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Changing Relations: Power, Ethics and Responsibility In Graduate Supervision

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In Graduate Supervision

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Abstract: This paper continues the dialogue between a feminist graduate student and non-feminist male advisor in an adult education graduate program: they each define the power relations inherent in the relationship, and raise questions about their ethical and moral responsibilities.

About a year ago we began talking about our relationship. Some of the dialogue centred on our feelings of discomfort, annoyance and difference from the other. Other discussions centred on the power relations between us, how gender affected our relationship, what personal, professional and political expectations we had for each other, and what ethical stances we brought to the relationship. We realised just how fundamentally opposed were our epistemological, methodological and ontological views.

We have since discovered that while there is much discussion of these issues from a theoretical perspective there is less empirical data. So while the student-advisor relationship is the heart of the graduate education experience, it is rarely used as a site for the analysis of what Tisdell (1993) has called interlocking systems of power, privilege and oppression in adult higher education. In this paper we continue our dialogue, talking about one of the practices that can either reproduce or challenge the structured power relations of higher education—the scholarship game.

Operating from different ethical perspectives of care, of justice and of duty, and how they frame our purposes and our roles and responsibilities to each other and to the institution, we have come to see how differently we view adult education. Valerie, the feminist student, believes strongly that the ethical role of adult educators is to create environments where people can surface just how the social and material reality of their lives is constructed in unequal power relationships based on gender, race, class, ability and sexual orientation (Cunningham, 1988). Tom, the supervisor, on the other hand, believes adult educators may be guided by other, equally valid, moral imperatives. Will this relationship ever work?

Tom says…

Valerie and I have talked about "power" on many occasions, but only recently have we begun to explore more fully what each of us means when we use the word. We both recognize that we are

in an asymmetrical power relationship in which I am the more powerful partner. Valerie has voiced her desire for power to be "shared" which to me presupposes that we have the option to decide to make the relationship more symmetrical. My first response to this was that the power I possess as a faculty member can't be "shared" in the conventional sense because it is largely a function of the structure of the university, including how decisions are made about key events in the lives of students. There are many structural features of this university that reflect and reproduce the power imbalances that exist between faculty and students—even advanced doctoral students, some of whom are preparing to enter the professorate.

This year and last Valerie asked me to write letters of reference on her behalf for several fellowship competitions. The fact that she had to ask and that I had the option to do it or not reflects this imbalance in power. Valerie is experienced in these games and has done her best to coach me in what she regards as important information to include in the letters. I sense that she is aware of how such coaching can backfire if I regard it as too insistent or directive. As is usually the case, these letters are regarded as "confidential" which I have always interpreted to mean that they are not shown to the student or to others who are outside the decision making process. In one conversation this fall, Valerie asked if I would be giving her a copy of the letter I wrote. She indicated that another faculty member had done so and that she—Valerie—had found it helpful to know what was said in the letter. My response was, "No…I don't do that." I explained that if I provided a copy for one student, I would feel morally obligated to provide copies to all those who ask for references. If I provided copies of letters to the students concerned, then I would not feel as free to provide a candid assessment of each person's strengths and weaknesses. This leaves Valerie—and other students—guessing about what I said in my letter and not knowing whether I helped or hindered their chances of getting access to important resources.

If I think about this example using a common sense notion of power, I can see why the asymmetrical character of our relationship is so troubling and why "sharing" power could be desirable. The fact that I can write whatever I want in these letters and students will not have any recourse is morally troubling. I have an ethical obligation to the adjudication committees for these awards to provide an accurate and complete assessment and I also have an obligation to the student to not jeopardize her or his chances of getting support by submitting an overly negative or sloppy letter. I have heard that some students hold the view that if the letter can't be a glowing endorsement, then I shouldn't agree to write a letter at all. I don't accept this view, but knowing that it is "out there" has caused me to think more carefully about accepting invitations to provide a reference. I have also thought about what sort of process would reflect a more balanced power relationship while at the same allow me to fulfil my ethical obligations to adjudication committees and sponsors.

I did a literature search for publications that addressed the power relations involved in graduate education—particularly in the research supervision process. It was interesting to note that one recent study (Aguinis, Nesler, Quigley, Lee and Tedeschi, 1996) directly on the topic used a very old taxonomy of power developed by French and Raven (1959). Aguinis et al argue that "The French and Raven power taxonomy is especially relevant to the study of supervising professor-student power interactions because it is a theory of power that applies to *dyadic relationships*" (p. 271). Following are the five types of power as they apply to the faculty/student relationship:

Coercive power—the ability of a faculty member to "punish" the student if the student does not conform in ways regarded as acceptable by the faculty member (p. 157-158).

Reward power—the ability of one person to mediate rewards for another. In a faculty/student relationship the faculty member may provide or withhold rewards to the student in order to shape the student's behavior in a way considered acceptable by the faculty member (p. 156-157).

Legitimate power—stems from values held by the student which dictate that the faculty member has a legitimate right to influence the student and that the student has a sense of obligation to accept this influence (p. 159).

Referent power—based on the identification of the student with the faculty member, what the authors refer to as "a feeling of oneness" or a desire for such an identity (p. 161). Referent power would be strong if the student felt a high degree of identification with the faculty member, or with becoming a faculty member.

Expert power—based on the perception that the faculty member "has some special knowledge or expertness" (p. 156). "The range of expert power…is more delimited than that of referent power. Not only is it restricted to cognitive systems but the expert is seen as having superior knowledge or ability in very specific areas, and his [sic] power will be limited to these areas…" (p. 164).

Although somewhat dated and possibly overly psychological, I thought these distinctions were potentially useful for discussing our relationship because they would allow us to talk about power more concretely. For example, the process of students requesting letters of reference and faculty members agreeing to write them seems ripe for analysis using some of the distinctions above. What forms of power do students believe that faculty possess that leads them to ask faculty for references? How do students expect these perceived forms of power to play out when reference letters are read by members of adjudication committees? What happens to a student's view of faculty power when the student does not receive financial support? And is the French/Raven taxonomy useful in any way when the notion of "sharing power" is discussed?

After reading the 1996 article and the original French and Raven chapter, Valerie did not initially accept either as helpful in part because the studies seemed overly "masculinist" and took no account of gender, race, class and other differences. She was also suspicious of the taxonomy because it did not address these issues.

The exchange over this research was another—dare I say—predictable outcome of two people working together who bring to the collaboration two very different perspectives on what constitutes legitimate or useful knowledge. Yet I worry about her quick rejection of recent

research based on the gender of its authors and the assumption that taxonomies are inherently limiting. There is not much research that we could find that is directly on the subject of faculty/graduate student relationships, so it seems to me that everything that has been done in the past 5 years deserves a careful look.

Shortly after this, Valerie gave me some material that provides a feminist analysis of Foucault's notion of power-knowledge (McNeil, 1993). Although this piece is engaging and provocative, I have yet to see how it can be used to deepen our analysis. It does provide an orientation to discourse analysis as a means of uncovering power relations, so maybe this reflexive process we are engaged in is a perfect illustration of a discourse-in-need-of-deconstruction. We seem to be attempting to influence the direction of our collaboration by proposing literature that we each feel most comfortable with. Our collaboration is forcing us to read literature—both masculinist and feminist—that we might not otherwise be inclined to explore and in that way it is beneficial to me. I wonder if Valerie feels the same way?

Valerie says...

I've spent the last two and a half months writing scholarship applications. Over and over and over. I have re-arranged words, deconstructed language, read between, under, behind and on top of the lines of instructions, written what I want, what "they" want and what I don't want. But hardest of all is the begging of references. I don't choose that word, begging, lightly. The most difficult references to ask for are the ones from people who know you the best—like Tom, my supervisor. I know that, even though our relationship has improved over the last two years, this is one of the areas where the differences between us are most acute. I want to stereotype and say, Oh, that must be a male thing, or, Well, typical of the old academy! He's amenable at times to suggestion, but then I feel I am acting out the typical Woman stereotype—manipulating the honest, bluff, open Man, using my feminine wiles to get what I want from Him. Like all stereotypes, there's enough recognisability to make it disquieting, and again, typically, we both seem to look only for confirming evidence for our stereotypical views on blind white males and deaf feminists (Griffiths, 1995).

Too often these last months I've felt as if I'm trespassing on sacred academic ground with him—this far, and no further! I still believe there's a possibility for collaboration, for a sharing of power, for joint decisions on who is responsible for what in my graduate education, and for an understanding between us that the relationship will not be about abusing that shared power, but about a moral and ethical sense of caring. And not that stereotypical feminine 'caring'—he's the one with the kids, family, even a dog, all that, not me. If anyone fits the nurturer stereotype, it's much more likely to be him than me. But this reference business brings up so much of the old hashed over stuff, feminist stuff, gendered stuff—much easier to do without it, but it persists in coming back in to our relationship. So...

About begging. I have knocked on doors, sent emails, faxes and made phone-calls, I've also been debating with myself, and fellow students, about just what makes a good reference and just what part a good reference plays in a good (read, winning) application. What student has not known

the agony of asking, <u>nicely</u>, Would you give me a reference for a SSHRCC, UGF, or whatever, and really wanted to say, So, Prof, is it going to be a <u>good</u> reference, or are you going to give me the kiss of death letter? And who dares ask to see the reference when it's written? Well, I <u>did</u> ask... ouch. I read in the small print of the SSHRCC that under the Freedom of Information Act, candidates can see their references, but really, who in their right mind would <u>demand</u> that? Only someone who had won? There's no way I'll ask Tom again. So, I may not know what a good reference is, but I've come to the conclusion that this scholarship game is the best example of a discourse in effect that I have come across in a long time.

Foucault's definition of discourses as being both historical and specific of certain knowledges and the truths that come from them—what we can speak about in specific times and spaces—fit the scholarship-application process to a 't'. He says, "It is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together"; he goes on, "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (1990, p. 100-1). Here I am more inclined to agree with bell hooks, who wrote that subverting dominant forms, undermining them, "happens much more easily in the realm of 'texts' than in the world of human interaction...in which such moves challenge, disrupt, threaten, where repression is real" (1990, p. 22.) Indeed. I would love to subvert the process, but how?

<u>If</u> discourses are enabling as well as constraining, then perhaps we should be using then more creatively, watching how we build our world with them, and then mutating them, just a little, making not-quite-new discourses fit old power structures. Subtly, planting notions, cultivating new discourses… How about one where professor and student write a letter together? But...

This is how the supervision/power relations process works along side the scholarship one. Actually, it's <u>all</u> about relations, this scholarship game. It's about how we want to define ourselves as same or different from others/supervisors, about how power relations force both of us to identify (or not) as same, not different. It's about how we represent ourselves and how others more powerful than us represent us. Above all, it's about whether we've learned to discipline ourselves well enough to be accepted in our disciplines, whether we've fitted ourselves snugly enough into our places in the(ir) taxonomies and classificatory grids of education.

In the studies on supervision that Tom turned up, few, if any, of the researchers, asked questions about how gender, race, class and sexual orientation—to name just a few post structural 'variables'—affected the supervisory relationship. The discourses of masculinist scholarship and research didn't allow for that, yet it's what most of us think about, privately. We just don't speak of it. In those same studies, none mention the material facts of power relations, even as they define just what (they think) power is. And for feminists like me, it's inconceivable to <u>not</u> start there, with the assumption that you can't "add in" power relations. Any description of any relationship must begin with the fact that there exists an (often asymmetrical) power relation between those in it. Starting with our "personal experience", or subject position, as we tend to call it now, we must acknowledge that power relations exist. And especially in educational relationships between teacher and learner, or supervisor and student.

Of course, Foucault (1990) believed that education was one of the "innumerable institutional devices and discursive strategies" (p. 30) used to regulate populations and to control individuals.

But "power is only tolerable on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself" (p. 87). Power is not a thing imposed from above, but something that works its way through all social relations—and in the "internal discourses of the institution—the one it employ[s] to address itself, and which circulate[s] among those who make it function". While I question the consensual nature of power that marks Foucault's thinking, I agree with him, that for power to operate, "Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms... For it, secrecy is not in the nature of an abuse, it is indispensable to its operation...perhaps just as indispensable to those whom it dominates..." (p. 86). I support rendering power relations visible—at least an admission that we do operate in a hierarchy of power relations, even if we do not want to disturb it. And that that hierarchy is based on *coercive* power. Making power visible is about asking awkward questions: Will I get a good reference, Why not, Have I been a good enough girl, Am I ready yet, to be admitted further into your/this masculinist discipline?

I use the term 'masculinist' as meaning "work which, while claiming to be exhaustive, forgets about women's existence and concerns itself only with the position of men" (Le Doeuff, 1991, p. 18). Masculinism is apparent in the choice of topics for research, the way it writes up that research in "unextravagant, unembellished, unpretentious, unexceptional, un(re)marked" ways (Rose, 1993, p. 8), the way it assumes a rationality and knowledge as existing separate from bodies, emotions, values, history, location—in all the discursive ways that signify that the scholar of the university's choice is the "master subject" (Haraway, 1991). He is white, bourgeois, heterosexual and masculine.

The gender, race, class, etc., of the researchers in those studies didn't affect their setting of questions. It's not necessary to be white, masculine, bourgeois, heterosexual. One can learn— one must learn?—to be so constituted, or at least to represent oneself as the master subject/scholar. To show, in writing up research, in choosing topics, in being referenced, privately, in "good" letters, and publicly, in print, that one has mastered the discipline. Any questions about this process must be neatly tidied away, left unsaid, along with the other questions we don't ask. …And in the end, as one professor told me, the deciding factor is getting high-powered, over-the-top references. First, of course, you have to prove you belong, that you are Same to their Same, that's that *referent* power...

Ethically, what does it mean to pretend to be doing research you won't do, to write differently (don't put any poems in, stay away from that post modern jargon and name dropping!) from your usual style/of/life-/writing, to claim yourself as not what you really are (as if there were a real, essential self... Ah, but there is, the master subject/self), to represent yourself falsely, in order to succeed in the scholarship game of life? What does it say of our academic world that this is one of the taken-for-granted rules of this discursive engagement, that we all know, are all complicit with each other, that, Well, of course, that's not really what I am going to do, say, be, but you and I will just pretend.

Do we have a responsibility for our truth? Or is truth just the effect of power and knowledge, flowing from diverse discourses? What would happen if we responsibly contested the masculinist public performances of seminars, writing styles, fieldwork? If we contested the private performances of masculinity? What would happen if I asked Tom, Let me see that reference, And, Why don't we re-write it, together? Or, if I went to the Head of the Scholarship

Committee, and said, Let me sit in on your SSHRCC deliberations—I want to know what my ranking is, how you decided if I win or fail? What if we both went, or even five of us, or ten, or twenty, faculty and students? Ah, but...

But for all our differences, both of us feel strongly that power is not entirely repressive, nor need it be negative. Power can be productive. If it flows from one structure to another, if power always creates resistance, then it can be turned around, taken up, used, to confront and change unequal or oppressive relationships.

Valerie says… Isn't the very act of our speaking out about the relationship between supervisor and student—that relationship, which, by dint of its being kept discreetly invisible, and which by its very taken-for-grantedness, becomes a discursive strategy reproducing existing educational power structures, isn't that breaking of silence a beginning...

Tom says… I keep returning to the "responsible use of power" as an overriding principle in my relationships with others. But understanding what that means in each relationship can only be achieved by making explicit the issues Valerie is brave enough to raise with me and which I am willing to discuss. Doing both requires such commitment that I fear the time may come when neither of us is willing to do either.

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