**Feminist Approaches to Teaching about VAW:**

**Facilitating Empowerment Through a Critique of Dominant Knowledges.**

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**Abstract:**

Feminism has provided a sustained challenge to the widespread occurrence of violence against women (VAW). Yet despite the tremendous efforts of feminist activists and academics, it continues to be one of the most tolerated crimes in the world. This paper offers an account of my own experiences teaching about VAW in higher education (HE). Whilst there is currently a growing interest in the barriers to HE participation, I am seeking to explore the ways in which we can address some of the barriers that students may face whilst on HE courses, particularly in relation to self-awareness, empowerment and healing.

Drawing upon the works of feminists committed to ending VAW, transformative education as envisioned by Paulo Freire and Foucault’s work on knowledge and power, I propose a feminist informed teaching practice that facilitates empowerment through: giving voice to women who have experienced violence; exploring and promoting the transformative potential of education and; challenging traditional and dominant forms of knowing. A recognition of the social, historical and political context in which violence occurs, and knowledge about it is accepted, is vital in empowering women who have experienced violence to challenge dominant discourses that do not fit with their own perceived reality.

KEY WORDS: Violence against women, feminism, empowerment transformative education, Freire, Foucault.

**Introduction:**

The article sets out the rationale behind my decision to do an Ed.doc, focusing on the way in which VAW is taught in HE settings. I offer an explanation of my own experience of teaching about VAW and an overview of how specific approaches to teaching this subject can provide an empowering space for students who have experienced such violence. Carly Guest explains how educational spaces have long provided opportunities for politicisation, activism and the development of counter-cultural identities (Guest, 2016: 471). In a study that involved narrative interviews with self-identified feminist women she found that for many of the women she interviewed “educational spaces offer fertile ground for engagement with feminist ideas, entry into activism and exposure to language which enables articulation of what were described by some interviewees as ‘feminist instincts’” (Guest, 2016: 472). The narratives in her study illustrate how shifts in political identity can occur through entry into an academic community that validates feminist ideas (Guest, 2016: 474). It is this potential of the HE setting as a place for women to articulate and understand what they already ‘know’, specifically in relation to VAW, that I want to explore in this paper.

I have found that whilst teaching on modules that address the very emotionally and politically loaded topic of VAW, women students often disclose their own experiences of such violence. My concern is that traditional approaches to the study of violence often teach the subject material in a detached and apparently ‘impartial’ way and fail to recognise the wealth of knowledge and understanding that students may bring to the classroom. ‘Expert’ truths that excuse such violence, blame victims, and seek explanations in the individual are very often at odds with the real lived experiences of students and form a significant barrier to understanding and articulation at both an individual and collective level.

**Starting Points: Utilising Freire’s Vision of a Transformative Education:**

My decision to do the Ed.doc was based on observations that I have made whilst teaching over the past eleven years. In the criminology modules that I teach, issues surrounding gender inequality and violence against women repeatedly arise. Within most, if not all, social sciences, the topics explored are not abstract and distant to the real lives of students (in the same way that may be the case for disciplines such as maths or engineering) and students often start degrees such as criminology with direct lived experiences of the various phenomena we explore: racism; sexism; class oppression; victimisation; criminalisation. Many have had some interaction with various criminal justice agencies whether that be as a witness, victim or suspect/offender. They do not come to the degree with no prior knowledge. What is very interesting is that they do not often begin with a recognition of the importance of this experiential knowledge and instead focus on what they have learned via the media about crime. When prompted to consider their own lived experiences the inconsistencies between these experiences and the media constructed ‘truths’ about crime become apparent. In quite a few cases, the application of theory to personal experiences is key in students developing their understanding. This is not to say that personal experience is a pre-requisite for understanding, or that it should be hailed as the most important source of knowledge. Indeed, theories that focus solely on personal experience do run the risk of becoming purely individualistic, de-politicised and of very little use in collective struggles against oppression. But still, personal experience does have a crucial role to play and for feminists this has been key in challenging dominant forms of ‘knowing’ that have retained power and prominence because of false claims of objectivity and impartiality. The alternative ‘knowledge’ offered by feminists within criminology and a whole range of other disciplines exposed the subject position of male experts in a world that was seen through a patriarchal lens.

Throughout my teaching career, I have found that each year no fewer than 5 or 6 women have approached me after lectures or seminars and disclosed their own experiences of violence. This year I have started to deliver a module devoted entirely to violence against women and that number has more than trebled. On the one hand, I am continually horrified (though not surprised) by the stories these women tell and on the other I am optimistic by their willingness and ability to speak out about something that is frequently trivialised, justified, silenced and ignored. In many cases the women that approach me inform me that the teaching sessions have been an eye opener, sometimes providing them with the tools to articulate and understand what had happened to them. Perhaps, most importantly, they say that what they have learned offers something other than other responses that have left them feeling alone, ashamed and unimportant. This prompted me to think of the ways in which I, as a feminist committed to the fight to end violence against women, could explore this further. So whilst these students would approach me after a lecture seeming quite optimistic, I want to find out what happens later on: do they take that learning experience forward? Does it get lost as they progress within their degree and focus on other areas of criminology? Does it prompt them to seek support if needed? Does it influence the specific routes they take within their degree and later career choices? Does it increase confidence? Does it offer a path into feminism and other political activities? I want to consider these questions as well as exploring how I can build upon these tiny snippets of information from women students to deliver teaching sessions that can do more to facilitate empowerment and healing for students who have experienced VAW and engage those who have not experienced such violence in discussions relating to ending it.

This is where Freire’s vision of a pedagogy of the oppressed is useful. His ideas originated in his work with literacy education of the poor in Brazil and liberation efforts in Latin America and Africa, but they enjoy widespread popularity throughout the western world (Dirkx, 1998: 2). The transformative education proposed by Freire aims to raise a critical consciousness amongst learners and is geared towards freedom from oppression. Dirx explains how this critical consciousness is a “process in which learners develop the ability to analyse, pose questions, and take action on the social, political, cultural and economic contexts that influence and shape their lives” (1998:3). As Freire himself claimed, it involves “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (Freire, 1970: 36).

Knowledge becomes founded on dialogue characterised by participatory, open communication focussed around critical inquiry and analysis, linked to intentional action seeking to reconstruct the situation (including the self) and to evaluated consequences. The dialogue that distinguishes critical knowledge and cultural action for freedom is not some kind of conversation, it is a social praxis. To be liberatory it must respect the everyday language, understanding, and way of life of the knowers, and it must seek to create situations in which they can more deeply express their own hopes and intentions (Glass, 2001: 19).

Whilst there have been critics of Freire, there is much of his work that can be built upon by feminists. Jackson picked up on two key problem areas. The first relates to Freire’s claim that “a humanising education is the path through which men and women can become conscious about their presence in the world” (Freire and Frei Betto, 1985: 14). Jackson points out that:

There is a danger in universalising a shared ‘humanising education’, and there are many other paths through which we become conscious of out positions in the world and learn to ‘know’ who and what we are, and this is particularly true of gender. Women and men have very different experiences of ‘their presence in the world’, which for women, for instance, may well be located in the private, and for men in the public arena (Jackson, 1997: 464).

She also addresses Freire’s claim that a role of humanising education is to teach women and men to take into consideration not only their own needs, ‘but also the needs and aspirations of others’ (Freire and Frei Betto, 1985: 15) by asserting that he:

… gives no consideration of what this means or how women and men have learned different ways of prioritising their own needs and the needs of others. Far from allowing us to find our path to liberation, women have long been tied to a caring and nurturing role, where we are expected, and have learned to expect of ourselves, that we will always put others first. The journey along the path to liberation for men has often been at the expense of women (Jackson, 1997: 465).

Despite these failings of Freire to fully acknowledge gender differences, there is much that feminists can take from his work. Indeed, there is plenty of overlap and Freire’s visions sit well with feminist ideals of empowerment, reflexivity and working to effect change. Jackson herself notes that what she wants and “cannot have without feminist pedagogy, is a theory of education which, whilst recognising difference, centralises and politicises women’s oppression, and which works to break down hierarchical structures” (Jackson, 1997: 466). There is a need to re-politicise the academic study of VAW and Freire’s work that offer a tool for doing this. Understanding violence not only at the individual level for survivors, but also how this fits into wider social contexts is vital for any meaningful change to occur. The aim of my teaching in the module is to offer a space where women can articulate and explore their own experiences of violence individually and develop a counter-truth to the knowledge that is presented to them but this then needs to expand further and those individual experiences need to be understood within the wider systems of oppression. Freire states:

Starting out with the educands’ knowledge does not mean circling around this knowledge ad infinitum. Starting out means setting off down the road, getting going, shifting from one point to another, not sticking or staying (Freire, 1993: 69-70 cited in Zoltock, 2014: 308).

And so whilst the personal lived experiences of students are a crucial starting point, Freire’s visions of a transformative education can take us beyond this. Teaching about VAW in a way that can facilitate liberation or empowerment for women who have experienced that violence is not about presenting a new authentic ‘truth’ but providing an alternative worldview to enable critical engagement. This epistemology incorporates and transcends lived experience; locating these experiences in their historical relations as we understand them as products of systems of ideology, difference and oppression (Zoltock, 2014: 310).

**Violence Against Women:**

For the purposes of this work, whilst I use the term VAW, I am basing this on the UN definition of gender based violence which is “Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (UN, 1993). The range of acts this definition covers - from sexual harassment, the control of women’s reproductive rights, female genital mutilation, and rape through to what is often termed sexual murder (this list is not exhaustive) – and the social, historical and political contexts in which such acts take place demand a much deeper analysis than is often offered in more common criminological and psychological studies that focus on the very vague Interpersonal Violence (IPV). Such studies tend to condense the vast issue of VAW to domestic violence and then suggest that women are as, if not more, violent than men.

There is no question that domestic violence against men (and perpetrated by women) occurs. And it where it does occur, there should be provision of support for men. The problem however, is that the progress made by feminists in naming VAW, providing a platform for women to speak out about their experiences and creating a space where work geared towards ending such violence could emerge is being undermined. We cannot meaningfully address VAW without a deep scrutiny of the history and how that history informs the current situation. Historically, rape was not an offence against the person, it was a property offence (Laster and O’Mally, 1996). The victim was not the woman or girl who had been violated, but her husband (or father if she was unmarried). The law surrounding rape did not exist to protect women and girls from violence but to reinforce their status as property of men. For domestic violence, it was actually enshrined within law that a man could, and indeed should, beat his wife if the situation warranted it with a stick no thicker than his thumb (Lentz, 1999) This history does not exist for men. There is no underlying and consistent narrative that makes men legitimate targets for rape in war (Tanaka, 1996), there is no deep rooted culture of blaming men and policing their sexual morality (D’Cruze 1998) and there is no acceptance of sexual aggression as a ‘natural’ trait in women (see Connolly and Beaver, 2015 and Turanovic et al, 2017 for examples of work that locate the source of VAW in the individual biology of men). The evidence is overwhelming: for men and women, experiences of violence are qualitatively and quantitively different.

The devastating effects of VAW have been extensively documented elsewhere (Dobash and Dobash, 1987; Hague and Malos, 1993; Hanmner, 2000; Itzin, 2006; Horvath and Kelly, 2007]. In order to challenge the existence of this violence it is crucial to acknowledge that it is “rooted in the unequal distribution of resources and power between men and women and institutionalised through laws, policies and social norms that grant preferential rights to men” (Moreno et al, 2015: 1689).

Violence against women is a widespread problem that affects the lives of women and girls globally. The forms of violence that women and girls experience are ‘frequently hidden, socially sanctioned and not recognised or adequately addressed by institutions that should respond’ (Moreno et al, 2015: 1685). Despite the efforts and progress of feminism over the past 6 decades, ‘the violation of women’s bodies… remains perhaps the most tolerated crime in the world’ (Campbell, 2014: 18). Outside of academia we are up against a struggle. Dominant and popular representations of violence against women cast it as something that women provoke, something that is carried out by sick or deviant men, and, quite confusingly, also as something resulting from natural masculine tendencies. What we find here is a discourse that suggests that violence against women is an anomaly: a rare occurrence that women can and should protect themselves from, by wearing the right clothes, mixing with the right people, not provoking man’s natural urges and so forth. It creates a truth about sexual violence that is at odds with the lived reality for so many women. For Beatrix Campbell:

Violence is not unthinking, visceral, primitive; it is produced by, and is productive of, power and control over land, riches and people. Violent hyper-masculinities and concomitant gender polarisation are, therefore, not residual: they are remade in civil society and in state apparatuses (2014: 12).

Beatrix Campbell offers a critique of the assumed natural inevitability of violence. She explains how an ‘Ice Age Art’ exhibition in 2013 at the British Museum throws the assumed journey from primitive barbarity to a more progressive, civilised moment into disarray. The art on display including “ripe, round female figures, with reindeers in flight, fish, birds, mammoths, lions, flutes, fish hooks, needles and an occasional male” (Campbell 2014: 10) raises questions about what we think we know about that period of time and, as she points out:

… seems to enunciate a challenge to an Enlightenment notion… that our ancestors were brutal and brutalised (and blokes), making their way in the world savagely; that they are strangers to us because we, their refined descendants, are uniquely rational, prosperous, democratic and pacific (Campbell, 2014: 11).

This recognition of the link between violence and progress or civilisation is not new. The dependency on extreme forms of violence in the name of progress can be seen from the civilising missions of the colonisers through to the current military intervention in the Middle East. J.M. Moore explains just how brutal the violence used against colonised peoples in the name of progress and of law and order was when he describes how:

At a point that Foucault implies that European penality had moved beyond the body and theatrical, participants in the 1857-1858 Indian rebellion were, following the due process of law, being tied to the muzzle of a cannon before its discharge spectacularly terminated their lives (Moore, 2015: 10).

Others have also contended that far from it indicating a progressive journey towards prosperity and democracy, liberal, capitalist modernity is reliant on violence and control. Elias (2000) offers an explanation of how the civilising project is dependent upon violence and the threat of violence to ensure obedience and control and Bauman explains how the Holocaust was not a move backwards in progress within Europe but actually a product of modernity (1991). In relation to violence against women, feminist research has shown time and time again that VAW is not the result of a few deviant men but is deeply embedded within patriarchal culture (Kelly, 1987:Mullender, 1996). It does not demonstrate a loss of control, but is a tool for maintaining control. It is systematic, institutionalised and deeply embedded in modern society. This brings us back to Campbell who asserts:

Ice age imagination reminds us that war and peace have histories, they are social practices; that violence between humans is not universal, eternal, inevitable and valorised. And what’s more, violence and crimes are specialisms – almost exclusively associated with specific cultures that create masculinity-as-domination. Feminism insists that violence is not biological or hormonal but social, that crime, violence and war are productive of power; that they are - as theorists in the second-wave feminism ventured – ‘resources’ in the ‘achievement or ‘doing’ or ‘performance’ of masculinities (Campbell, 2014: 11).

The problem is that non-feminist explanations for VAW within the academy, amongst policy makers and within the criminal justice agencies that we expect to protect and support such women all too often fail to recognise this. The forces that we are up against when trying to speak out about men’s violence against women are strong and the fact that we are still struggling after decades of feminist activism, intervention and academic contribution is testimony to just how difficult a task it is. The widespread ‘knowledge’ about VAW that circulates within the media is not all that inconsistent with the ‘knowledge’ produced in academic disciplines such as criminology and psychology. We can also see it in the law. It is through a critique of these discourses that we have the best chance of making a difference. We can see some limited progress that has been made, most notably it now being a public and policy concern. However, the dangers lie in the ways in which dominant discourses and modes of knowledge prevent us from really tackling the widespread abuse of women and girls.

**Challenging Dominant Truths about VAW: Foucault, knowledge and power:**

Like Freire, Foucault has come under criticism by feminists, most notably for his failure to recognise the role gender plays in the systems of power that he seeks to challenge (Howe, 2008). However, much of his postructuralist discourse analysis is of use to feminists and whilst he himself failed to take his own advice when it came to considering gendered oppression his explanation of criticism is useful for feminist attempts to challenge VAW. For him:

Criticism consists in uncovering thought and trying to change it: showing that things are not as obvious as people believe, making it so that what is taken for granted is no longer taken for granted. To do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy’ (Foucault 1994: 456–7).

This is consistent with Freire’s vision of a transformative pedagogy and proposes a starting point for the deep critical engagement that is required for social change. The analysis of VAW requires a platform from which to proceed that acknowledges that the ‘taken for granted’ knowledge about VAW is not as apparent at it seems. This challenge to dominant forms of knowledge, that are seemingly self-evident, is further enhanced by Gramsci’s term hegemony which Strinati argues is maintained through dominant groups in society, including but not exclusively the ruling class, maintain their dominance by securing the ‘spontaneous consent’ of subordinate groups, including the working class, through the negotiated construction of a political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups (Strinati, 1995: 165).

Foucault is often accused as being nihilistic (Phelan, 1990) and there have been many critiques of postructuralism that suggest is does little in terms of action or offering solutions. However, as Gandal pointed out over 30 years ago Foucault’s project – both in his politics and his histories – was not to lay out solutions, but rather to identify and characterise problems (Gandal, 1986: 123) Just like Freire, and Marx, who influenced much of Freire’s work, Foucault’s method was to grasp a situation, an experience, in its specificity and its history, in the particular conditions that produced it and maintained it, in order to change it (Gandal, 1986: 124). He believed that a progressive politics needed, not a vision of what should be, but a sense of what was intolerable and an historical analysis that could help determine possible strategies in political struggles (ibid.) Feminists using Foucault’s work to explore VAW allows for a mode of knowledge production which uses postructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social process and institutions to understand existing power relations and identify areas and strategies for change (Weedon, 1987 in Gavey, 1989: 460).

This has been taken up by Adrian Howe, who has used Foucault in her own teaching practices and which she sets out in her book *Sex, Violence and Crime: Foucault and the Man Question.* Her book, based on her own experiences of teaching the module I now teach on (and on which I was a student when she taught it 16 years ago) “tests the limits of the sayable and unsayable” in relation to violence against women (Howe, 2008: 16). The module that she initially developed seeks to engage in discussions about truth production of VAW that are not merely concerned with uncovering *“the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted”* but *“the ensemble of rules to which the true and false are separated and specific effects of power are attached to the true”* (Foucault, 1980: 132). It explores how, “camouflaged as etiological research, so-called ‘expert’ explanations for men’s violent acts invariably deteriorate into apologies that run the gauntlet from the abjectly sycophantic to the self-consciously defensive” (Howe, 2008: 2) and offers an alternative way of looking at VAW that both challenges dominant explanations and provides women who have experienced violence with a platform to articulate their own experiences in their own words. It is through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work (Gandal, 1986: 130).

An in-depth examination of the various discourses surrounding VAW: the media, law, academia allows students to challenge the dominant knowledge about violence which seek explanations in the individual, present violence paradoxically as both the actions of a few deviant men and an inevitable result of man’s natural sexual urges, and ultimately blame women for the actions of violent men. By highlighting that criminology does nothing other than paraphrase and reiterate the dominant ideology (Cameron and Frazer) and questioning the modernist faith that science can reveal truth about human behaviour and will eventually bring about progress (Howe, 2008: 11) that criminology subscribes to, students are able to articulate their own experiences, and understandings of those experiences, on their own terms. This is crucial for empowered participation in the continued struggle to end VAW.

**Conclusion:**

This paper has brought together Freire’s critical pedagogy, feminist approaches to the problem of VAW and Foucauldian perspectives on power and knowledge. Whilst there is some conflict between the three approaches, there are also some striking similarities. Each offer a pathway for challenging dominant truths, actively resisting oppression and creating real and meaningful change. I propose that by utilising the three of these, there is a good basis to build upon teaching about VAW in a way that facilitates empowerment, engagement and healing for women students who have experienced violence as well as developing academic knowledge and understanding of the subject area.

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