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Becoming a Social Worker: Chris' Account

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Chris Murray, a young African-American male, admitted on a scholarship to a social work masters program, reflexively explores his negotiation of difference in dialogue with an Australian female social work educator twice his age. Standpoint theory and the concept of intersectionality are used to frame Chris' experiences at a private northeast US university after achieving an undergraduate degree in his southern home state. His initial access to university came through military service. Chris was interviewed by the author as part of her international study project examining social work students' experience of diversity in the classroom. The open-ended interview was designed to allow self-identity of difference. Chris ethnographically recounts to a stranger a subjectivity statement of who he is in relation to studying social work. Chris' story works the hyphen between the binary of subjectivity and objectivity through the particulars of his personal history and world-view and his expectation that I as a social work educator share his seeking of social justice. His detailing of what moved him to become a social worker and contextual complexities negotiated along the way connect to wider discourses on how agency and structure play out in lived experience in seeking social justice.

Keywords: Reflexivity; Social Justice; Subjectivity Statement; Intersectionality; Gender; Race; Social Work

This paper centers on a young African-American male social work student's account of becoming a social worker.¹ In conversation with the author, a visiting Australian female social work educator, he details the negotiating of difference required in shifting from a public housing project in southern USA to an elite private university in New England. The experience of interviewing Chris has stayed with me across several years. In a climate where universities are increasingly corporatized and packaged as institutions of a one way transfer of knowledge, Chris' story draws attention to how accessing a university education can also be considered as adding to the public good and providing spaces where people can critically engage with issues of democracy and social justice.

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Chris' narrative on becoming a social worker details how identity in lived experience is not constructed around fixed universal categories of gender, race and class. Identity grounded in narrative is able to incorporate the multiple constructed and shifting qualities of modern subjectivity. It addresses the complexity of identity formation and its variability over time. Wilks (2005) has argued that such narratives show how:

In late modern society, without uniformly accepted traditions or values to shape our identity, the construction of the self has become a reflexive project in which people actively fashion their own identities in the face of new social practices and in turn, through this process, shape those practices. (2005, pp. 1252–1253)

Intersectionality, a concept developed by Patricia Hill Collins (1998) drawing on earlier standpoint theory work by Dorothy Smith (1990) is useful in interpreting Chris' reflexive account of becoming a social worker. Retaining Smith's focus on power plays in the complex intersection of gender, race and class and other constructs, Collins moves beyond a singular lens on disadvantage, be it race-, class- or gender-only. To Collins, intersectionality:

provides an interpretive framework for thinking through how intersections of race and class, or race and gender, or sexuality and class, for example, shape any group's experiences across specific social contexts. (1998, p. 208)

Collins is careful to state that the concept can best be seen through personal narratives of lived experience. These personal narratives however, are to be understood through a methodological framing of socially constructed selves rather than the taken for granted individualism of much current Anglo-American social discourse.

In McCall's (2005) reckoning, it is personal narratives that define the field of intersectionality. In the field of social work such narratives are often told by those with personal troubles that do not fit conveniently into the 'public-issue' categories such as housing, ethnic affairs, race relations and women's policy. It is part of the discipline of social work to work the hyphen between what are personal troubles and what are public issues.

This paper argues that working this hyphen applies to becoming a reflexive social worker as much as to helping others (Fine, 1994). The terms personal troubles and public issues made famous by C. Wright Mills (1959) are reflective of the broader categories of subjective and objective used to frame much current thinking about what counts as knowledge. Social work is increasingly articulating that the nature of doing social work involves mediating between the personal and the public, the subjective and the objective.

There can be difficulties in doing this in a culture dominated by dichotomous thinking and the formation of oppositional binaries such as theory and practice, men and women, and black and white. These either/or categories rarely reflect relationships of equality, and instead pattern what Patricia Hill Collins terms 'a matrix of domination' (1991). Dorothy Smith establishes how these matrixes occur globally and are connected, while being unique and specific in how they inscribe themselves on any particular individual (see Smith, 1990, 2005).

The standpoint theory of Dorothy Smith (2005) and Patricia Hill Collins' (1991) unpacking of the notion of the 'outsider within' is used here in presenting a personal

narrative of Chris, a 26-year-old African-American man, who was at the time of being interviewed, engaged in postgraduate social work studies. Liz Stanley (1993) has argued that autobiographical accounts are never about autonomous individuals but are a way of picturing social structures through single lives. As a foreigner/stranger/outsider listening to Chris' account of his journey in becoming a social worker, I felt a strong sense of his living in a very different but connected world to mine. Like all self stories, the story that Chris tells necessarily contains the potted biographies of significant others, even within the silences and selectivities of the narrator's voice. By being particular rather than general, such texts start from local and little narratives, but have the potential to enable connection to lived experience at other sites to build a general picture of how the relations of ruling operate and how to research them in order to change them (Smith, 1990). In respect to the topic of social work practice they have the potential to identify differential but communicating local paths to the global aim of social justice (Crawford and Leitmann, 2004).

In the mid-years of this decade, at the time of the interview, Chris was a scholarship student at a private university in a New England state. The university was previously women-only, having being founded at a time when women first won entry to the professions. It now enrolls both men and women at the postgraduate level, although the majority of students in the social work postgraduate courses remain women. The in-depth interview conducted with Chris was part of a wider consideration of how students experience and interpret their diversity as it is engaged with and enacted in the classroom. Effective cross-cultural skills are demanded of graduates of social work programs. Considerable attention is given in both Australian and American social work programs to developing such skills (Parekh, 2000). With the increasingly diverse identity of social work students an emerging research focus is how this pedagogy is enacted and experienced in the classroom (Tusmith and Reddy, 2002; Crawford and Leitmann, 2004; Irving and Young, 2004; Mildred and Zuniga, 2004).

In universities driven by market performance it can become easy to forget the potential of education to equip students to be active participants in democracy and the liberal values of human equality, freedom of conscience and self development entailed (Wright, 2006). Chris' university, like many globally, had made a public commitment to a mission of recognizing and valuing cultural diversity and social justice. Chris' participation in a social work program through winning a scholarship was one way this commitment was being enacted structurally. As will be clear from Chris' interview, his participation through his scholarship also added value to the university and specifically his class and teachers. The benefits of this interaction and interchange were clearly multidirectional and speak to the value of supporting diversity in the classroom.

Chris volunteered to be interviewed in response to an open invitation for students self-defining as 'different' from their educators or fellow students, to reflect on and report their experience of negotiating difference in the classroom in an hour's conversation with a visiting Australian academic. One of 12 students interviewed,

Chris openly embraced the chance to reflexively unpack some of the frames of meaning as to difference within which he was living out his life. As he said:

I am who I am and that's all I can be. And it is still a conscious struggle to figure out who I am and where I fit.

Documenting the complexity captured by Chris' transcribed words with minimum analysis is to purposefully focus on the individual's meaning making of lived experience. Cree and Davis (2007), in a conceptually related project, positioned their project as 'not a research study' (p. 9) because no claim was being made for representativeness and hence generalizability. At the same time they had the project reviewed by relevant ethics committees, tape-recorded and transcribed all interviews, provided written information to participants on the purpose and style of interview, and collected signed consent forms from participants. Setting aside engagement with the question of what constitutes research, this present project followed the same protocols.

The interview was structured using six open-ended questions:

- Tell me about your experiences in classrooms where there were cultural and/or racial differences between yourself and your teacher?
- How did these differences affect your learning?
- Tell me about your experiences in classrooms where there were cultural and/or racial differences between yourself and the majority of the other students?
- How did these differences affect your learning?
- Were there any particular things that the teacher did that helped to negotiate these differences, making learning easier?
- What advice would you give to teachers that might help them to negotiate racial and/or cultural differences between themselves and their students so as to improve opportunities for learning?

The purpose of these questions was to focus on experiences of how diversity was negotiated in the classroom, the effects on learning and preparation for social work practice (Kvale, 1996). Participants were additionally asked to suggest ways that educators might be more effective in the classroom in working with diversity issues with regard to social work aims and purposes.

The United States is a nation where more young black men are in prison than at university and some 10.4% of all black males between the ages of 25 and 29 years are in prison, with the numbers greater in the southern states (US Department of Justice, 2008). As Chris expressively describes, this could have been his path but that he discovered that by first serving in the military an accessible route to university studies became available. Chris' story is presented here faithfully, in the hopes that it conveys some of the ways in which reflexivity in education helps to preserve self-esteem and avoid dehumanizing by powerful others.² Patricia Hill Collins (1998, p. 518) in describing objectification of the dominated writes 'All forms of oppression imply the devaluation of the subjectivity of the oppressed'. Chris was engaged in a project of evading capture by this logic even as he lived its truth.

Family and Becoming the Stranger Within

I was the first, well the only one in the family, to graduate from college to go to grad school and basically intertwine myself amongst other races, other groups of people, other cultures. My family wanted me to get an education but they didn't expect some of the things that come along with an education like the way I speak. They don't recognize my voice, I don't recognize my voice.

I grew up in public housing projects. My dad he was a tradesman all his life so he worked hard with his hands. My mother worked until she got sick and now she doesn't work. But they worked hard their entire life to move out of the project, to move me out of the projects. And then when I moved out of the projects I was exposed to a whole other world and I just kept going but it is almost like my parents think I went too far.

Becoming Passionate About Social Work

I was 12 and we were living on welfare at a public housing project. And this lady invited young mothers to work for her. And she did something amazing that changed my life. She took the children of these women and provided them with a safe haven after school. Provided them somewhere to learn the skills to work with children that are in your similar situation. And I took advantage of that opportunity. I became very passionate about just helping people in general. I did a stint in the military as a non-commissioned officer. I was in charge of guys that were younger than me and I helped them when they had personal problems. It was just social work stuck in my blood.

She gave me a view of what "the others" were like. She was doing social work out there in the trenches. She helped people and she advocated for them, for families. And from then, I kind of had this vision of maybe every person of her color can be like this. And I have had this journey through life where every person of her color is not like this. But because I have had that one experience with her, I am able to feel it's possible.

The Importance of Dialogue in Education

Here I am learning to use my voice, I am learning to speak out against these injustices. Which is something that I was afraid to do.

In undergraduate I experienced a little more overt racism. I went to a southern Baptist college. I experienced a lot of racism from a professor who was an openly gay Republican middle-aged white male. And um being that the school was located in one of the most racist counties I felt like I had no say in it. I just had to keep all my feelings inside just to get the grade. Just move away and forget about it.

My intimidation stemmed from an incident (when the teacher singled me out for scapegoating by the rest of the class). I had to bite my tongue because he had my grades in the palm of his hand. I couldn't challenge a professor who had tenure. It was meant to put me in my place, saying OK you are in (Racist) County and this is your place. Accept it, remember it. Oh yea I remembered it. To this day I use it as an example to the kids in my neighborhood so they can understand that sometimes you have to bite your tongue.

Being Asked to Speak For All My Race

Coming here I felt as if I was in the classroom to teach. To be a token spokesperson for African Americans every time there was a question that came up around African Americans: to be that spokesperson and represent the whole.

Well it's something I've kind of come not to like. I was told that whenever you are a minority and especially in an educational setting, they are going to look toward you for all the answers. And I don't like it. I really don't like it because I am not an expert. I can only speak for myself. I had to step back and realize that by me taking this role on as leading authority on race relations between blacks and whites I was doing a grave injustice. I just feel that it is unfair that someone would ask me to generalize for an entire race of people.

Disappointment at Other Social Work Students' Positioning

I was in class and a student asked "I don't understand why these kids have to stand on the corners and sell drugs?". Once again having lived in that environment, I felt the need to speak up. I said, you're just thinking about one day someone wakes up and decides to go out and sell drugs. Imagine if you were 11 years old, you can't go work at MacDonaldis. You got three younger brothers and a mother who are living in the car with you. There's older guys in the neighborhood who look like they always have money and they can recruit you easily because you are at risk. You are gullible.

You see it as a way to free your mum because already a young male is put into the position of being the man of the house. Now that's kinda a lot of responsibility for a child to have. I had to remind these ladies in class that these are children out there on the corner. These are women who have had a life experience, they've watched the movies. If they were to read some articles!

For you to even apply to do social work you must be willing to be open, be willing to learn. Be willing to accept. But it's not asked like "Help me to understand what would cause a child to feel like he has to do that?". It's a big judgment already in how they ask the question.

Caught in the Binary between Good and Bad Black Man

When I was 17 I used to be one of the kids on the street corners looking at people in my professors' position, looking at people in my position now. Calling them sell-outs and that was probably one of the hardest mentalities that I had to break through my journey in education.

But those like I used to be see me as trying to be white. Acting white. Yea they take it as a rejection. Rejecting my culture, rejecting my family. None of my friends went to college. They can't understand that I wear two faces. I wear this face when I am in an educational setting. Then I have to wear a face when I'm with them. And they don't understand the pressure and the stress of being outnumbered all the time.

A lot of blacks start off in this what I term as a n-word phase where self hatred, hatred for your family, hatred for each other, where you are calling each other nigger and you are on drugs and you are doing all these bad things. I guess society and the environment plays a part but we do have to take responsibility for ourselves at some point. Once you are able to start moving out of that n-word phase into the black phase—I call that on the fence.

That is where I kind of am where I am not ready to say bye to that life that I knew and my friends and my family who still have that mentality. Us and them and they are out to get us. That we have to stick together and not venture out and try to change things. And that's where the black is. The black is like well I don't want to be African American, like the Colin Powells, Condaleeza Rices, like the Oprah Winfreys, the Denzil Washingtons. Because for fear of being called a sell-out by family members. Thinking you are white, thinking you are better than us because you have an education.

So now I am starting to move to that African American phase to where I know I'll have to deal with people other than just black, I have to. (With one friend who used the n-word) I asked, "Now why do you call yourself that? Why would you call your friend that when that is a derogatory word?". And its "Well um that's just how we do it". It seems like I am a sell-out because I am doing a lot of positive things whereas if I go back to being negative then I am not a sell-out but I am a menace to society. Someone goes off to college you don't throw him a party, someone graduates from college you don't throw him a party, someone goes to grad school you don't throw him a party. But you get out of jail there's a party. That may be a stereotype but it's true. It happened to my family, it happens in thousands of African American families.

Being a Black Man Among Women

I kind of feel that we are all in a similar plight. The social work field is predominately a women's field. I hear in class that all the men are in all the top positions. I feel like I am being categorized: me with those, with them. I am a male here but look there is slavery, there is civil rights, there's affirmative action. I fall in the midst of all of these. Society labels you. So sometimes I remain silent. Sometimes I agree to just agree because the majority of the conversations are about women's empowerment and when we are in class discussing how women should learn to be more powerful, "What do you think Chris?". Hey I agree. On the other hand maybe it is just to keep the peace. There are not too many things with the women's empowerment movement that I disagree with. But it makes me feel like the women want me to be again the male voice for the entire male population.

Sometimes I like playing the devil's advocate. Just to see the response I will get from the class. They kind of welcome that challenge. Because it gave them a chance to actually be heard and get their views out there and kind of gave them the feeling that "Yes, I told a male off". And I kind of understand that. When something is said I don't like and I do speak up about it, it gives me a chance to get it off my chest, to get it out there.

And now I kind of see that is the same thing for them. Just because we are social workers we don't have to have the same principles, values and ideals.

Negotiating Intra-racial Dynamics

There are a lot of black professors here, professors of color here but I feel that they really don't want to rock the boat. Because it seems to me that the professors are pretty much set in their jobs and in a comfortable position where they don't want to rock their boat.

In one class last year there was only two black people, myself and another woman. She says that African Americans in my opinion are lazy. We are the only black people in class so I am like OK what do I say to this. So I defended African Americans. Then she told me. She said "Well it might be because I was adopted by

a German family when I was six and I grew up with that attitude". And it just shocked me that she could even have that mentality. Being African American, sitting in a class well outnumbered by white women and for her to be able to say that really shocked me.

There are not too many students of color that hold the title African-American. I will be the only one volunteering for your research willing to call myself African-American.

And so it was with other 'of color' participants calling themselves biracial, tri-racial and Latina but not black nor African-American.

Negotiating Unexpected Differences

It wasn't until I came here that I really started realizing gay is a separate culture. I never looked at it that way before. Like my grandfather, he's gay but it wasn't until I came here that I was forced to have some opinions about what it is to be gay. And it was hard for me. And I think some of my professors thought maybe I had a problem with gay because I didn't have an opinion about it. I think it brought some tensions between myself and one professor.

I thought social work was non-religious and non-political. And I couldn't be more wrong. I mean it is entrenched in both of those. I am not a Democrat. I support whoever is in Office first of all and secondly I am independent and there have been a couple of incidents in class where politics have come up and I've been the outcast.

Religion does come up in conversation—a lot. And I had an experience in class this year to where I felt that a religious leader—Louis Farrakahn—was not anti-Semitic. I felt that he may have said some things that any human being may say in a fit of rage but it doesn't mean that he is generalizing the entire Jewish population and I defended him in class because again not only was I the only male but I was the only black person in class. They showed him on the video and everyone kind of attacked him without really knowing the fullness of his story, the fullness of his plight then I felt that I had to stand up for him. I felt it was a personal attack against me because I agree with a lot of his policies. I got the cold shoulder and no one would speak to me in class. Usually everyone is jumping to speak to Chris, the black token in class. No one.

Finding Commonalities Across Differences

Actually being here is not at all culturally different to me. Because the culture that I come from, they are very closed minded. They have their views of what the majority is from TV, from the media. I am only speaking for one community, not blacks as a whole. But from the community that I grew up in I know white people were kind of despised, hated. And they kind of ostracized me because I kept performing. Yes we all have that (insularity). Yes it is there. You couldn't say I was shocked and surprised (at the insular behavior of women in class).

Motivation in Negotiating Difference

(The insularity of some people on the course) actually has propelled (my learning). Anger has been a motivational factor for me for many, many years. I was asked in a

racism class, “What is it that blacks want from whites?” And it is a question that I get a lot. Because they think I am kind of militant. And I say, “Well I don’t know what blacks want from whites. I’ll tell you what I want from whites. I just want a white person who feels they didn’t need to ask me that question—to understand that the Africans that were brought from Africa were educators, lawyers, doctors, parents, teachers. Not just some ignorant race of people”.

I have been thinking about that for probably the entire week. Because I am going back down South after I graduate to try to do some work in minority communities. Now I feel that I am an advocate against injustices as such. I feel that people need to be made aware that things still go on like this in educational institutions. My father would say “You have to be three times better than a white man to get ahead in this world”. And I never really understood that until I came here. And he would also say “Smoke em”. And that meant go in and just create fires. Challenge, challenge, challenge.

Reflexivity and Classroom as Liminal Space

At this School I feel that my capacity to learn has just increased. There are just so many issues that come up and some of the personal feelings I have about being in this environment and having relationships with different professors, with different genders, different sexual orientations. It makes me want to just know more.

I’ve learned that African Americans can be just as racist. Specifically I’ve learned that I too am a racist. I didn’t understand that I was a racist because I always felt anger and hatred was coming from without, from them and it wasn’t—it was coming from both sides. I was angry that they were angry at me and in return I treated them the way they treated me. And I wasn’t helping the situation by making other people feel uncomfortable. So I’ve learned a lot about myself from just listening to fellow students. My experiences in the classroom have greatly affected my papers. I mean to the point that I always bring in classroom interaction into my papers and I actually give some long thought on it.

Probably the biggest thing that I will take away from here is the interaction with my classmates. At first I didn’t want to help. I really did not want to help my classmates understand. To me they represent the majority, they represent that power differential between the haves and the have-nots. And it was a process for me coming to understand there is this kind of mentality that I give because I’m the one feeling like society is against me so I must know everything there is to know about specific subjects like racism, segregation, discrimination. Well then I had a bit of a reality check. When you feel there is nothing that you can be taught then you become a part of the problem.

The Importance of Good Facilitation in Negotiating Difference

Specifically in the racism class the professor lets everyone know that your opinions are respected but we have to respect the opinions of other people. She has been great at facilitating classroom discussions, especially around politics and religion because that’s where the major cultural differences come in. In this racism class I felt safe.

The majority of my teachers have been minorities. Black and Latino professors and they really taught me that it is a game of survival. Some of them challenged me by starting heated debates with the majority students to get my opinion out there. While the white racism professor singularly comes to my rescue the black professor is more likely to “Throw him to the wolves and let him fight his way out” because he’s got to learn. And I see both of them. It’s all right to have that safety net. But now

I can also respect that one-day I am going to have to throw other minority students to the wolves and let them fight their way out.

Conclusion

In social work education what happens in the classroom between students and between students and educators is as much part of the learning experience as all that is documented in the formal curriculum. Much of Chris' narrative can be interpreted as relating to his lived experiences of 'the relations of ruling' (Smith, 1990). In teaching social work, how do we make a place for engaging with the ontological experience each participant has with the lived experience of intersectionality. Chris' narrative happened to be recorded and transcribed by a visiting stranger but connected dialogues happen all the time across the diversity of social work education. The question then becomes how are such dialogues on knowledge incorporated into the discipline of social work and how much do they become subjugated and marginalized knowledge because of the subjectivity involved.

Chris' comparison of his classroom experience at the undergraduate level compared with graduate studies captures how a classroom teacher can oppress and silence individual students. In the private university in contrast he recognizes his minority and male status provided a relatively privileged positioning where his views were actively sought. The extraordinariness of his presence in class there speaks to the absence of black males from this setting as students and resulted in him being expected to speak to the oppression of all blacks. His fluidity in unpacking and connecting the insularity of his home community with that of fellow social work students and his own racism with that of others speaks to a creative and committed meaning maker. How does the discipline of social work make space for such creative working of the subjective-objective hyphen within a culture of technocratic rationality? This is a global question addressed positively and productively by local narratives such as Chris'. Chris' story invites an honoring of a social worker imagination that echoes C. Wright Mills conclusion of 50 years ago:

You must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship is the center of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you work. (1959, p. 196)

Notes

- [1] A pseudonym has been used to preserve anonymity.
- [2] While keeping to Chris' words some details were omitted from quotes to protect his anonymity and keep to the word limit.

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