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When I say... hegemony

How do *you* say 'hegemony'? With a hard British-inflected G, hegg-emony, or a soft North American one, hedge-emony? (Or do you subscribe to that subset who insist on emphasising the third syllable rather than the second, resulting in hege-*moan-ey*?) Once you have recovered from the squirm-inducing potential of picking the 'wrong' one, you might consider what a transformative social concept this awkward word represents. If you have the misfortune to share an office with a Marxist, you are probably already all too familiar with hegemonic domination of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat. For the rest of us, here it is in a nutshell.

Hegemony is power. That is, not power exercised by coercive means, but a particularly sinister form of power which is exercised through consent. Coming from Marxist theory and much associated with Antonio Gramsci, the idea is that dominant ideologies are maintained via creeping socialisation. Exposed to a constant stream of background assumptions through the media, religion, and education, we come to accept them as taken-for-granted truths. Gramsci called this 'manufactured consent'.¹ Hegemony exists at all sorts of levels. It is a form of power which is socially constructed amongst people, and socially maintained, rather than simply the result of top-down oppressive structures. Your pronunciation of the word itself may reflect whether North American or British English is hegemonic within your world. The prevalence of twirled moustaches and lumberjack beards could be said to be hegemonic amongst hipsters. The fact that the cowboys are the good guys and the Indians the bad guys in Westerns is a hegemonic concept, drawn from colonial culture.

Closer to home, and more seriously, a few hegemonic political concepts define the social work of education. Classrooms and lecture halls, with students arrayed in rows, are the result of defining education as industrialised process of production. In recent years, the commercial and individual concerns of neoliberalism have come to be the dominant ideology of our times, with the result that students are consumers, and research is the currency of tertiary education.² These assumptions, rarely considered because they are quietly ubiquitous, form the background to our work as educators and in healthcare.

More specific to medical education, consider the dominance of OSCEs within the world of assessment, or the importance attached to reliability, or competency-based education. If it is a taken-for-granted concept with the potential to suppress other ideas, then it is hegemonic. At the level of medical practice, the 'clinical gaze' has been hegemonic for the last century. Doctors are afforded power as a consequence of their scientific knowledge, while patient narratives and illness experience are suppressed. This cultural assumption arises from the technological advances of the last century, from our awe and faith in scientific discovery, and from the Enlightenment assumption that the mind and body are separate. This hegemony plays out in the social construction of every patient contact and symbolic action of the working day.

If this all sounds very depressing, it is rescued by one final important point. Hegemony exists in tension with counter-hegemony. Conflict is thus a defining feature. Revolution is possible – what Gramsci called a *war of position* built on imagining a new way forward.¹ All the necessities of resistance are already available to us within our everyday social and cultural resources. Thinking about hegemony in this vein, it becomes an affirmation of our own agency. Patient voices are increasingly raised in medical education. The clinical relationship is being constantly redefined.

Once we open our eyes to hidden structures and practices of power, they become hard to unsee. Modern critical theory would not exist without hegemony, making it a pivotal concept if you, like me, position yourself as a critical researcher. Every day we contribute to, or learn to resist, hegemonic practices. Explorations of power benefit our students, our patients, and our students' future patients. We *can* resist uncritical transfer of information and cultural practices. We *can* learn to recognise, and challenge, the unjust exercise of power. Moreover, we can teach our students these skills of critical enquiry.

So. When I say... hegemony, I use a soft G, just because I like the sound of it better. Let's finish with a contribution from the Oxford English Dictionary, which helpfully offers *anemone* and *lemony* as useful rhymes.³ Useful if, after resolving the pronunciation conundrum, you happen to get stuck describing hegemony in iambic pentameter. Social theory sonnets most welcome to the corresponding address.

¹ Gramsci A. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. (Eds) Hoare Q, Nowell Smith G. London: Lawrence and Wishart 1971

² Olssen M, Peters MA. Neoliberalism, higher education and the knowledge economy: from the free market to knowledge capitalism. *Journal Of Education Policy* 2005: 20(3)

³ Oxford Dictionaries. *Hegemony*. Oxford University Press 2016

<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/hegemony> [accessed 14/6/2016]