Good Intentions Are Not Enough.
Uncovering Hegemonic Practice While Trying to Create Change

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Abstract: This paper presents the findings of a participatory action research project that challenges the idea of what it means to be the difference. The purpose was to identify a shared problem relating to equity and social justice in the workplace and then act to address the problem.

Introduction

This paper shares the findings of a participatory action research (PAR) project initiated and completed as part of my doctoral thesis entitled, "Being the Difference: Change from Below." The co-researchers, including myself, were members of an equity and social justice committee located within a large county government. Tired of feeling tokenized for our efforts to raise awareness about social justice issues, our committee hungered to make a difference and to be a part of the larger equity and social justice initiative that was taking place in our organization. We met weekly to investigate, understand, and create strategies to address the inequities we experienced in the workplace.

Over the course of a year, we learned a lot together. We constructed a group narrative and framed our experiences of what it was like to work in our department. We questioned current and past practices and defined a problem with which we all could identify. We learned about what others were doing in similar organizations and, most importantly, we expanded our knowledge about internalized inferiority and superiority. We used this knowledge to build a plan that would guide our efforts to embed equity and social justice into daily practice.

What was missing from this experience, however, was a critical look at our own actions and decisions for how we were contributing to the status quo. While we became mindful of how race, gender, and class manifested in our group practices, we failed to notice the more subtle patterns of domination and subordination that emerged in the ways we communicated, created and exchanged information, and in the strategies we chose to follow throughout the project. Upon examination of the data, it became clear that, while we had the best intentions to create change, they were not enough to make a difference. Behind these good intentions were hegemonic assumptions that represented a "common sense wisdom that we accepted as being in our own best interest, without realizing that these same assumptions actually work against us in the long term by serving the interests of those opposed to us" (Brookfield, 2000, p. 40). They were explicative of both the hegemonic assumptions that were embedded in our choices and the roles we played in contesting hegemony. It demonstrates how practices designed to counteract inequities can still be connected to and serve dominant interests.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the project was to address the seeming lack of understanding and recognition of the causes and manifestation of oppression within my workplace. The desire was to create a project that would stand as a testament to the inequities that workers faced every day, that would mobilize people to question why things were the way they were, and to create a place where we could work together to overcome current conditions and create change. It asserted that because government programs are products of the workers who design and implement them, workers must be attuned to issues of internalized inferiority and superiority in their work if we are to truly achieve equity and social justice. By way of a democratic inquiry process, its intent was to give voice to those who felt isolated, marginalized and afraid to make mistakes -- so they could better understand their experiences and develop the skills and knowledge needed to change things in their lives (Heron & Reason, 2000, p. 179).

Theoretical Framework

The application and use of a critical theory lens was instrumental in all aspects of the project. Critical theory provides an explanatory framework for how organizations work to legitimatize their actions, why they fail to notice the contradictions in their practice and why so many people actively go along with organizational practice without stopping to think about the implications. There were three concepts that were central to my project and its analysis: ideology, hegemony and critical pedagogy. Ideology was important for its explanation of the way that values, beliefs, and actions are embedded in society and how they work to sustain unequal power relations, hegemony for its explanation of how actions that we consider neutral or beneficial act to support dominant interests and perpetuate the status quo, and critical pedagogy for its belief in the possibility for social change. Critical theory also provides a framework for the emancipatory PAR approach that was used where PAR was more than a research method, but also a learning process where the ability to create new ways of knowing had the potential to be as powerful as the change itself (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

Basics of Research Design

Rationale for Choice of Methodology

Participatory action research seemed the logical choice as a research method because of its commitment to justice, emancipation and collective action. PAR is research with people (not on people and not for people) for the sole purpose of resolving a problem and creating change (as stated by Greenwood, Heron, Kemmis, Levin, McTaggart, Reason, and others). I chose this method because I wanted to create change in my workplace. I also wanted to offer a counterstory that recognized that everything wasn't okay and we needed to change if we wanted to make a difference. Other qualitative research methods, while valuable in other contexts, lack this commitment to action for social change and, therefore, would not reduce the gap between what we say we do and what we actually do.

Research Question

Much care was taken to use a line of inquiry that would serve the interests of the co-researchers rather than those of the organization though not from the outset. At the beginning of the study, the research questions focused on how to engage and motivate employees and build organizational capacity. However, as the study progressed and more was learned about power and hegemony, it became clear that this line of inquiry would provide more benefit to the

organization than our group. In the end, the analysis changed its focus and, using a critical theory lens, examined the hegemonic group practices that emerged over the course of the project.

Data Generation and Collection
The data sources included personal interviews and data generated from planning retreats, inquiry meetings, co-researcher reflections, critical debriefing sessions, and concept memos. Each of the nineteen inquiry meetings included activities to develop shared meanings and decision making and resulted in five distinct action and reflection cycles: 1) developing a shared history and vision for the future; 2) deciding on what we wanted to learn and do; 3) expanding knowledge about organizational change; 4) expanding knowledge of racism and our own internalization of racism and 5) building a plan for the future. Often attributed to PAR and other forms of action research, what was learned in each cycle served as the foundation for each subsequent cycle as if in a spiral (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). As the culmination of our work, we created a plan that recommended strategies to explicitly address racism at the individual, departmental and systemic levels.

Means of Analysis
A critical analysis of this project began by selecting and coding passages and direct quotes from all primary data sources. The second round of coding examined both primary and secondary sources for the attitudes, beliefs and assumptions contained in the data. Using Brookfield's (1995) three types of assumptions (i.e., paradigmatic, prescriptive, causal) and his framework for assumption hunting, I first searched the data for words that depicted a personal value or a value that is often thought to be universal such as peace, humanity, equality, freedom, respect, trust, and love. Next, I searched for affirmative statements that assumed universal agreement like "all people want to be loved" or contained phrases that indicated a prescribed way of behaving such as "people should be treated equally." Finally, I hunted for the explanations and justifications that we made for our own behavior as well as the behavior of others. This round was followed by a structural coding method where the data was examined for hegemonic assumptions and patterns of domination and subordination and for ways in which it either supported or challenged the status quo. Finally, after this round of coding, several analytic concept memos and concept maps were created to identify and generate patterns, which were then used to further condense the data into the final major themes.

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Findings

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The findings suggest that our department must do things differently to truly promote equity and social justice, and the values and norms associated with equity and social justice must become embedded into a worker's day-to-day practice. However, the findings also suggest that even individuals who acknowledge and work to counteract their unearned privilege and strive to embed equity and social justice into their daily practice often act to support the status quo as much as they act to challenge or change it. Our activities served to support the status quo in three primary ways: 1) by confusing the repressive tolerance shown by management for actual management support; 2) by allowing expert knowledge to dominate our conversations and silence other ways of knowing; and 3) by externalizing the problem and thereby minimizing our own complicity in it.

First, it became apparent early on in our inquiry that equity and social justice lacked legitimacy in our department. As a result, we wanted to become the next biggest thing. We wanted our coworkers to be singing "equity and social justice" from the rafters. However, based on our experiences in the department, we were also concerned about the lack of upper management support. Because we did not want our efforts to be dismissed, ignored or otherwise rendered meaningless, we spent countless hours strategizing on how to get management's approval for our project and any subsequent recommendations we would make. Knowing the types of resistance we faced, some members believed that we had to avoid conflict and be strategic if we wanted management to approve our ideas. In hindsight, our effort to seek legitimacy from a system that we had collectively identified as being unfair and from people who could at anytime put an end to our work was counterproductive to our goals. We started the project with the desire to challenge status quo and contest hegemony; however, by centering our activities on what management would approve, we extinguished any hope for this change. What we took as support and commitment was actually a form of repressive tolerance.

Second, our preference for expert knowledge dominated conversations and subjugated the "non-expert" knowledge of individual group members. Over the course of the project, we met with established experts in the field, collected and viewed materials that were created by experts or authorities in the field, and it was a hope of the group to become in-house experts ourselves. More often than not, when choosing a strategy or course of action, the group would attribute greater weight to expert opinions than the opinions of individual group members (even though our group contained decades of experience and skill). When we used alternative forms of data generation, such as writing a poem, making a collage, or drawing a picture, members reacted positively but they also made comments that subordinated the practice – such as saying it was "nice", "fun", or a "good icebreaker," suggesting that it was simply a primer and not real work. These examples show that we clearly did not embody the belief that all knowledge is valuable or that everyone is capable of producing knowledge, as articulated in the principles of PAR. We failed to notice how this preference for expert knowledge acts to marginalize those who typically do not have access to this type of knowledge. The practice of subjugating non-expert knowledge to expert knowledge is one of the greatest forms of oppression as the people who produce, transmit and keep knowledge are the ones who control the power because they get to define what and who is important.

Finally, our externalization of the problem (i.e., the belief that it was others who lacked awareness, that management was not supportive, and that the structures in which we work, live and breathe were inherently racist) let the members point blame at everyone and everything but ourselves Our solutions failed to acknowledge our own complicity in the situation despite spending a year creating a deep understanding of the ways that internalized superiority and inferiority works and a deep commitment to equity and social justice. In part, this is because we did not examine how our practices served to minimize or justify our benefits or access to privilege (Wellman, 1993).

Conclusion

Working for change requires more than high ideals and good intentions. Only after critical examination of the data did it become clear that good intentions mean nothing if we fail to see that they lead to the same unequal power relations that we set out to eliminate Brookfield

reminds educators of the dark irony of hegemony where educators fail to notice how the same beloved and laudable goals that are intended to empower and liberate can actually serve to perpetuate social inequities and systems of oppression (2000, p.41). The findings from our project are further support of this claim.

The findings exemplify how practices designed to counteract inequities can still be connected to and serve dominant interests. This connection becomes more obvious when these actions are carried out in the name of the organization. Heaney states that "the allegiance of educators and the purposes that they serve is largely defined with the context of the organizations that employ them" (Heaney, 2000, p. 563). Despite their individual interests, educators become an extension of their organization by the nature of their employment. Clearly then, if adult education is not carried out for the purpose of transforming social and cultural traditions, it ultimately serves the hegemonic interests within a given society (Mayo, 1999) where the outcome of adult education practice is the social order itself (Heaney, 2000, p 568).

Educators must be as willing to change themselves as they are willing to change the world. The ability to ignore this responsibility is the greatest form of privilege.

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