



Issues for Debate

Making power visible: Doing theatre-based status work with nursing students



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ABSTRACT

As part of a senior leadership class in an undergraduate baccalaureate nursing program in the north-eastern United States, we conducted an experiential, theater-based workshop designed to increase student awareness of the micro-dynamics of power and the enactment of status in their day-to-day lives. These exercises allowed student participants to embody status and power and understand it in ways that they did not after simply completing assigned readings. At the conclusion of the workshop the participants were asked to reflect on their status habits and the consequences of these habits in a single hand-written page. The participants' reflections showed two interesting trends. The first is that a relatively short workshop dramatically increased participants' awareness of power and status as ever present, including a substantial normative move from seeing using power as being a generally bad thing that can be justified in the interests of the organization's mission to a more neutral stance that power and status are at work in all of our interactions. The second trend that emerged was the tendency for participants to focus on agency-based explanations of power dynamics.

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Theatre work has been used in nursing education to enhance learning, promote the application of theory to practice, and to engage students in difficult subject matter, such as end of life care (Arveklev et al., 2015; Ekebergh et al., 2004; Middlewick et al., 2012; Tuxbury et al., 2012; Wasylko and Stickley, 2003). In this paper, we describe an experiential, theater-based workshop designed to increase student awareness of the micro-dynamics of power and the enactment of status in their day-to-day lives.

During the workshop, adapted from work by the actor-director, Piers Ibbotson (2008), two groups of senior-level baccalaureate nursing students were led through a series of theatre exercises to investigate power and status. They were encouraged to reflect on various elements (verbal, nonverbal, feelings, and thoughts) throughout the action. Those who attended also completed a “minute paper” reflecting on how they habituate status. We will begin with an introduction to the concepts of power and status in nursing, followed by a description of the workshop, and end with a discussion of the student's reflections. Our aim is to share our approach and generate discussion about how power might be

approached within nursing education.

1. Power in nursing education

Per the Institute of Medicine's *Future of Nursing* report (Shalala et al., 2011), nurses are expected to transform and lead health care as equal partners in interdisciplinary teams. Given this charge, it is imperative that nursing education include critical evaluation of the barriers to effective communication and collaboration. Power and status are recognized as potential barriers (Stein-Parbury and Liaschenko, 2007; Sutcliffe et al., 2004).

Despite a call for coursework that would promote critical awareness of socially constructed differences and of institutionalized patterns of power (Koch et al., 2016; McPherson, 2008), there is little evidence that nursing students are provided with opportunities to evaluate the role of status and power within nursing education and health care. Students form their professional identities as they move through their education. It is therefore important for nursing students to develop an awareness of status and power as part of their training, as their unchecked assumptions may adversely affect their ability to work in teams, to control their future practice, and to effectively advocate for themselves and patients they care for (Apker et al., 2005).

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Power is often framed negatively in nursing, as something imposed on someone, or as control over someone or something (Manojlovich, 2007), yet it is acknowledged that power plays an integral role in all individual life and group process. Nurses must be mindful of the power they have, a power that can be shared or held over patients and others, and that their ability to do their work is affected by power (Chambers and Thompson, 2009).

It can be difficult for students to understand how macro-level inequalities are enacted in micro-level interactions, which in turn reinforce macro-level inequalities (Phelan et al., 2014). These exercises allowed student participants to embody status and power and understand it in ways that they did not after simply completing assigned readings.

2. Status and theatre work

Foucault (cf 1982) theorized power as being ubiquitous and all of our social world being constructed through power relations – we cannot escape it. Despite its inescapable presence, we are mostly unaware of power in our day-to-day lives. The importance and pervasiveness of power in everyday relations became apparent to the theatre director Keith Johnstone (1979) when he was trying and failing to create a crowd scene on stage. After trying a variety of interventions, Johnstone introduced status goals to the actors. Some actors were told to try and enact a higher status than others, while others were told to enact a lower status. The addition of the status goals made the scene seem real and full of life.

Status has become a common tool in the theater world. For actors, status is not something you have, but rather something you do. You can lower someone else's status by interrupting them. You can raise your own status by standing taller and holding your head still. You can lower your own status by slumping your shoulders and dropping your knees inward. (These physical “power poses” are demonstrated in the TED talk by Amy Cuddy (2012).) What Johnstone had discovered was that these small ways in which we are constantly negotiating our relative status with others are the micro dynamics of how power is enacted.

A large part of the art of acting is about producing actions on stage that look authentic to the audience by consciously doing things that are normally done unconsciously in real life (cf Hagen, 1973; Meisner et al., 1987; Stanislavski, 1936). Status interactions are a good example of this. With a little work, almost anyone can learn to recognize and consciously manage status interactions – after all, we have been doing them our whole life. We are not always unaware of the power dynamics in our lives: the oppressed often know that they are being oppressed and we are pretty good at seeing how others are privileged. Nonetheless, until we learn otherwise, we are often unaware of how power plays out in our lives. Working with status can make those invisible micro-power interactions visible.

3. Doing status in the classroom

These two status workshops were done as part of a senior leadership class in an undergraduate baccalaureate nursing program in the northeastern United States. These senior students had been previously exposed to Forum Theater-based techniques (Boal, 1985, 1995) in the program when they learned about motivational interviewing. Other than the motivational interviewing training, only one student participant reported prior theatre experience. The second author of this paper was the instructor for the class, while the first author was an invited guest instructor for the theatre exercises. Both instructors have a background in the performing arts. The workshops were conducted with two separate groups of students, with half the class (roughly 25 students) in each group.

This workshop had been conducted and refined over several years and yields a variety of insights into leadership for both the participants and instructors (e.g. Ibbotson, 2008; Taylor, 2013, 2015). The workshops are 3 h in length and are broken into three parts: 1) warm-up and developing a sense of connection, 2) identifying methods for creating connection, and 3) identifying barriers to connection.

The first section started with some gentle stretching and physical warm-ups. Then the premise that leadership is based in how we connect to others was offered and this sense of connection explored physically through simple mirroring exercises. The idea of leadership and followership were explored with an exercise in which two participants touch index fingers. The follower closes their eyes and the leader then leads them around the room using only the shared connection of their fingertips while the rest of the participants form a wide ring around the pair. Each participant undertakes both roles and then each discusses their experiences with the group. The exercise is then modified so that both participants have their eyes closed and they are instructed to allow leadership to pass back and forth between them. While both participants are moving around the space with their eyes closed, the ring of participants keeps them safe. All students participated in pairs.

The second part of the exercise explores the idea of “yes, and ...” from theatrical improvisation (Johnstone, 1979). The exercise begins when one person makes an offer (asks a question) and their partner accepts the offer (answers the question) and then adds to it – saying, “yes” to the offer “and” adding more to it. That person then makes an offer (asks a question) back to their partner. The primary conceptual points here are that we can say, “yes, but ...” or “no, and ...” or “no, but ...” as well as “yes, and ...” in both theatrical improvisation and real life. The response of “yes, and ...” both creates connection and moves the scene forward in interesting ways, while other responses both limit connection, sometimes even creating disconnection, and stop the scene from moving forward. The participants were not limited by reality or the truth and encouraged to say whatever came to mind. For example, one conversation, given in demonstration, was:

“Did you have breakfast on Mars?”

“Yes, and I had Martian bacon. Did you have breakfast on the Moon?”

“Yes, and I hated it. Did you like your breakfast on Mars?”

“Yes because I love all types of bacon. Do you like Martian bacon?”

The students described working hard to overcome the tendency to say “no”, which stopped the conversation.

That exercise was followed by a nonverbal, physical version that originates from Boal's Image Theatre. Pairs of participants were instructed to shake hands and then freeze in place. One participant unfreezes and then moves to physically say “yes, and ...” to the tableau forming a new physical image with the two bodies. The first person then unfreezes and moves to create a new tableau that says, “yes, and ...” to what they saw. Here again, a story unfolds as the pair collaborates.

The group discussed their experiences, including the differences between the cognitive and the physical “yes, and ...” exercises. Some shared that it was difficult for them to listen and respond in the verbal “yes, and ...”, as they were trying to formulate their responses before their partners finished their question (known in theater as “stacking”), illustrating how difficult it can be to just listen and the tendency we have to be thinking ahead instead of

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