'Telling the Story…and telling it right': Race, culture and gender in Higher Education.

Abstract:

This paper explores race, culture and gender in Higher Education, providing some insights into challenges of access and retention in Higher Education, deriving from two interviews undertaken as part of an auto/biographical doctoral study into collaborative working in services for children, young people and families. As a non prescriptive process, exploration of race, gender and culture that is implicit and explicit in Andrew and Sian's narratives became a focus, in particular, their experiences of Higher Education.

Drawing on Freire, hooks, Merrill and West and Kearney, this paper explores Andrew's story as a reluctant student and Sian's experience of education as a forum for exercising her voice and how their narratives intertwine with my own. This more than an academic process but an important part of my own trajectory; a major consequence of this reflexive process is how my role as academic, as educator and researcher, is thrown into a new domain, as I consider my desire to use the forums available to 'tell the story' and furthermore to 'tell it right'.

Introduction:

Andrew and Sian are research collaborators interviewed for an auto/biographical study about services for children and young people in the UK. Andrew is of black Caribbean heritage who has been a community and youth worker for many years. His narrative is rich and his usage of analogy and metaphor perfectly tell the significance of race and culture in his learning experience. Sian is also of black Caribbean heritage with diverse experience in community development, reaching senior management level. Sian was at a turning point in her career trajectory and via reflective dialogue, expressed clarity around being a professional black woman, a community activist and how education can nurture voices.

What they tell is important to my role as an adult educator, leaving me to consider: what does this tell us about our role as educators? How important is conscientização – or critical consciousness (Freire, 1996) in acknowledging the significance and centrality of race, culture and gender in the educational process? It is not about 'giving' voice – which assumes that there

was no previous voice and alludes to the 'false charity' Freire conveys, that the voice of others is ours to give. In this paper I am promoting the necessity to 'not to silence', rather than to suppose that giving voice is within my control or desire. This paper strives for the 'more nuanced understanding' proported by Thompson, 2000, cited in Merrill and West, 2009: 89) and moves away from the discourse that problematises non-traditional students to one where adult educators who fuel traditional structures and systems, are challenged to acknowledge that they too 'bring with them into higher education their life experiences and biographical and cultural baggage' (Merrill and West, 2009: 88). In this way, I am challenging what Gee, 1999 (cited in Bell, 2003: 5) terms the 'Big D Discourse' and championing a critical pedagogy that 'keeps at its center the need to problematize both the overt and covert exercise of domination-subordination in social structures and processes' (Nagda, Gurin and Lopez, 2003: 167). This is resonant of hooks' perspective, where 'she sees discrimination and domination not in separate categories but all are interconnected' (Burke, 2004).

The congruence between telling the story and telling it right and the auto/biographical methodology and approach, acknowledges that the evolution of the narrative is related to the richness of what is told and how it is sought. The dialogical nature of the approach stimulates the potential for conscientização, establishing the researcher as a participatory learning partner, as opposed to the spectatory, knowledgeable expert, 'doing' research. This study is what is described as 'insider research' and importantly, I position myself in a 'curious stance', as 'learner' in the research process (Gehart, Tarragona and Bava, 2007: 375). In some 'fragments' I may be considered an insider but in terms of my role as an academic and as a researcher I am the other, the 'outsider' and in this sense, I could be what Bell, 2003, terms an ally 'from the dominant group' and am presenting the voices of collaborators via a counter-narrative.

Andrew and Sian's candid narratives are insightful and engaging; throughout this paper, I strive to maintain their authenticity, whilst also preserving my own voice. In the wider doctoral study, Andrew and Sian are both profiled as case study chapters, having been analysed using West's proforma (Merrill and West, 2009). I have focused much less on the methodology in this paper in order to use the space to tell the stories. As Bell, 2003, asserts: 'close reading of the stories of the stories we tell about race and racism can become a learning tool to help us to be more

conscious of historical and current realities, and through this consciousness, interrupt the stories that prevent movement toward democratic and inclusive community.' (Bell, 2003: 4)

This paper is a precursor for future exploration but it does offer some useful insights into the significance of race, gender and culture in Higher Education and the wider exploration of challenges of access, retention and drop out.

Telling me:

I was a teenager in the 1980's and my background is 'working class'; to move out of this normality was a major incident and my incident was going to University in another geographical area. As a woman of mixed race parentage, I have lived 'in-between' socially polarized cultures and ethnicities, being coaxed, covertly and overtly, to 'choose' one or the other race or culture leading me rebel and defy to define myself according to how *I* saw *me*. This has felt like a process of moving along a conceptual scale, from 'dark skinned white person' to 'light skinned black person', which is as much a personal process as it is a social one. It is my roots in a largely white British environment that contributed to my identity as a 'dark skinned white person', positioning myself within the available frameworks. Camper, 1994: xix), describes being mixed race as a '...paradox of existence in two or more races'; my omnipotence has been my determination to straddle ideologies, coming to realize that although other's perception of me is not my existential reality, it *is* a part of me as a social being, thus, an aspect of my 'reality'. This has symbolically underscored my professional identity as a chameleonic professional (Oliver, 2010), where critical consciousness, fuelled by responsivity, honesty, doubt, receptivity, necessity, spirituality and reflexivity, is an essential component.

Complexity in relation to my identity is reflected in Williams' (2005) exploration of multiple identities and multiple constraints 'To ally with either Afrocentrism or feminism may necessitate silencing a central component of their identity.' (Williams, 2005:279). My quest is to liberate fragments rather than silence them, letting them flow as one embodied whole. Notions of 'womanity' are appealing, as a 'woman of color who has committed to the wholeness of the entire people, male and female (Walker, cited in Jenainati and Groves, 2007: 149). They

determine that 'the term becomes an alternative to "feminist" and expresses a collective notion of solidarity with one's own culture and race as well as one's gender.' (2007: 149).

Telling me and education:

Education was not important in my family and community and although I did not flunk school, I left as soon as I could to go 'out to work'. My own reflexive engagement has enabled me to try to make sense of fragments of the past and in their psychodynamic relevance to the present. It was through 'youth work' and the influence of a positive black male role model (my own father was absent in my childhood) and perhaps a need to release the voice within me, that I found education and it found me. Whilst working for a youth project, I was mentored by a youth worker defining himself as 'mixed race', not because of his racial heritage but because he was a black man of Caribbean descent, living in a racially diverse society. He is still symbolically a teacher to me and as I develop as an educator and researcher, I am awakened to the critical pedagogy that he incited almost three decades ago.

There is no irony that I became an educator; I wrote a poem aged 12 years, conveying 'I*, teacher because* I *teach ya*', which perhaps vented frustration that people did not 'know' or understand and as such, I was constantly teaching them. In many situations, when honestly expressing myself within a group comprising mainly white people, they have shown unwillingness to consider a perspective from 'another side' meaning I invariably become the 'teacher', then caretaker, putting aside my own needs in favour of their (now) 'hurt' feelings. I have witnessed where I am in the formal role of educator, that black students (usually) the minority, who 'liberate their voices' in the way that Freire promotes, have to then 'pay' the price when their peers are affronted that they do not feel comfortable in the group. It is as though critical consciousness is blocked by an inability to acknowledge the dynamic, placing the responsibility for the 'condition' upon the oppressed person, who is now perceived to have 'power' to restore order.

Higher Education presented a way out of the world in which I grew up, allowing me to create new tracks, embracing my growth and leading to my becoming estranged from aspects of my previous life, underscoring that it is 'ok' to be different from those around me. Being 'different' is a position that has remained unchanged in my educational journey; academia is a paradox of

liberating processes and restrictive forces and my predisposition to contradiction and resilience means I have not allowed restrictive forces to be a barrier to liberating process. I went to university aged 21 years, where I realized that intelligence was more than money, social standing, race and culture and that I had a *right* to be there. Throughout, my reflective diaries preserved my voice, within an environment where the dominant group was inevitable and overtly expressed. My undergraduate study in advertising, media and marketing, taught me that social identity 'happens' whether or not one accepts it and I learned that work in the commercial environment would be denial of myself; my critical consciousness was now apparent and lying to myself was unviable. Having studied a Masters in Therapeutic Child Care, my understanding of human interaction and unconscious influence deepened and my 'scenic' journey into formal education meant that I have veered towards critical pedagogy.

The role of senior lecturer, researcher and narrator are interlinked into one career identity and I draw on Dominicé (2000), who outlines inter-relationship between teacher and researcher; I am reflexively aware that teaching is learning and that this process is 'researchive'.

Telling the wider story; raging against the machine:

As the interviews with Andrew and Sian were initiated by my doctoral study, I will outline some pertinent aspects of the study.

Working collaboratively in services for children, young people and families:

There are inequalities in multi-professional and multi-agency arenas providing services for children and young people and my experiences fuel a compulsion to promote voices and to 'fight the power', even perhaps, to 'rage against the machine'. Notions of hierarchy permeate concepts of professional identity in practitioner experiences within multi-agency contexts who are, as the children of Chile, 'drinking from other streams' (Kearney, 2003). Banks (2001: 103)) highlights importance and potential tensions of professionals maintaining the 'ideal of professional autonomy' within 'reality of a rule governed, hierarchical structure.'

When I began the doctoral study, Labour government were in power and the election of May 2010 signifies major change for UK society; the emergent events are a double edged sword, as

'coalition' introduces further dimension to notions of 'collaboration'. The landscape related to children and young people is a political one, shaped by government policy and legislation, with funding cuts to services being part of the government's 'efficiency savings', provoking a reaction of demonstrations and marches. People are 'talking back', seeming also to want to 'fight the power' and 'rage against the machine'. One could liken this to fulfilling the fears of who Freire refers to as the doubters of conscientização, a premise whereby 'it is better for the victims of injustice not to recognize themselves as such' (1996: 18) and that such awareness is 'anarchic' and 'may lead to disorder' (1996: 17).

The doctoral study is a forum for 'talking back', challenging the way voices of children, young people and practitioners are distorted in the current climate where destination is prioritised over process. Like Bava (cited in Gehart et al, 2007: 375), it is important that I not only position myself within the research but also consider "What am I creating?"

Telling Andrew, Telling Sian, telling me, telling you:

Andrew undertook HE study as a compulsory component in his professional development in community and youth work, rather than scholarly ambition. He wears his experiences of oppression and awareness of power inequalities close to his heart and race, gender and culture was implicit and explicit in his narrative:

'Although things have changed..or we're led to believe things have changed, erm, I don't know for me, on that level, change is kind of, dictated by how obvious it is, in a lot of respects, erm, which is why, certain things, around racism and things, discrimination is still there, but they've… the fact that it is still there is acknowledged by them changing the grounds of racism to institutionalized and so forth and so forth, which is just another way of saying that 'yeah, we can't be so open with it', so they do it other ways.'

Andrew referred to necessary changes to services for children and young people, including educating youth support workers:

*'...the way youth work's taught, yeah, its kinda delivered a certain way... I argued on the course – as I would do (*slight laughter*)....that, a lot of these methods and processes that you're telling me, er, are coming from old white people, yeah, I'm not living in that society. That society isn't as evident for me now, I'm in a diverse area and a lot of these methods and a lot of these processes that are well documented now are done by white English people, at a time when that might have been relevant for them, yeah, but things have changed and...the things that we're hearing from certain people, me as a black person growing up in a white society and having to experience what I have - and a lot of other black people have experienced these things...for me to sit in a class room now and listen to some of these phrases and some of these references, I'm thinking ' how out of date is it' you know and what is it, what makes it right for us to follow these people's processes by the letter? Yeah, alright, I'm not saying I'm ignorant to the fact that there's some value in what they're saying, of course there is, but..the processes change, yeah, or the ingredients, the ingredients to their solutions.'*

Andrew articulated that it was the content *and* the process that challenged him; struggling to identify with theoretical perspectives and their relationship to community and youth work in urban communities. He appealed for more parallel lines between theory and practice, advocating an approach relevant to his depth of knowledge, enabling his 'praxis'. Educators need to engage in and encourage what Milner, 2003: 196, refers to as 'race reflections'. A lack of inclusive teaching and opportunities for learning led to him feeling that he was made responsible for 'bringing in' the diversity. This is echoed by Sian raising that misinterpretation of the contribution that black people can make creates an inappropriate smoke screen - for instance 'being black' translating to 'being qualified' to undertake certain work situations, based upon assumptions of non-black people. Some of my black students have shared that other students have expected them to speak 'for' or be representative of the 'black race', resulting in the particular student instead choosing to be silent. This is reflected in Mackenzie-Mavinga's paper related to counseling students: 'The black students wanted to share their experiences but challenged the role of being seen as a black expert for their white peers' (2006: 5).

This is in contrast to Sian's recollection of HE study, motivated by her wanting to develop herself through scholarly activities: *'I had a fantastic time at Uni (*she studied sociology*), there was a black student's society, where I was active and you know, we were really vocal'.* I

reflected that Sian sounded like she had a strong voice, questioning its roots. Sian's initial response: *'I've had to, Jo'*, gives some indication of a dichotomy of vocality and silence that is familiar to me as black woman; the voice that is provoked and then recovered can remain 'hidden' under layers of oppressive expectation and unspoken 'rules' of engagement. My understanding of therapeutic process has led to appreciation of the many selves we accommodate, especially if they are repressed or oppressed selves that are not 'supposed' to have a voice. In his biographical analysis about motivation and Higher Education, West highlights that 'Telling stories about self, others and a life seems to lie at the heart of exploiting some of the possibilities of our present times and transcending its worst features.' (1996: 208). If education is a forum for finding and sharing voices, the idea that education can also silence is not a major conceptual leap. This is reflected in Kearney's empirical study (2003) about identity in education, where his collaborators felt that their academic success was partly due to silencing their own voices. This is converse to bell hooks' ideal of 'teaching in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students' (1994: 13).

Sian believes that the foundation for her 'voice' was developed at home: *'My grandmother did everything herself, she was always independent, always independent. And my mom would always say how important education was and for me….I didn't want to have any children. I was like, no, I don't want to be tied down by loads of kids, I want to do what I want to do….so it's a mixture of things really'*. I asked Sian whether the educational system supported or quelled that voice. Sian felt that she was lucky at school, with a good group of teachers, generally and because she studied undergraduate sociology, this was reinforced. Critical engagement and critical consciousness is perhaps intensified when educational subject matter is related to pedagogy; I feel sure that Sian would not have been 'retained' if she had felt silenced and immobilized in her own learning process.

The disparity between Andrew and Sian's experience of education is quite startling, whilst Andrew felt restricted and unable to express his self, Sian conveyed an empowering experience:

'When I went to Uni,it was the best place I could have gone to, I think..for me..coz going to Keele and places like that wouldn't have been the same for me. You know, we had quite radical teachers'. Sian went on to talk again about the relationship of the subject matter to the learning process and developing criticality and cross cultural awareness and that this enhanced the

'radicality' of the environment: *'So you had that feeling all around you, like from the lecturers and you had that from the students as well.'* When I asked what she thought that was about, Sian responded: *'I think it was about individuality, I think it was about giving you the confidence to say, well, just because its in a text book, doesn't make it right, you know…and I think it gave you that, gave you that confidence to say, well you know, you can challenge.'* It was clear that Sian's involvement in making 'real' change in the community was inextricably linked to her education and also to her own personal disposition: *'Just because you go into the real world, you go into work and you should still be able to challenge things, to change things and to acknowledge that is that right that that happens, how could you…what influence could you have, you know, that sort of thing. I think that for most of the people that we working with, people were of a similar mind and people were able to, you were able to… it was like nothing…you know, you shouldn't be boxed in'.* According to Kearney 'The world is in the classroom. It can only be translated into new cultural webs if we enter into new dialogues and explore people's lived experiences.' (2003: 9)

Andrew appealed for this level of criticality and alluded to a lack awareness from educators to tailor the programme of learning to meet the needs of a diverse range of students:

'…if you're baking a cake with the same ingredients and you're giving this cake to people and they are happy to eat it, then the cake is going to be off the hook. But if you're giving it – just an example – let's just say the cake was now being given half to West Indian people, as we know, they like flavour to things, yeah – that cake now, to become more acceptable to West Indian people, we might want to put a bit of pepper in those ingredients, so the output is of a better taste to us and erm, to the other side it might be a bit different, they can taste it, they might like it, some might not but its opened them up to that, do you understand what I'm saying? But now, you can either bake a cake, a jerk cake, with pepper in it or just have a normal cake that will just be them…and if I'm, if that's a decent metaphor….I think that yeah, certain factors, change is in your face.'

Perhaps this is the most telling in that it calls out to educators to 'pepper the cake', to consider different tastes and the necessary ingredients for 'making cake' *and* in the recipe, or delivery, furthermore, peppered cake may have a wider appeal and introduce variant tastes to students who may not otherwise be exposed to it. At a recent scholarship event at Canterbury Christ Church

University, Professor Adrian Holliday, in challenging colonization of education, via 'Western well wishing' spoke of: 'Going to other people's places to get them to do what *you* want them to do' and this 'colonization' rings true for me, regarding Higher Education of non-traditional learners.

Conclusion:

Through the narratives of Andrew and Sian, I consider whether I am satisfied with my contribution, whether I am fulfilling my own potential to 'make a difference'. With regard to Freire's discourse, Shaul (Freire, 1996) acknowledges the 'culture of silence' and the role of education as a route to 'acquiring voice'; I feel that I can no longer perpetuate oppressive systems, either as educator, as researcher or as narrator.

Conscientização is paramount to procuring effective professional practice in work with children and young people. The learning forum needs to be a space to reflect and challenge self and others, so as to rejuvenate awareness and counteract professional complacency. Sian's is a critically conscious voice and in turn, is an educative one, she suggested that workers can become desensitized to their environment and that people who care are ones who *'try something new'*. As adult educators, we need to *care enough* to not be complacent in our 'expertise', to *care enough* to step out of our zone of familiarity and comfortability.

Sian felt that reform in HE changes the dynamic for young people and in particular black young people, who are less likely to access such forums and so will be further trapped in their respective communities, without the escape route that education can provide, unable to access forums to change the perpetual cycles that they are caught in. She spoke of her role in challenging approaches promoted by government and whilst reflecting on not being a qualified social worker, Sian asserted: *'I can't be part of that system, I need to be on the other side. I can't sit there and be accountable to these people who are telling me this is what I should do with these people, when I know in my heart of hearts that its not right and how would I cope with that myself?'*.

This resonates for me, at the juncture I have reached right now; the scourge of conscientização is that I cannot *know* and *not do*. Freire states that 'liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one' (31: 1996) and in some ways by actively responding to conscientização, I am attracting disorder, with comfort drawn from Freire: 'In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform' (31:1996).

In the words of Andrew: '*If you can make a change somewhere, or make an impact somewhere, then its not only fulfilling to myself, to know that I might have touched someone else's life..it heralds a change....its like preaching the word of anything and you kind of...you have to start somewhere, some people have to hear it before it starts to spread you know...and once you've touched someone, they'll tell someone else about it, they may take some of what you said away and do something positive with it, they may take something you said away, or an experience around it and....that may prompt them to do differently, to kinda to what they may have done, if they'd not had that interaction with you. If it's a positive thing and they take it away and they kind of, erm, its something that they use in their life, or in their development, for the better of themselves or the people around them, then its good thing..its a good thing...'*

Bell, 2003, concludes: 'Ultimately, we need to uncover and generate stories that inspire action and hope if we are to create the world we envision….The stories People of Color tell over and over to bear witness to their ongoing experiences of racism sometimes seem like screaming into a White void from which no reflection returns.' (2003: 24)

This is notion of education as hopefulness is reflected in hooks' 'pedagogy of hope' (2003) and one that inspires my own discourse. Key to ensuring access and retention of non-traditional learners in Higher Education is a firm commitment to the learning forum as a transformational space, grounded in a critical pedagogy where students and educators are participatory learners and 'critical consciousness (is) a daily ongoing reality.' (Nagda et al, 2003: 168). We must engage critically in the literature we 'unveil' to students, by engaging with their stories and recognizing whether the literature serves the purpose of enabling praxis. Finally, all of this, we must *choose* to do.

4,492 words

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