

Title: Social work education and carcerality

Introduction and background

The study applied Foucauldian concepts of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1991). Foucault identified several ways carcerality is enacted within institutions: hierarchical observation, normalising judgements, examination, spatialisation and regimes regulating behaviours and time (Foucault, 1991; O'Farrell, 2005). However, this analysis develops Foucauldian theory in relation to disciplinary power to include technologies of relationships and of the self (agency) (Leask, 2012). Little has been written about carceral and disciplinary influences on higher education but there is evidence about the impact on students (Fox, 1989; Kelly, 2012) and staff (Fox, 1989; Harding and Taylor, 2001; Hendrix, 2010). Foucault (cited in Chambon et al., 1999) argued that social work is a societal regulatory mechanism and evidence of Foucauldian disciplinary power in social work, including the ability to resist, has been discussed (Moffatt, 1999; Gilbert and Powell, 2010).

Methodology

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were undertaken with 21 social work academics from five English universities. Participants had experience as social work practitioners and remained registered social workers in England with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). Interviews were transcribed and subject to respondent validation (Bryman, 2008).

Early Findings

Findings indicate that Foucauldian notions of disciplinary power operate to constrain, shape and incapacitate social work academics, but resistance is possible. Examples from the data will be provided to exemplify findings.

Hierarchical observation exerts power and control over individuals by making them constantly visible (Foucault, 1991), however, contrary to this, in the early part of their

careers, social work educators experience a lack of gaze which is potentially incapacitating, carrying risks for students, social work academics and the university. This lack of gaze may lead to a carcerality of incompetence which is constraining of their practice and development as academics, particularly upon their arrival in the academy. In response to the lack of gaze, a collegiate compensatory gaze is created.

Social work academics are influenced by an array of competing normalising judgements (Foucault, 1991) being multiply positioned as “docile bodies” (Foucault, 1991: 138), seditious academics and enforcers of normalising requirements. In managing competing and contradictory discourses, social work academics exercise agency and privilege discourses about social work practice, service users and fitness to practise, incurring risks of “dividing practices” (Foucault, 1982 cited in Chambon, 1999: 67). Social work academics were aware of normalised expectations of academic practice, often engaging with these but, like other practitioner academics (Boyd et al., 2011; Gourlay, 2011), the norms about research performance were problematic. Normalising practices are infused with power and social work academics acted to regulate the behaviours, values and practices of students and control entry to the profession. On occasion, power served to exclude other social work academics when normalising judgements from different perspectives collided. Social work academics exert technologies of the self or agency in rejecting some normalising discourses and privileging others although arguably, this is merely prioritising one normalised discourse over another. Within these normalising judgements, and “divided practices” (Foucault, 1982 cited in Chambon, 1999: 67) there is a sense of fragility for social work programmes and individual academic identity with risks of “unbecoming” (Colley et al., 2007: 178; Archer, 2008: 389) or indeed, not becoming.

Social work academics were instruments in the examination of students by assessing their work (Fox, 1989; Foucault, 1991). Moreover, social work educators experienced the examination of their programmes by approving bodies such as the HCPC and The College of Social Work (TCSW) as well as the Quality Assurance Agency requirements; all of which impose non-negotiable expectations on curriculum design, content and delivery. There were also internal processes of examination (Fox, 1989) (e.g. re-validation panels and ethics committees) which regulated the behaviours of social work academics. Individuals were

directly affected by examination of regulatory bodies in maintaining their registration as social workers, often managing competing normalised discourses. There were also reciprocal influences of examination between employers and social work academics/programmes.

Disciplinary regimes relating to the control of behaviour and time were evident. Knowledge of disciplinary regimes (e.g. timetabling) were initially obscure for social work academics but eventually understood. Social work academics complied with disciplinary regimes; for example, assessment of student work and requirements for teaching qualifications, reflecting normalised discourses within higher education. Control of time and time exhaustion (Foucault, 1991) were also evident, reflecting issues of “work intensification” (Fanghanel, 2012: 22) in the neoliberal university.

In contrast to social work practice, being an academic was regarded as individualised (Aspinwall-Roberts, 2009; Worsley, 2009), characterised by solitary confinement and exacerbated by issues of spatialisation. These practices impeded transition experiences and the development of research skills, particularly in relation to collaborative opportunities. Carceral practices about research performativity (Harding and Taylor, 2001) prevented colleagues from sharing ideas and offering support with research; the development of networks to build research skills depends on serendipity and is not equally available to all, potentially further contributing to a carcerality of incompetence.

Technologies of relationships were central to positive transition experiences and survival within the academy, but not always benign. Existing relationships with university staff and the social work programmes were particularly potent in decisions to apply for employment, with many social work academics returning to their alma mater. Potentially then, access to social work academia may be promoted and restricted by social networks. Whilst not common, some staff were ostracised by social work academics, influenced by competing normalising judgements and closed relationships, generating further “divided practices” (Foucault, 1982 cited in Chambon, 1999: 67). Furthermore, networks to support the development of research skills are exacerbated by issues of solitary confinement and the risk, although rare, of senior staff appropriating ideas.

Conclusion

Social work academics are ensnared within complex carceral networks, requiring them to manage competing discourses and position themselves within the normalising judgements of the neoliberal university. Social work practice discourses are privileged but this may have deleterious effects in relation to normalised expectations of the academy, locating them in a liminal space as reported for other practitioner academics (Williams, 2010) and professional staff (Whitchurch, 2008). These findings are important for supporting transitions and enabling the development of academic practices.

1000 words (not including abstract and reference list)

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