Reflections on Critical Pedagogy and Transformative Curriculums. The Antidote to Gaslighting

Aastha Ahuja
International Masters in Adult Education for Social Change

Declaration of Author's social location

As an upper caste born Indian, I admit that stances explicated in this paper with regards to Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi experiences make a conscious effort to not project my worldview and aspirations on these communities. However, I may have faltered and would appreciate that it be pointed out. I am keen to reflect on and correct mistakes that are inevitable from my position of caste privilege in the Indian context.

Introduction

With the acceptance that "reduction of politics to psychology of self will be erroneous" (Haider, 2018, p.108), in this reflection piece I discuss the possible positive effects of transformative curricular experiences on marginalised learners. I use a combination of psychological and critical lenses to argue that transformative curricular experiences allow marginalised learners to translate their personal narratives from that of shame to oppression. The social dimension of transformative learning has been greatly explored, in that multiple authors, including Mezirow, Freire, Brookfield, Hooks, have articulated the need for emotional support during the unfreezing stage of past perceptions, behaviours and attitudes (Jost, 2015). However, the exploration of internal experiences of the individual marginalised learner is still sparse. I believe it is important to explore this dimension of transformative learning since "individual transformation amounts to, and is influenced by, the

collective transformation" (Calleja, 2014, p.133). I will begin by describing some of the key theoretical concepts that I use through this reflection. This will be followed by bringing the psychological concepts and critical theory into a dialectical conversation. In conclusion, critical consciousness will be established as a necessary condition for the psychological resilience of the oppressed.

Key concepts

Field theory, a psychological theory, explains that "human behaviour is predicted and explained in terms of the relative strengths of internal and external forces acting on the individual" (Jost, 2015, p.609). The internal factors include cognitive and personality factors and external factors include immediate group and societal conformity (Jost, 2015; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). There is wide consensus on how the "need for conformity" (Kaiser, Byrka, & Hartig, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 2004) makes people and societies resistant to change (Jost, 2015). Within the scope of this knowledge around human behaviour, the important question for this reflective piece is with regards to the psychological costs of conformity for someone who lives at the margins of society. For instance: What does it imply for a trans Dalit woman to conform to the mainstream society and what happens when she can/does not conform? I argue that Dr. Robin Stern's conceptualisation of "the gaslight effect", a form of psychological abuse, explains the experiences of marginalised people trying/failing to conform to mainstream society. Stern (2007) defines the gaslight effect as "a relationship between two people, a gaslighter who needs to be right in order to preserve his own sense of self and his sense of having power in the world; and a gaslightee, who allows the gaslighter to define her sense of reality because she idealises him and seeks his approval" (p.35). Gaslighting can happen across any kind of relationship and either gender can play the roles of gaslighter and gaslightee (Stern, 2007). Sweet (2019) rightly points out the lacuna in sociology theory resulting from having ignored the need to theorise the phenomenon of gaslighting. Using a case study of domestic violence, Sweet (2019) argues that gaslighting merits being understood as rooted in social and structural inequalities beyond its original psychological conceptualisation.

I grew up and studied with DBA[1] friends not knowing their caste identity for over a decade. As a meagre attempt to understand such experiences, I recently

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[1] DBA: Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi; A collective term to identify lower castes in Indian society

read Yashica Dutt's (2019) memoir "Coming out as Dalit". Her book highlights how her journey of hiding as a Dalit through childhood and adulthood psychologically traumatised her. She, like many other marginalised learners, carried over this baggage of trauma in the form of compulsive second guessing and feeling like an impostor[2], to name only a few. Unlike my friends and Yashica, Rohith Vemula, a student from Hyderabad University asserted his Dalit identity to support friends who were struggling within the "culture of silence" (Freire, 2000). After spending a life in scholarship and activism Rohith left us in 2016. The first line of his suicide note read: "My birth is my fatal accident" (Bhattacharjee, 2017). Caste Hindu supremacy has killed a disproportionate number of Dalit students (Jaiswal, 2016; Pandey, 2017; Acharya 2019) as educational institutions continue to force them to question their worth at school and in society i.e. gaslight them in insidious ways. Given that the key purpose of critical pedagogy and transformative curriculums is to empower learners, I now look at how these curricular experiences can help both closeted and assertive learners from marginalised social locations to protect themselves psychologically.

Seeing critical pedagogy, transformative curriculums and gaslighting together

As individuals we are all embedded in the social structures around us. These social structures shaped by and for the perpetuation of dominant ideology act as a means of social and economic control. One of the most damaging aspects of this social control are captured in what Gramsci calls "common sense" (Gramsci, 1971). This common sense is internalised by the oppressed and the oppressor alike and consequently, it shapes the passions, interests and aspirations of both sides. This unquestioned internalisation causes marginalised people to suffer from a dual gaslighting:- one from the world around them and its agents but another, more critical one, from themselves. For instance: when a Black student scores low on a standardised exam (Sewell, 2013), or a Dalit student is unable to find a job despite having the same qualifications as a Brahmin student (Deshpande & Sharma, 2016), he/she/they are prone to feeling inadequate and unsuccessful. This can cause them to

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[2] Impostor syndrome: The psychological term referring to a pattern of behavior where people doubt their accomplishments and have a persistent, often internalized fear of being exposed as a fraud (Bravata, D. M., Watts, S. A., Keefer, A. L., Madhusudhan, D. K., Taylor, K. T., Clark, D. M., . . . Hagg, H. K. (2020). Prevalence, predictors, and treatment of impostor syndrome: A systematic review. *Journal of General Internal Medicine, 35*(4), 1252-1275. doi:10.1007/s11606-019-05364-1)

second-guess their own abilities, feelings and thoughts in ways a gaslightee does when they are trying to win their gaslighter's approval and validation. However, to try to fit in and win the approval of a system that was designed to keep them at the margins surely can be a futile exercise for many creating unnecessary resentment towards themselves. Given that this dual attack on the self-worth of the marginalised people makes them psychologically vulnerable, it is appropriate to apply the concept of gaslighting to their experiences.

Hooks (1994) argues that the values in which traditional education systems are rooted - progress, authority, objectivity and conformity (Sewell, 2013, p.15) - manufacture servile workers who measure their entire self-worth from their work and discipline themselves internally to perform better in a system that does nothing to address their alienation or improve their wellbeing (Brookfield, 2014). Transformative curriculums when taught using principles of critical pedagogy have the capacity to break this internal chain even when external material and other structural realities remain unchanged. Freire's (2000) suggestion that the oppressed need to overcome the oppressor consciousness and cultivate a critical consciousness is sometimes questioned by critical pedagogues as a worthy goal in itself. Pedagogically, critical consciousness enables marginalised learners to come to perceive themselves as agents of their own reality and understand the systemic nature of their reality. Brookfield (2014) locates these realisations at the core of personal wellbeing. Psychologically, cultivating critical consciousness enables marginalised learners to devalue group and societal conformity and dissent when needed. As a result, marginalised people begin to validate their thoughts and feelings internally, rather than seeking external validation from individuals who are yet to be conscientised. And, it is this internal sense of self-belief that equips marginalised people to start believing in their own feelings and thoughts about experiences ranging from failure to microaggressions. This resultant freedom of the oppressed from unconscious shackles can possibly evolve into a sense of empowerment i.e. "an increased capacity of people to engage in meaningful interactions, decision making, civic engagement and social action" (Clover, 2013, p.14).

Even when marginalised people have become critically conscious of their reality, such silencing measures continue to pervade their social relations and everyday life, implying that the battle does not end, but begins with their conscientização. For instance: my critical understanding of society has enabled me to trust my ideas and feelings when a white colleague micro-aggressively

suggests that a merit based education system is democratic or that they have the strongest passport in the class. Additionally, it is important for the marginalised to be critically conscious else they risk being trapped in trying to win an unfair battle forever. It is also important to learn to turn inwards into a mode of self-inquiry so that the marginalised do not fall into the identitarian "us versus them" trap. Critical pedagogy empowers learners in a way that they can both believe in and question their assumptions without getting defensive (Sewell, 2013).

Conclusion

The discussion above has illuminated how critical pedagogy and transformative curricular experiences help the marginalised learners battle the double pronged sword of gaslighting. From personal experiences, active and vicarious, I have grown to believe that psychological resilience is a precondition for marginalised people to engage in hard-won political and material struggles that aim to change unjust structural realities. As and when marginalised learners locate their current realities in a framework of historical material and social injustice, they also acquire the courage to right these historical wrongs. As a collateral, this transforms their self-image from that of victims to fighters. In this light, I recall DG Kelley's words: "Reading Black experience through trauma can easily slip into thinking of ourselves as victims and objects rather than agents, subjected to centuries of gratuitous violence that have structured and overdetermined our very being. But in fact what sustained Black people was a memory of freedom, dreams of seizing it, and conspiracies to enact it- a heritage of resistance that is erased by the rhetoric of black bodies" (Haider, 2018, p.91).

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