canada. The study included 16 participants who were paid staff at

local community organizations and whose job entailed community outreach, committee work, and organizing social justice campaigns. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews, reactive observation (Angrosino, 2005) of community work and archival research.

This article is based on data collected from one social worker, referred to herein as Tina (a pseudonym). Tina was a recent hire in a community organization that advocated for the rights of low-income residents. Tina had immigrated to Canada as a young child from China and had many years of experience working in community organizations. Observations of Tina's work included attending meetings, rallies, workshops, and outreach sessions into the community. Tina also participated in two semi-structured interviews that included in-depth discussion of her role, views, and practices. This case study approach was considered optimal because of the focus on context and the potential to narrow in on a phenomenon such as institutional racism generally considered ubiquitous.

Many researchers concerned with issues of race and ethnicity have argued reflexivity is necessary to gain an understanding of the influence of white privilege and power over the research process (Butler, 2005; Scheurich, 2002). In this study, reflexivity necessitated conscious scrutiny of the double bind of whiteness- that is, a willingness on my part to examine issues of power tied to race as well as my own complicity with them (Ellsworth, 1997). In order to understand the influence of my identity, experiences, and interpretations held over the research, I recorded ideas and interpretations in a research log book and conferred with other community organizers, as well as graduate students and critical race scholars.

To ensure study trustworthiness, a number of steps were taken such as prolonged engagement, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and volunteer checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For confidentiality reasons, all identifying information is obscured in this article, including the name of the organization, the neighbourhood, and the city in which it occurred. The starting point of data analysis was Tina's own acts of resistance. According to Foucault, "through the antagonism of strategies" power relations may be brought to light (1982, p. 211). Tina's actions elicited other actions that could be traced to disciplinary techniques in this context and the matrix of power relations underway.

Analysis

Tina, a community social worker, became concerned about the lack of diversity in her organization shortly after being hired: "If we just look at representation, it is a no brainer; it is so obvious." During the course of this study, Tina took her first step to address the issue: she proposed holding a meeting with volunteers of the organization to discuss racism in the organization. She referred to it as the "people of colour roundtable" and her hope was the roundtable would become an ongoing feature of the organization. Using the lens of Foucault's disciplinary power described above, the following analysis will examine Tina's experience organizing the people of colour roundtable. I will focus on the disciplinary techniques of observation and normalizing judgment in particular while highlighting features of disciplinary power, including the body as object/subject, subject-less authority, and resistance.

Before the roundtable discussion could go ahead, Tina was asked to follow unusual procedures that allowed for increased scrutiny of her work. Unlike her coworkers, Tina was required to justify the initiative at a unit meeting with coworkers and supervisors. At the

Lavoie

meeting, she raised the fact that volunteers did not reflect the diversity of the neighborhood. Although other unit staff were similarly concerned, Tina was then instructed to follow specific steps, further facilitating control and observation of her work. As Tina points out, this was rationalized on the basis of the organization's best interests.

First, Tina was told that only a select few volunteers would be allowed to attend the meeting. As Tina explained, the reasoning was that "we didn't want people to think that there was a big problem at the organization." Second, the issues or recommendations raised by the roundtable would not carry any weight within the organization. Tina was then expected to communicate this to the participants: "Since we have this concern about not raising expectations I made it very clear from the beginning of the [roundtable] discussion that I couldn't guarantee this discussion would go anywhere." On both points, the overriding concern was the reputation of the organization. Although there was some agreement that the roundtable was important, efforts to rule out possible perceptions of a "problem" in the organization or bungled "expectations" significantly curtailed any outcomes of the roundtable.

At points during this study, staff from outside of Tina's unit also intervened. When Tina drafted a brief article to the organization's newsletter regarding the roundtable, two staff contacted Tina directly regarding the proposed title of the article. Both were seeking changes: "I received two calls from staff saying, 'Well, I think this title is divisive' or 'provocative.'" Tina attributed these criticisms to staff expectations surrounding organizational loyalty: "I think that shows that there is this worry about any type of negative impression at [this organization]." When asked how she would move forward with the roundtable given this concern among staff, she noted "[My goal] is to find a diplomatic way to frame the issues and address them." Tina recognized that she was not going to be able to move the issue of racism in the organization forward without cautious reframing of the issue to ensure the organization's public image was preserved. Whether it was possible to do both is uncertain: at the completion of this study, no change had come about as a result of the roundtable discussion.

The increased scrutiny on Tina's work continued after the roundtable discussion. In contrast to other workers in her role with committee responsibilities, Tina was expected to report on the roundtable meeting. At two separate staff meetings, Tina was asked to describe who was present, what was talked about, and how she handled the discussion. During one of these meetings with all staff, Tina was asked in an accusatory tone why her report of the feedback from the roundtable participants raised similar points she herself had raised in a separate meeting a few weeks before. Rather than consider the possibility that there might actually be a problem at the organization, this question focused in on Tina as the problem. Such a public rebuke may serve as penalty for Tina as well as warning to others who share Tina's concerns. Tina later reflected on the comment: "I think it was obvious that they thought there was some manipulation on my part, that I had my agenda, and I am using the volunteers to justify what I thought the organization should do." Thereafter, Tina made efforts to address staff concerns: she assured staff that her record of the roundtable was "verbatim" and that "these words didn't come from me at all." Such reassurances would distance Tina from the issue and demonstrate her willingness to conform to the expectations of other staff.

The instances so far described highlight the disciplinary powers directed toward Tina. It is important to note, however, that Tina was at times enlisted as both object and subject of disciplinary powers: with the norm of organizational loyalty, constraints were imposed *upon* Tina as well as *by* Tina. When Tina was asked what advice she would offer to other social workers attempting to address racism in their organization, the role of the social worker as the subject of disciplinary power became clear.

I think the facilitator should set up the context of the discussion really well so that people who take the time to come are very committed to the organization [...]. It is not a revolution; it is not a forum to destroy the organization.

Through her insistence that participants be committed to the organization, Tina's loyalty to the organization was transmitted onto community members. The ways Tina resisted the expectation to protect the organization are also telling. At its most basic, Tina resisted the norm of organizational loyalty by naming it thus rendering it visible and open to interrogation. Tina also presented several sophisticated strategies to work against it, such as dispelling concerns intended to undermine her credibility and finding strategies, such as diplomatic language, that would pass below disciplinary scrutiny. There were other examples as well. For instance, Tina happily took research papers provided by this researcher to distribute to other staff, explaining that, "Because people are so sensitive and protective about the organization, it is good to have something supposedly objective that didn't come from me." Another example of resistance took place during the planning of the roundtable. During the roundtable, "accidentally there was a non-volunteer who came," an event Tina later explained.

When people heard that a non-volunteer had come there was like freaking-out reaction, like, "how come? We decided to keep it really internal" and I explained to these people that, well, at first I was surprised too but I learned so much from the roundtable. This fear about what is internal, external, I get frustrated. I just look at the end results.

The external person who "accidentally" attended was a leader in the community among one large ethnocultural group thus far not represented in Tina's organization. Tina was pushing for new initiatives within the organization to respond to the needs of this ethnocultural group. In fact, Tina appears to have misled other staff given that she had, in fact, encouraged external representatives at the roundtable meeting by speaking with them in the lead up to the roundtable and providing them with information regarding the date, time, and focus of the meeting. Tina's claim to be blameless in this instance, that she too was "surprised" by the outcome, seems to mask her actual intent and the events that took place leading up to the roundtable. Framing her reaction as "surprise" may have then divested her of disobedience or disloyalty to the organization, particularly given that culpability could neither be substantiated nor refuted.

Interestingly, Tina's efforts to resist sometimes cannot be separated from her efforts to conform and transmit disciplinary powers onto participants. For example, we have seen how Tina both resisted and complied with the norm of organizational loyalty. Another poignant example of this juxtaposition was Tina's behaviour toward the decision-making structure of the organization. Tina told roundtable participants there was no commitment from the organization to follow-up on recommendations from the roundtable discussion. Yet, despite seeking

participants' concession on this issue, Tina was also frustrated by it. Tina explained that, even as a staff member, she did not know what steps to go through to make change happen: "There is such a vacuum as to the follow-up and where the power is in the organization." Yet, her resistance was obvious as she was prepared to persevere: "I am not going to let it drop off the radar. I guess I will keep on pestering whoever it is within range, that okay, where do we go from here." Tina was acutely aware that decision-making in the organization was anonymous and subject-less, and her struggles against this were apparent, yet she also reinforced this form of disciplinary power with roundtable participants.

Given the complexity and degree of disciplinary powers outlined above, I wondered what Tina considered necessary to push her initiative forward. Tina emphasized allies: "I would say building allies among the volunteers and among the staff. I wouldn't know how else how to approach it because there is not a critical mass of people." It is not surprising that Tina would be concerned with allies given that what were once benign workplace functions became a venue for her to be singled-out and put under unusual scrutiny and suspicion by other staff. Such forms of discipline would likely be alienating and difficult to oppose. Tina hoped that, if other staff raised the issue, they might achieve the "critical mass" necessary to upset existing power relations.

Tina also suggested that organizations concerned with institutional racism need to confront issues of transparency, and "make [racism] an open discussion." With this approach, an organization can begin to identify constraints and pinpoint control and decision-making processes that, as is evident here, are otherwise vague and dispersed.

Discussion

This paper used the writings of Michel Foucault to examine one social worker's attempts at anti-racist organizational change. The analysis pinpoints two disciplinary techniques in particular functioning to reinforce existing power relations: observation and normalizing judgment. Observation was most explicit in this study during staff meetings. For Tina, staff meetings graduated from collective support and decision-making to suspicion and even confrontation. A range of staff, including those who were previously uninvolved in Tina's work, transmitted such penalties. The same was true of normalizing judgment: many staff stressed to Tina the importance of loyalty to the organization. It was Tina's apparent antagonism to this norm that brought it to light so that it was no longer simply taken for granted. The result of the disciplinary powers of observation and normalizing judgment was a type of social control that appeared loose but, in practice, was unequivocal and deeply felt by this social worker. This analysis of disciplinary power highlights certain facets of institutional racism. First, by considering disciplinary power we are given insight into the complexity of resistance needed to bring about change. The social worker in this study reframed her work, deceived others, and redirected her efforts so that she could resist both discrete and heavy-handed discipline. The scope of resistance by this social worker suggests that addressing institutional racism may not occur by overt defiance alone. Rather, it may require nuanced resistance alongside acts of compliance.

Second, this case study emphasizes the point that there does not need to be a requisite racist making institutional racism possible (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). To transmit institutional racism

all that is needed is people willing to enforce disciplinary powers. In this instance, some of the roadblocks to change were buttressed by Tina's own communication with the roundtable participants. Such disciplinary powers may not originate in an effort to reinforce institutional racism but rather stem from other overarching concerns such as protecting the organization and preserving one's own position.

Third, and on a related note, any facet of institutional racism is likely to have multiple sources. In this study, there were multiple disciplinary powers embedded in the structure of the organization exerting pressure on, and through, the social worker. Such a complex, multi-lateral disciplinary force brings about a certain elasticity and durability in the disciplinary field; even if one or more of these channels was somehow undermined or rejected, and the relations of power shifted, the remaining channels would likely be able to maintain disciplinary pressure. Institutional racism is likely to persist especially when efforts focus on a single issue, such as diversifying staff, without focusing on how the organization functions as a whole.

Given this analysis, our conceptualization of institutional racism maybe elaborated. Here, the central analysis for understanding racism within an organization is how power relations constrain/enable activities such that individuals and organizations work in concert to reproduce and resist racism. This is made most explicit by the ways in which the social worker in this case study was both object and subject of disciplinary power: we learn how she was at once the target and conduit of certain organizational norms, thus pinpointing the impossibility of conceptually severing the two. Using Foucault's work on disciplinary power, institutional racism is conceptualized as a set of relations rather than a set of categories of individual and organizational activity. Our understanding focuses on *how* does institutional racism work, rather than where and by whom. The strength of any definition of institutional racism therefore lies in the dual emphasis on organizational activity and individual agency. Primacy is not given to one or the other but rather to the interactions between the two.

To my knowledge, this case study is a first attempt at applying Foucault's theorization of disciplinary power to institutional racism. Using Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, as a social worker, I have found it particularly useful in elucidating and clarifying what was once imperceptible or vague. In particular, Foucault provides a conceptual foundation for examining the connections between activities, rather than viewing them as disparate functions, thereby highlighting the systemic role of racism and the dispersal of its disciplinary pressures. In addition, we gain insight into how power relations operate as normal and, by extension, consciously and/or unconsciously through subjects. We are therefore motivated to examine activities that otherwise appear as benign and common sense. Foucault also offers an empirical tool by viewing resistance as an entry point from which to explore the matrix of power that secures institutional racism. This is useful given that institutional racism is ubiquitous and often difficult to discern from other organizational activity. Lastly, activities at one time viewed as singularly oppressive can now be recognized for their potential to serve as a site of resistance and institutional change.

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