Diversity training and social work
An insight into theory, methodology and practice

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to highlight the fundamental importance of diversity training to the education of social workers whilst introducing an example of an effective didactic method drawn from the authors' own diversity training. An initial overview of similarities existing between the underlying values and professional realities of social work and the concepts of difference, power and rights that inform diversity trainings serves as an introduction to the topic in hand. This is expanded through a brief analysis of the differing theoretical and methodological bases that underpin the concept and pedagogy of diversity training. Through the presentation of a core training exercisefor students of social work it will be demonstrated how the central pedagogic goals of diversity training are met through a combination of guided experience and reflection.

Why is Diversity Training important for Social Work?

Social Work as a profession "addresses the multiple, complex transactions between people and their environments" and is "focused on problem solving and change". These descriptions from the global definition of social work (IFSW/IASSW, 2000) illustrate the huge variety and diversity of areas of practice for social workers due, in part, to the extreme complexity of social exchange, relationship and the concept of well-being. The everyday reality of our interactions with each other exists within a globalised world with a pluralistic and, in particular, ethnically diverse society. This diversity is often mirrored in the personal biographies of social work students as well as in their later experiences of personal and client discrimination during professional practice. The trend of local practice evolving into international practice has been analysed by Healy who defines international social work as involving at least one of these four dimensions:

"internationally related domestic practice and advocacy, professional exchange, international practice, and international policy development and advocacy." (Healy,2008, p. 10).

With particular reference to the first of these dimensions it can beclearly appreciated that local practice – even in our own region of Vorarlberg, a very rural area of western Austria – has long since become internationally connected either through the globalised background of social problems or through the consequences of a considerable proportion of the community holding a migration background in their personal history. In Vorarlberg about one in five persons is considered to be a migrant(Statistik Austria, 2011).Fluctuations in the levels and security of employment throughout Europe, which have a huge influence on the daily interventions of the social work profession,have been shown in recent years to be as much linked to the global financial sector as to local economic and social factors.

Working constructively within social work with the aim "to enable all people to develop their full potential, enrich their lives, and prevent dysfunction" (IFSW/IASSW, 2000)is not an activity involving aspecialised work area with inflexible limitations on intervention. Viewing a social problem merely through an individualistic perspective would not be seen as an adequate response in order to achieve the above goal. Instead, the reality of a generalist practice, combined with the inherent complexity of human interaction, is reflected in the intervention of social workers at all levels of society. Poverty,for example, has been seen as one of thedefining social problems since social work began its process of professionalization (Richmond, 1917; Salomon, 1926; for an overview of the historical development see Mueller, 2009)and remains today a vivid illustration of the differing societal levels of diagnosis and intervention required. The IFSW/IASSW definition of social work (2000) provides an explicit foundation for this type of practice:

> "In solidarity with those who are disadvantaged, the profession strives to alleviate poverty and to liberate vulnerable and oppressed people in order to promote social inclusion. … Social work interventions range from primarily person-focused psychosocial processes to involvement in social policy, planning and development."

The differing levels of social work intervention and the above client definition remindsus that differences in the exercise of, and the access to, power within society hold people either in privileged or oppressed positions. Dealing with this uneven positioning within society is a key issue that social workers have to confront in their everyday practice in all working areas and, as a consequence, the need for the appropriate training and skills is clearly apparent.

A solid ethical base also holds a central role in performing professional action, maintaining values such as respect for the equality, worth and dignity of all people at its core. Within the code of ethics for social workers (IFSW/IASSW, 2004) special value is given to human rights and human dignity as well as social justice:

> "Social workers have a responsibility to challenge negative discrimination on the basis of characteristics such as ability, age, culture, gender or sex, marital status, socio-economic status, political opinions, skin colour, racial or other physical characteristics, sexual orientation, or spiritual beliefs." (IFSW/IASSW,2004, 4.2)

> "Social workers should recognise and respect the ethnic and cultural diversity of the societies in which they practise, taking account of individual, family, group and community differences." (IFSW/IASSW, 2004, 4.3)

In summary social work can be seen to be operating within an international, global context that demandsa certain degree of intercultural competence while its ethical commitment to equality and inherent solidarity with the socially excluded requires its practitioners to be well versed in the issues of power, privilege, oppression and discrimination even when their practice remains at the local level. The gaining of such skills and the serious examination of these issues form the core learning goals of diversity training.

What is Diversity Training?

One major difficulty within the field of diversity training approaches lies within its huge scope of issues, variety of approaches and their major areas of overlapping and occasionally contradictory theoretical bases. This complexity can be more easily managed by separating out the theoretical and didactic foundations of the trainings into an intercultural and an anti-racist approach and then viewing the whole diversity pedagogy as having a unifying role; representing a theoretical umbrella informing diversity training within the field of social work and aiming at realising a wide range of learning goals from intercultural competence building to anti-discriminatory practice. Nazarkiewicz (2010) provides such a structure, which we will briefly summarize.

Different approaches informing Diversity Training: Intercultural Training/Anti-racist Education

As previously stated, a clear conceptual division can be made between first, intercultural training and second, anti-racist education. Nazarkiewicz (2010) argues that the major difference lies within whether the definition of culture is seen as static and inflexible or, conversely, as dynamic and able to change. Theories underlying all trainings are mostly interdisciplinary and according to Nazarkiewicz(2010, p.16) often lack a sound knowledge base according to specific sciences i.e. psychology or anthropology which would normally fulfil the need for clear definitions of terminology. Therefore Nazarkiewicz (2010) analyses the different approaches by returning to their disciplinary context, focussing on how they define culture and intercultural competence and how that subsequentlyinforms the didactic stance of the specific trainings.

Apart from the definition of culture, the other strong differential between the intercultural training and anti-racist education concerns how intercultural competence is defined and the effect this has on the learning goals of the trainings. Here, however,a certain over-arching communality exists through the application of components, inputs and exercises that address the four traditional aspects of intercultural competence – awareness, knowledge, attitudes/emotional challenges and skills/behaviour (see Brislin et. al. 1983).

Linking them to their original scientific disciplines Nazarkiewicz (2010) specifies the following three perspectives as the foundation of intercultural training:

1. Differences from a cultural-anthropological perspective focussing on studies of Hall, Hofstede and Trompenaars and their development of cultural dimensions; (see Hall, 1981; Hofstede, 1997; Trompenaars/Hampden-Turner, 1997)
2. Differences from intercultural psychology focussing on training throughmethods such as cultural assimilators; (see Thomas,1996)

3. Language and discourse differences from a linguistic awareness of cultures perspective focussing on analysing real life intercourses. (see Knapp-Potthoff, 1997; Thije, 1997; Bolton, 1999)

Under the second category, anti-racist education, Nazarkiewicz (2010) outlines three major areas of focus:

1. Discourse interventions such as argumentation training or the well-known but critically viewed Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes trainings developed by Janet Elliott. (see Elliot, 2003-6)
2. Theatrical pedagogic approaches often derived from the ideas of Augosto Boal; (see Boal, 1979)
3. Consciousness trainings such as Van den Broek's critical whiteness approaches. (see Van den Broek, 1993)

On the didactic level all three areas again use a variety of exercises and inputs informed from the four aspects of intercultural competence previously mentioned. However an essential departing point from the intercultural training models involves an emphasis on value bases in connection to historical development and a clear focus on issues of power and privilege such as colonialism or apartheid. As previously stated, a further area of divergence lies within the dynamic definition of culture, looking at processes of constructing and reflecting on differences.

The anti-racist approach has strong similarities with the social justice trainings advocated by Adams, Bell and Griffin (2007). The concept of social justice in the title of the trainings is defined as both a goal towards which society should be aiming and at the same time a process involving a continual collaboration in order to effect change. Educational and training processes form a key part of this collaboration and these are underpinned by a framing theory of oppression viewed through its universal features and the relevant historical contexts. Oppressive practices such as racism and sexism are viewed as mutually reinforcing elements in an "overarching system of domination" (Adams, Bell and Griffin, 2007, p. 4), a system that, amongst other defining features, displays the core concept of internalisation, whereby beliefs, stereotypes and prejudices are mentally captured both by the oppressors and the oppressed to be perpetually reinforced within the wider society, a process known as hegemony.

Adams, Bell and Griffin (2007, p.1) define the goal of social justice as the "full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs", mirroring the commitment to the values of social justice outlined in the international definition of social work (IFSW/IASSW, 2000). The conversion of these principles into tangible agency through the process of education and training emphasises

> "interactive, experiential pedagogical principles to help learners understand the meaning of social difference and oppression both in the social system and in their personal lives." (Adams, Bell and Griffin, 2007, p. 2)

Diversity Training as a unifying concept
Nazarkiewicz (2010) completes her analysis indicating that the diversity training approach, which developed as a synthesis of the organisation-orientated diversity management and the diversity training methods within political education, both of which had their origin in the USA, can be seen as a combining methodology unifying the split between intercultural

training and anti-racist education. The focus of the diversity training is more widespread, encompassing on the one hand questions of personal identity, culture and biography and, on the other, the reflective work on the self and the structures within society that is necessary to minimise the effect of discriminating stereotypes and behaviour patterns. Furthermore this focus has the additional element of resource recognition i.e. learning to locate advantage and value in difference. Neither the cultural misunderstandings of the intercultural trainings nor the critical appraisal of privilege and power represented by the anti-racist education dominate the learning process; both have a relevant pedagogic role to play in the unfolding of the training.

Learning goals of Diversity Training
Nazarkiewicz(2010, p. 71) summarises the learning goals of the diversity approach as follows:

> "1. Awareness of, sensitisation towards, and reflection on, the process of socialisation and accumulation of values; understanding the results of discrimination; awareness of personal values and stereotypes and a willingness to critically reflect on them,
> 2. recognition of institutional discrimination and its effects,
> 3. perceptionof differences as a resource; increasing empathy; taking responsibility,
> 4. alteration of personal behaviour; support against discrimination on a personal and an institutional level." (Translated by the authors)

Whilst expanding upon the abovegoals it is instructive to reflect back on the educational needs of a social work student who is preparing for future professional practice in a globalised, intercultural context, promoting inclusive intervention strategies that tackle discriminatory processes that can be both explicit and implicit. In terms of an initial entry point into a diversity training it is expected that the participants are able to look at their own biographical history and its concurrent systems of values and moral thought and understand the social processes that have fashioned their own identities. As they progress through the training they become able to understand the essential fluidity and dynamic nature of these processes and are able to appreciate the reality of differing and shifting perspectives, views and concepts. Furthermore they should begin to be able to recognise that this same biographical history informs a series of ever-reinforcing stereotypes that hold a very real power dynamic impacting directly on the lives of those about them, not merely at the level of face-value content but on a more subtle plane where well-meaning communications and interactions can perpetuate on-going discrimination. This first learning goal of increased awareness should necessarily expand into the wider perception of the second; the understanding of disadvantage and discrimination on a structural level, the so-called 'institutional discrimination' that is often maintained and reinforced through the non-interventional strategies of those on both sides of the power dynamic. The last two learning goals map the psychological jump within the participant as the often newly perceived differences are not just mentally accepted but emotionally embraced as a resource for all individuals and groups in society, leading ultimately towards the final resolve to alter behaviour patterns that reinforce discrimination through a continual learning process that necessarily reflects on all four of these aspects: Awareness, recognition, perception and the ability and motivation to remain open to change.

Putting the theory into practice: 'Observational Study'

A wide varietyof exercises exist within the tradition of diversitytrainings, each employing differing methodologies in order to achieve these learning goals. One such exercise that we have developed, 'Observational Study',has been particularly effective within our own trainings and has become a core experiential component of our entire concept. Like several other exercises in the training its goal involves an improvement in the participant's ability to reflect on aspects of their own interaction with the wider society about them whilst at the same time increasing their awareness of difference and the role this difference plays in the implicit and explicit exercise of power. The nature, however, of this particular exercise can, given the right conditions, present an especially exacting and, as a consequence, extremely effective challenge to the participant. This challenge concerns itself primarily with the self-participation in the raising of one's own insecurity to the extent of being able to define and plan all aspects of that insecurity oneself.

So why is it important to experience insecurity within the context of a diversity training?The critical comments of Von Spiegel (2008) in which she summarises studies on the connections between the differing elements of social work curricula and their later effectiveness in professional practice (see also the discourse on social work and innate creativity e.g. Schütze, 1992;Dewe, 1996) provides a response to this question:

> "From which it can be deduced that a systematic insecurity with regard to the biographically created consciousness must be successfully produced together with an awareness of the diverse issues regarding what to learn and with what goals." (Von Spiegel, 2008, p. 112, translated by the authors)

It is precisely this constant state of guided insecurity that the 'Observation Study'exercise seeks to create. Aschenbrenner-Wellmann (2010, p. 62) goes so far as to suggest that the ability to endure insecurity is directly linked to the ability to enhance competence in the field of diversity.

> "The readiness however, to change or expand on what we have previously learned is an ability that each of us owns in different quantities and qualities. The perseverance to continue doing this despite the required level of insecurity and tentativeness is, on one hand, a basic competence, and on the other, a condition for a successful diversity training." (Translated by the authors)

The key, as Von Spiegel (2008) indicates in the above quote, is at the same time not to lose sight of the diverse nature of the pedagogic goals whilst remaining in a state of reflection and openness, both as a trainer and as a participant.

The 'Observational Study' has four essential elements: Guidance through the exercise by the trainers, the implementation of the exercise by the participant, the completion of a written reflection and finally a reflective discussion in the larger group.

The exercise gives the following task to the participants:

1. Think of a place where you imagine you would feel unusual, strange, foreign, or just different. Reflect on why you have chosen this place.
2. Go to this place on your own and spend some time.
   a. Observe your environment (people, objects).
   b. Observe yourself (non-verbal behaviour, how you move, etc.).

      c. Attempt to integrate with your environment, make contact with the other people there.

3. Think of a place where you imagine you would feel at home, you belong, comfortable or just normal. Reflect on why you have chosen this place.
4. Go to this place on your own and spend some time.
      a. Observe your environment (people, objects).
      b. Observe yourself (non-verbal behaviour, how you move, etc.).
      c. Attempt to integrate with your environment, make contact with the other people there.
5. Write down your experiences, send them to your trainer and bring a copy with you to the next training day when you will by given time to
      a. describe both experiences,
      b. reflect on your observations.

Reflections and feedback from the participants

The following analysis provides a short introduction into how various participants in our diversity trainings have reflected upon their experiences during the exercise, 'Observational Study'. The intention is to illustrate some of the learning possibilities for those involved and to demonstrate how the particular nature of this exercise can underline many of the core learning goals relevant for both diversity training and social work education. (For a scientific study of the effectiveness of pedagogic methods in intercultural learning see Nazarkiewicz, 2010, Ch. 3/4).

When the participants are presented with the tasks outlined above, they are immediately confronted with an interesting challenge. As has been maintained the first part of the exercise has been developed precisely to artificially induce the participant to move outside his or her normal parameters, a deliberate step away from the comfort of inclusion. However the place to go has not been set by the trainers, the participant is 'free' to choose. The extent to which this freedom is applied and the risks that are then either taken or rejected become themselves a part of the learning process for the participant, either at the moment when the decision is made or perhaps later on during a reflective discourse in the group. This exchange that takes place at the end of the exercise can also serve to initiate questions in the individual such as: "Why were they able to go there?" or "Would I have been able to have that experience too?" The answers and the subsequent discussions can lead to a deeper understanding of how powerful difference can be in addition to further reflection on how 'free' we all are in choosing a place of belonging/not belonging. For some participants simply the process of choosing a place where they do not feel they belong is enough to produce extremely strong emotions:

> "The greatest challenge of the exercise was to find a place for the uncomfortable part, for the very reason that I do not want to go to anywhere where I feel bad. I thought over it a great deal until I found a compromise that would be fitting for the exercise and possible for me to undertake." (Participant, translated by the authors)

Our experience of using this exercise in diversity trainings has produced a rich variety of 'places where I do not belong'. Some participants choose places where they will come into contact with another ethnic or national groups such as a Turkish supermarket, others choose places where the lines of demarcation cross boundaries of religion, class, interest, or gender such as a church, a betting shop, a sports field or a sex shop. The act of choosing can itself awake the initial reflective process in the participant with questions as to why certain places

and people feel so 'foreign' and evoke certain reactions within us, both in our behaviour and in our thought processes. In contrast the place of belonging is often less diverse as many participants choose their homes or their rooms. However the comparative power of this second excursion when set against the (almost always) more extreme emotions of the first provides an integral role in ensuring the exercise has maximum effect. Certain observations drawn from setting the two places side by side can provide insights into how particular discrimination processes operate. One participant noticed during a discussion with the group that the places of belonging tended to be in areas that were private and not open for everyone whereas the places of non-belonging were often in public places leading to an insightful debate on institutional inclusion/exclusion and the role of privilege in deciding who is considered to be an insider and who is not.

When the moment arrives for participants to actually physically go to their place of non-belonging, the biographical influence on their reactions and behaviour that have been previously theorised in discussions in the group becomes explicitly apparent, its intensity often surprising the individuals involved.

> "It was unbelievable for me that I could feel so foreign just a few hundred metres over the border although I grew up on this same border!" (German participant writing about a visit to a Swiss restaurant, translated by the authors)

Once the initial orientation has begun the observations of the participants demonstrate a gradual widening of their perceptions with regard to difference. Essential points of departure on both an implicit and explicit level between themselves and the people they are surrounded by are often described with a sense of surprise and realisation.

> "I noticed that there was not a single woman to be seen, neither in the restaurant nor the garden, apart from the waitress and furthermore I noticed nobody whom I could have said was a foreigner. It was lucky that no women were there as I can hardly imagine that it would have been fun for a woman." (Participant writing about a visit to a fast-food restaurant, translated by the authors)

It is the sense of emersion in the surroundings heightened by the lack of companions (who, if present, could serve to dilute the psychological effects of the exercise) that can dissolve some of the barriers to perceiving discrimination and thereby enhancing empathetic responses. In this way a strong initial reaction ("the whole situation alone and as a foreigner, overfull with Swiss people, impersonal and superficial … gave the place and the food such a feeling of negativity", German participant writing about a visit to a Swiss restaurant, translated by the authors) is refined as it passes through the phases of direct experience, written reflection and finally group discussion and exchange. As the focus moves from the self ("I need more time to orientate myself, look what the others are doing, I don't want to stand out", participant, translated by the authors) to a more measured analysis of how one reacted, the final point is reached where a personal understanding of some of the processes of discrimination, including those on the institutional level has been given a greater depth.

> "When I think back on this hall it is filled with shame and sadness… the shame that I can "easily" leave this place. I can understand the people who do not like to go to this place." (Participant after visiting a social security office, translated by the authors)

> "I am somehow happy when the observation is over, but at the same time I feel somehow wiser, knowing now at least a little more about how life is for those people,

and having made a step into a world where perhaps not all of us have tried to enter." (Participant after visiting an old people's home)

"If you don't belong to a group you start even more to go in your shell and that is what makes you an outsider." (Participant after visiting a youth club)

This increase in understanding and perception of difference can be reached in a variety of ways, depending on how the exercise unfolds. One participant experienced a highly positive moment during a visit to a restaurant he would not normally have frequented:

"Not for one second during my visit did I have the feeling that any one of the people present was being disingenuous, something I experience a lot in my personal and professional life. Everyone appeared to be continually fully authentic." (Translated by the authors)

Mirroring the comments of Aschenbrenner-Wellmann(2010) concerning insecurity, in some cases the participants expand out beyond the more immediate analysis of place and reaction to reflect on the process itself. The place of belonging is seen as somewhere that provides "security and stability" (Participant, translated by the authors), whereas "the confrontation with foreignness and the others leads to a personal development" (ibid., translated by the authors).

Finally the participants often close their commentaries and reflections with the expression of psychological gains for their professional and private lives and, in some cases, the forming of resolutions for behavioural change and continued reflection on the issues that have been raised by their excursion in the 'unknown'.

"Looking back I found both experiences very interesting and they have given me strength in my work in which I want to make places where long-term unemployed people and young people can feel comfortable." (Participant, translated by the authors)

"If a place has negative feelings for me I retreat into my shell, my potential remains unused and is hidden. This is an important message to any host country with relation to immigrants." (Participant, translated by the authors)

If the entire diversity training is to attain its intended learning goals such sentiments and observations should form part of a continuing reflective process that has a tangible impact on the lives of the participants and the people they come in contact with.

Conclusion
This short insight into the reflections of participants of the exercise 'Observational Study' is intended to illustrate the potential for deconstructing socially learned behaviour when combining an highly experiential learning instrument with the opportunity for both written and verbal reflection. As this paper has maintained the participation in such exercises within the context of a diversity training should enhance the awareness of identity processes including a critical reflection on personal stereotypes and values, increase the recognition of discrimination, both on a personal and institutional level, and provide a motivation for committing to continual social advocacy against such discrimination. As we have seen the educational goals of diversity training are of clear relevance to a social worker working in a globalised and progressively intercultural world and, furthermore, they reflectboth the core

value base and the essential ethical considerations that underpin how the IFSW and IASSWdefine social work today.

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