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Exploring the role of feminist knowledge in student transformations: A Bernsteinian analysis (0043)

Programme number: G10

Research Domain: Student Experience

Introduction

This paper draws upon a three-year ESRC funded which investigated sociology-related social science degrees in four universities differently located in UK league tables: ‘Community’ and ‘Diversity’ were consistently rated in the lower quartile and ‘Prestige’ and ‘Selective’ in the top quartile. In all universities we found that students had access to personal transformations as a result of their education. Acquiring sociological knowledge placed students as graduate in a group which has specialised understanding about how individuals and society interact, making them more enlightened about themselves and others and likely to be concerned with promoting greater equality and tackling disadvantage in society. Students’ perceived quality of pedagogy was the key to their being able to acquire knowledge.

These over-arching findings do not reveal how students’ knowledge of particular theories or ideas contributed to students’ personal transformation, nor which specific injustices and inequalities they had gained insight about. However, if, -as we have argued (XXXX et al. 2013)- graduates from sociology-related social science are potential creators of a more empathetic and egalitarian society, we need to understand more specifically what inequalities students think about and how they think about them (Bernstein, 2000; Coate, 2006). In this paper, we discuss the result of ‘drilling down’ into our data to explore the extent and nature of students’ engagement with and transformation by feminist knowledge, which we regard as essential if sociology graduates are to contribute to tackling persistent gender inequalities (Walter, 2010).

Methodology

Using data sets generated by the project (1) we analysed course handbooks and module guides from the four departments for feminist\gender content (2) we used a wide range of gender\feminist relevant terms in NVivo to interrogate interviews with 97 first-year students and follow-on second and third year interviews with 31 of these students, who were case studies. By gender and institution we searched pertinent codes (‘node’ in NVivo terms) from an original coding framework, for example, the code ‘discipline’ which coded any mention of gender/feminist theories, concepts or empirical examples. However, there were so few

references that we extended the search to all codes, reading through to double check (3) we drew upon coding framework used for all 12 of the project seminar videos (one per year per institution) to inductively analysed a recording of a first-year seminar in which feminist research was discussed to explore the interplay between pedagogical processes and knowledge about gender (4) synoptic accounts of case study students have been written and for this paper two have been selected for comparison of (dis)engagement with gender/feminist knowledge.

Analytic framework

The analysis of how gender /feminist knowledge is embedded in curricula and pedagogy and of whether it transforms students was framed by Bernstein's (2000) concept of the 'code' and the related concepts of 'classification' and 'framing'. Code is shorthand for ideas and values which imbue all of social life, shaping consciousness and being. In education, codes are conveyed through how curriculum is classified (*what* is learned) and pedagogy is framed (*who* teaches and *how* it is learned). Like Arnot (2002) we have adapted Bernstein's framework which focuses on socio-economic class to explore the complexity of gender codes within a contemporary context. Within sociology-based social sciences sociology, feminist knowledge is classified as a separate category, these classifications can be stronger or weaker, projecting stronger or weaker specialised feminist identities. Framing refers to who controls what within a classification, it too might be strong or weak: for example, within a department an individual feminist academic might have complete autonomy or have limits put on control over how feminist knowledge is represented in the curriculum.

Findings

Overall, the level of engagement with feminist knowledge by the students we interviewed is low. However, there are systematic variations. If the classification of feminist knowledge was sufficiently strong for dedicated modules within the curriculum, women students were more likely to be transformed by the knowledge acquired. Accordingly in Diversity and Prestige more women mention gender and feminist theories and readings, some wrote dissertations on gender/feminist topics; and, they told us how the knowledge gained had changed the way they see the world. On the other hand, Community and Selective classify feminist knowledge weakly (it featured within modules for a week or two at most), had a strong strand of criminology and fewer women students. Here there was less engagement with feminist knowledge by students. Furthermore, it appears that, regardless of the university, the classification and framing of gender/feminist knowledge does not engage men. Their engagement had a sensationalist aspect: they tended to focus on criminology topics such as rape and prostitution. No-one mentioned masculinities, although one male student mentioned studying homosexuality.

A comparison of two women students who both had difficulties in their lives which feminist analysis would see as arising from patriarchal relationships indicates that personal experiences alone do not determine whether students have engaged relationships with feminist knowledge. This raised for us the question of the role of pedagogy in framing feminist knowledge. An analysis of a recording of a first-year seminar for ethnically-diverse students focusing on domestic violence at Diversity showed feminist knowledge framed by pedagogy that encouraged thinking about personal relevance; while a student from Selective complained that gender/feminist content might have been interesting, had the lecturer not made it boring. Earlier project findings show that pedagogy strongly mediates engagement with disciplinary knowledge. If sociology-related social science graduates are to play a role in reducing gender inequality in society, gender/feminist knowledge needs to be classified and framed in ways that engage men and women.