

Keynote 2

“Developing a critical sociological imagination: challenging the ‘taken-for-granted’”

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I have a lot of sympathy for the sociological imagination. After all, in the mid-1970's I almost forsook studying social work and opted for a sociology degree. I didn't particularly understand or enjoy the social work program. However in my second year I read C. Wright Mill's Sociological Imagination and for the first time I actually felt inspired in my university studies.

Incidentally I stopped regretting my choice of social work study when I undertook my masters degree research and discovered the challenge and satisfaction of applying, and effectively trying to work out, how to practise critical sociology in casework with individual people. My experience was only marred by the young male social theorists who attempted to give us social workers “the good oil” with their lectures on various theorists such as Althusser and Miliband. If I'd known then that Miliband was Ed's dad it would have made it more interesting and perhaps help me make more connection with his theories. Such was the state of my thinking at the time (and probably now as well!). We social work students (mostly women and mostly practitioners) listened politely but

privately wondered what this had to do with our vision of social work. I guess this was one significant step in inspiring my career-long concern and interest in applying sociological thinking into the minutia of micro-relations, the smaller experiences of the everyday. Interesting that these themes are often seen as the domain of womens' study, and that it is feminism which can be credited with bringing the personal into acceptable academic study. But I digress...

Before we go too far down this track, let me say a quick word about who I am, in the spirit of being reflexive. This will give you a feel for my peculiar take on the academic culture which I have inhabited, or should I say *tried* to inhabit, for the last 40 or so years. What is it I'm bringing to the academic table? As an Australian of three generations long ago Chinese descent, and a woman of lower middle class background who grew up in a racist post-WW2 Australia, I am reasonably used to being on the margins, or even outside the margins. Contributing to my sense of marginality is my fundamentalist protestant background, and although I cast this off decades ago, it is still hard for me to identify with a "mainstream" culture, whatever that is.

Before you start feeling sorry for me however, I think my particular ignorance has worked to my advantage in some ways. My peculiar background has meant I haven't expected to be understood or even accepted, and so, not feeling the need to be understood or accepted has certainly honed my ability to see beneath and beyond what

many of us take for granted. Not sharing other people's premises can be a seriously unsettling yet grounding experience.

It is no wonder I suppose, as I speak to you from the hindsight rendered possible by being near the end of my career, that I took so happily to critical sociology in my early academic years. Being from the margins can confer critical insights. I was easily attuned to other perspectives, having already lived them for most of my life. Interestingly I only came to recognize the autobiographical context of my affinity with critical sociology in the last couple of years..... Mortifying that with all my sociological knowhow, and interest in reflection, I had somehow missed the application of the macro in the minutiae of my own background.

What does this say about critical sociology I wonder? Is there something about us as sociologists which shows we have a blindspot for the personal? Have we set up academic cultures which imply an inherent value on the collectivity, the structural, and a resulting discomfort with understanding individuals and their inner workings?

Yes I know we have a lot of literature on these aspects, and that critical theory itself is rich in exploration of how individual subjectivities are made. Nonetheless I would argue that there is still a denial of the personal, the emotional, and the psychological, integrated seamlessly with the political, social and structural, in the academic cultures we have created.

This is where I want to look now – the darker, hidden and unacknowledged corners of our academic cupboards. What is it in fact that we do ignore, value or devalue, which implicitly works against using a critical sociological imagination in a much more comprehensive and integrated way?

I'm going to start where you might not expect – with a few different, very banal stories. The fact that they are banal is significant, because they're about the sort of experiences which I believe are fairly commonplace, and so they do, I think, say something significant about the "popular" taken-for-granted culture we have created in academia.

The first instance relates to a comment I have sometimes heard made about people's academic work, that it "makes things appear too simple". Often this is a remark made by academics with a critical persuasion, about social work practice theory. It is clearly a criticism, but I wonder exactly what it means and why is it delivered in this way? We'll return to this later.

The second happened a few years back. It was a remark made by a senior male colleague about a keynote address of mine. I had been asked to present, and indeed did present this keynote, as a reflective piece. I read it out (similar to what I am doing now), as I have found that such keynotes have to be carefully crafted to get the right ordering

of content and imaginative phraseology. I find they take a lot more preparation, than a traditional academic address. So I was startled by this remark : *'Jan really needs to learn how to use powerpoint'*. Given the thoughtful preparation and that I had clearly stated at the outset that I did not intend to use powerpoint slides since I wanted people to listen to my words as a narrative, not read them off a screen, I was somewhat put out. There was also an inherent assumption by the speaker that I did not know how to use powerpoints (which made me more indignant than it should have!) I wonder why my own rationale was dismissed, as I felt even I and my talk was being dismissed, in this off-hand remark? What did this comment assume about how academic presentations should be, and what academic culture was being promulgated? We'll return to this later as well.

The third experience I want to mention is more of an ongoing experience and set of observations about people who identify and label themselves as being from a "critical" persuasion. In my experience the more people identify with being "critical" often the more ungenerous, prejudiced and judgemental they are towards people they categorise as not like them. I have been on the receiving end of such criticism.... cast as "neo-liberal" for trying to set up dialogue with people who have been categorized as in the "not critical" camp. Often I do find that people who are judged to be "non-critical" are often categorized as such for the flimsiest and most superficial of reasons. What happens to our own critical ability, when we are confronted with people who appear not to think like us?

Perhaps I can be accused of over-simplifying here, but let's all pause and think about what these stories might have in common which could indicate a more hidden culture in academia. What do they say about cultures we have developed, which may (or may not) facilitate the use of critical sociologies in our understanding, education, and practice of social work.....

So let's return to the first story I mentioned, the comment about academic work which makes things appear too simple.

I wonder what the inherent assumptions are here. What's wrong with things appearing simple? And is there a difference between "being simple" and "appearing simple"?.....Is there something implied here about some things needing to appear difficult in order to be valued? If so, I wonder what this says about what is valued. What kinds of things must appear difficult in order to be valued? In my experience the critics are usually referring to Theory with a capital T. I wonder why "Theory" has to appear or be difficult? Why do we invest it with super-ordinary qualities? Why does our esteem automatically increase for people who can use jargon, or can clearly label their theoretical perspective is? (How many of you have been asked (smugly) about this in job interviews?) Why do we invest Theory with so much authority?

There is also something here about what we value in communication. Somehow the remark implies that our communication should not make things appear too simple? I am reminded of C. Wright Mills again when he gave tips on academic writing. A phrase which has stuck with me is to regard the “Prose” not the “Pose”. He felt that too many academic writers were too concerned about how they came across in their writings, too mindful of establishing their own status and credibility. Thus they were more concerned with sending a message about their own “pose” or social position, than with the actual content, or “prose” which was being communicated. I fear that much of our theoretical writings can come across as more concerned about the “pose” we are striking, and less about the “prose” of what we want to communicate. We are perhaps more concerned with how we appear, rather than ensuring our message gets across.

Are we setting up some kind of “theory club”, so that only the initiated can become members? Are we communicating that we set the “pose” which others must emulate in order to be in the club? Earlier I mentioned my experience with male social theorists whilst studying for my masters in social work. Being on the receiving end of such theories, with my mostly female practitioner class mates, only served to reinforce the social divisions between male and female, sociology theorist and practitioner, academic and student.

On a related note, how many times have I experienced outrage from colleagues when I have cut theory back to its basics, and invited people to learn from their own

experience, creating theory from this in dialogue with other people's stories and theories. It's almost as if those who climbed the theory mountain first don't want to make it easier for those who follow. Perhaps they feel it will devalue the difficult task they themselves managed to master.

From these experiences, it seems to me that there were (and are) many vested interests in portraying theory as distant and elusive, perhaps prized mostly because those who were not like me had it. A hidden, but nevertheless clear message, was that I had to become **not like me** in order to get it. In the many critical reflection workshops I run with practitioners, this is one clear message that comes through – practitioners feel locked out of the theory club.

Now I realize only too well that what I am talking about here is a standard and clearly recognised critique, and I am sure none of us intentionally perpetuates a social distinction between practitioners and theorists, students and educators....or do we? Just having the two sets of words, and posing them as separate categories says something about the divisions we assume. How often do we unwittingly pit opposing categories one against the other, such as research and practice? And how much does this serve to reinforce the divisions between these types of categorisations? What kind of culture does having these divisions, talking about them and acting upon them, as if they are a prime way of seeing the world and people within them, create? And how does this type

of culture, one based on an assumption of binary worlds, actually mitigate against a more critical and complex understanding of all kinds of people and situations?

Now I know we are all aware of creating and constructing binary opposites...old news! But what underlies them is a culture of categorizing, one which can become an all too easy way of controlling our worlds and experiences and the ways we live them. Not only can it lead us to make superficial judgements (do we really think ideology should triumph over ideas, as in the case of when we seek first and foremost to label people as “critical” or “neo-liberal”) or become fixed on the idea that powerpoints and the ability to use them is the most important aspect of a talk? What are we saying is most important when we make these kinds of judgements, and what values are we creating and supporting when we do so?

In the case of my colleague who disparaged my presentation because I chose not to use powerpoint slides, I wonder what message he was trying to send. Could he really have been so crass as to ignore my own stated rationale, and to assume ignorance (rather than choice) on my part? As critical sociologists (as I believe this person would claim to be) do we not allow room for a variety of presentation styles, of ways of communicating ideas?

I suspect that what we are talking about is good old-fashioned prejudice here, and it seems easy to point the finger at his thinly disguised hostility. However, how often are

we all guilty of doing something similar.....when was the last time you shot the messenger, rather than the message? I see this often, especially with practitioners who work with difficult managers. Much easier and safer to blame the manager for what is happening, and better to forget they may also be a person with their own life pressures, and also suffering under other political pressures.

In my critical reflection workshops I often encounter people who bring incidents for reflection which involve trying to work with other people/professionals who they characterize as very different from them, and who they believe are problematic in terms of getting work done in the way they want. A common story for everyone. We are all familiar with the scapegoating scenario. It's a much simpler story when we create it this way. Once it's clear who the enemy (or outsider) is, then the course of action, guidelines for continued behavior, etc are much simpler. You don't have to question or change the rules. You just focus on the one who doesn't fit. Of course this is in essence what happens when we individualise and pathologise non-conformist behaviours. And it's easier to identify when this happens with a person, or group of people, who is ostensibly different from us. For example, as we know, it's all too easy for us to blame those who look different, or speak or dress differently, but what about those who have different roles? Academics can blame practitioners (for not understanding theory well enough or even being anti-theory, or for not wanting to undertake research and integrate it into their practice) or managers (for conforming to the latest consumerist policy or round of funding cuts). It's ironic isn't it that we have learnt not to "blame the

victim” so instead we “blame the different”. And in the case of budding critical sociologists, it’s often “blame the powerful”.

Trouble is, as we also know, its not that simple. It rarely is. What happens when you discover that the practitioner actually loves theory, but it’s a different type of theory from the one that you tout? What about when the practitioner wants to undertake research, but it’s a very different project from what you are interested in as an academic researcher? ...what is the “othering” we engage in which hinders us from connecting with people who we deem different from us in all the complexity of what it means to be a human being trying to survive in difficult circumstances (some shared and some not)? What categorizing do we do which glosses over the detail of both differences and similarities we all have in the business of being human? And how should our understanding and integration of critical sociologies help us in this endeavor?

This dynamic of “othering difference” which we know so well as critical theorists operates in one other key way in our application of critical sociology. I return here to the split between the “macro and micro”, or between the “structural and individual” or the “political and personal” which I mentioned at the beginning of this talk. I know this may sound “old hat” and that we have supposedly outgrown such stark divisions. However I think they have just moved to a less visible back seat and are pulling the strings from behind. Why do I say this? Because good critical theory contains in it the foundations for

understanding and analyzing the link between personal psychology and social structure. Yet I still hear common talk which splits the two in artificial ways.

One example of this common way of thinking is that many academics are unsettled by the personal and emotional side of experience. Although in social work education many of us do I think, understand the integration of the personal and political, and do teach it, there is a wider academic and popular culture which still operates to mitigate this. We have not been effective in building this integrated understanding into the foundations of social work. Why do I say this? Because we see, right now, in British social work at least, a very strong move AWAY from sound critical approaches, towards perspectives like the relationship-based, in order to restore what is believed to be an inadequate attention to the person. I wonder why we turn to these relatively apolitical approaches when other approaches, such as narrative therapy (with its intricate development of critical post-structural ideas) exist? Where has critical sociology within social work gone? Why is it not at the forefront of practitioner concerns, and of the development of practice theory? Why is it so difficult to integrate a good political analysis with an understanding of peoples' psyches and have this play out in more equitable ways of empowering and relating to people? Is it because we haven't really mastered this ourselves in our own micro-relations?

Can we apply critical principles to analyze our taken for granted in academic social work? Will this help expose the superficialities, the gross social divisions and the easy

prejudices which get in the way of really engaging with the complex differences? Can we use this understanding of how we ourselves participate in, and help create these social divisions, to create a culture for more in-depth engagement, especially with people whose beliefs or world views appear ostensibly fundamentally different? I suggest we start by perhaps engaging in more depth with those around us, without assuming we know what and why they think. By trying to arrive at a more sophisticated understanding of each other and ourselves in our own peculiar biographical and social contexts, we might slowly create an environment for better engagement, right here and now.

It's up to us.