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Learning to think differently: Diversity training and the 'good encounter'

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ABSTRACT

At a time of ongoing economic and social insecurity the capacity to live with difference is under renewed strain. In this context, community outreach organisations and projects of intervention that deal with diversity-related tensions are essential. This paper provides an empirical account of a diversity workshop run by an international organisation that aims to cultivate more peaceful modes of coexistence through attention to the everyday formation of prejudice. The paper has two key concerns. The first is to attend to the techniques employed to facilitate encounters with difference and to unpack the constructions of prejudiced thought. In the context of growing debates around the possibilities and challenges of coordinated contact, the paper engages with work that has articulated alternative ways of responding to difference through an attention to practices of embodied thought. The second concern focuses upon the conditions that make new ways of thinking possible and argues that in order to understand how such organisations might affect positive change, it is vital to understand how such workshops take-place. The paper therefore attends to the role of memory, habit and the working of particular affects such as shame, to open up a discussion about the ways in which workshop exercises might resonate beyond training events. The paper concludes with some reflections upon the implications for policies concerned with behavioural change in the context of developing relations across difference.

1. Introduction: An encounter

> *I take hold of her hands and casually make a comment that I know will offend her. I am ill-prepared for the response; am thrown backwards as she pushes against me. Eyes wide, she thrusts her face inches from mine. With cheeks flushed, she swears at me; insults me; struggles to break free from my grip. I fight to maintain my composure; am deeply embarrassed by the volume of her voice. I become aware of my palms and try to stop the nervous giggle caught in my throat. She shakes me, draws upon all kinds of descriptors – describes the figure that embodies all that she is fighting against. She stops as abruptly as she had begun. The muscles in her jaw flex; she maintains eye contact. I am fixed to the spot and my shoulders are tense. She closes her eyes and exhales. I feel her grip loosen. She opens her eyes and looks sheepish, "sorry... I guess I've just heard that one too many times..." (Workshop diary, 2009)*

In this encounter, a threshold of tolerance is crossed. Upon hearing a cruel comment the woman responds with unexpected force. She is compromised by the encounter, which is felt through the body – her flexed muscles, increased adrenaline and rapid breathing. Her state of agitation and rage is witnessed through her violent movements and wide eyes as she draws upon past experiences to describe the body that she believes herself to be struggling with. Particular histories of encounter are clearly reopened and brought forth to affect her reactions in this particular moment. The outburst is surprising and takes hold of her within seconds. Moments later it is replaced by an apologetic tone as she seeks to qualify her response.

This particular account was taken from my time spent with a diversity leadership-training group in the UK, and depicts an exercise designed to encourage people to talk about their experiences of prejudice. The group that facilitated it is dedicated to the elimination of a broad catalogue of social conflicts. Described as an international not-for-profit network, it works with a range of individuals, groups, teams and communities to tackle prejudice and oppression in its multiple forms. Taking the form of city and regional branches across Europe and North America, it is reliant upon voluntary workers who undergo leadership training for the effective facilitation of prejudice reduction and conflict resolution in their own communities and organisations. It thus responds to particular episodes of violence, including 'gang violence' in Chicago, growing Islamophobia in London, anti-Semitism in Vienna and community work following the riots in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley in 2001. Yet the violence that the individual reacts to in this opening account is not a nameable event or a particular episode of conflict; it is rather more prosaic. It is a reaction to the violence wrought by state-led policies that have normalised particular ways of living to the detriment of others. It is a reaction to

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misconceptions circulated by the media; to casual prejudices and cruel remarks in the street; a response to indirect discrimination in the workplace and the long-lasting, detrimental effects that it has had on a family over time. As such, the imaginary perpetrator that the individual is fighting against is not an individual – is not even a particular encounter – but represents multiple encounters, spatialities and contexts over time.

As Haldrup et al. (2006) have suggested, it is in everyday rhetoric – people's perceptions of others and the way in which they speak of and to them – that we find the on-going legitimation for violence. It is (re)produced in banal acts; 'bodily and sensuous practices' (p. 174) and small, often unnoticed 'linguistic markers' that shape and are further shaped by a 'contemporary common sense' (p. 175; Allport, 1979). It is also central to what is considered to be 'the normal state of things' – an invisible or 'objective' violence (Zizek, 2008, p. 1–2) that is the product of cultural domination and contemporary political frameworks (Darling, 2013). Whilst multifaceted and at times difficult to name, it is these forms of violence that the workshop primarily seeks to engage.

This paper thus examines a series of training exercises that aim to promote new 'knowledge practices'[1] (Adam and Groves, 2007) that alter how individuals see their role in effecting social change at an everyday level. In so doing, it details the varied techniques and exercises utilised by The Group in order to address and further unpack the organisation of prejudice, its everyday occurrence, and the normalising tendencies of state regulation (Brown, 2006). This is vital at a time when economic uncertainties and growing social insecurity place the ability to live with difference under considerable pressure and when the UK government is placing emphasis on the voluntary and private sector to drive locally-led action to tackle social intolerance and prejudice (DCLG, 2012). It thus feeds into debates concerning the challenges of social sustainability in contemporary societies (Valentine, 2008) and positions the workshop within a bewildering array of strategies designed to manage diversity – from policies of multiculturalism, community cohesion and integration (DCLG, 2012), through to citizenship education, programmes of conflict resolution and diversity documents and legislation (Ahmed, 2007a). Within this context, the paper has two central concerns. First, it considers how the mechanics of positive coexistence and the potential to live otherwise are located at the 'level of implicit assumptions and naturalised habits of mind' (Adam and Groves, 2007, p. 182). Secondly, it is concerned with the conditions that make new ways of thinking possible, further connecting with work concerned with how particular spaces can influence pedagogy (Cook and Hemming, 2011) and asking to what extent they can alter sensibilities *beyond* such spaces to affect behaviour in the longer term.

The paper thus makes a number of geographical contributions. Firstly, to the study of prejudice, which as Valentine (2010) notes, has been relatively understudied within geographical work. In focusing upon its taking-place, ordinary affects and spatio-temporalities, it brings work concerned with experimentations in thought together with recent work concerned with theories of habit (Bissell, 2012) and the relationship between affect and identity (Tolia-Kelly and Crang, 2010) at a time when neuroscientific studies are increasingly concerned with the role of affect in matters of prejudice (Amodio and Devine, 2006; Brubaker et al., 2004; Dotsch and Wigboldus, 2008). Secondly, through an account attentive to the possibilities of managed contact in a particular spatial context, it feeds into work concerned with the geographies of encounter which has sought to document its 'potential to disrupt pre-conceived boundaries and social stereotypes' (Leitner, 2012, p. 1). Finally, whilst the paper focuses on the micro-contexts of a diversity training workshop, it highlights the significance of understanding the minute workings and techniques of a training-model that is transported, learnt and adopted across a trans-national network.

I therefore begin with an overview of recent work that has articulated alternative ways of responding to difference, which are centred upon practices of embodied thought and critical reflection. Having outlined recent concerns with behaviour change in the social sciences and the growing body of literature attentive to the *taking-place* of prejudice, I draw upon the writing of William Connolly (2002, 2005), who advocates a greater reflection upon the patterns of thought that construct identity/difference through an 'ethic of cultivation'. This links to work concerned with *experimentation* in ethico-political practice (Darling, 2010; McCormack, 2003, 2010; Popke, 2009) and invites the question as to what would happen if such practices of cultivation were taken up by programmes of conflict management or diversity training. This paper thus examines both the possibilities and limitations of such experimentation in practice.

The paper details a number of exercises that have been designed to cultivate new knowledge practices by dissecting the elements that make up and further organise prejudice and social intolerance. The discussion and subsequent accounts arise from an eight month period of ethnographic research during which I conducted interviews, diary-interviews[2] and focus groups with both participants and facilitators. These were conducted alongside participant observation of workshops and observant participation on a small number of occasions – which demanded a much more personal and indeed much more uncomfortable exploration of prejudice than I had previously intended. Alongside a focus upon the ways in which participants are made aware of the instincts and patterns of thought that orientate their daily interactions, the paper details the points at which participants are confronted with the 'cruel effects' of their habits to locate the moments in which it becomes 'ethically incumbent' to devise strategies to work upon their patterns of thought in the future (Connolly, 2002, p. 29). In so doing, I look at the forms of attention and attachment that are developed within workshop spaces and the shared feelings that are facilitated, with particular attention to the role of discomforting emotions such as shame.

Finally, the paper reflects upon the implications of this work for the everyday challenges of co-existence. In so doing, I question whether the critical reflection and new ways of feeling addressed in this paper can ever be achieved in spaces other than those regulated by conditions of conduct and thus whether this kind of work can ever be enough (Darling, 2010). I therefore consider the afterlife or resonance of such spaces and what implications or lessons there might be for social policy work concerned with conflict management and the development of relations across difference.

2. Learning good judgement

There has been a growing focus upon behaviour change and the ways in which the state has sought to shape patterns of thought, order human beings, and classify identity and belonging (Pykett, 2012). Academic scrutiny has focused upon the criminalisation of behaviour (Burnett, 2007) the codification of shame or anxiety (Cobb, 2007; Pykett et al., 2011) and attempts to shape how we feel about ourselves and the nation through ever more discrete or

[1] Here I borrow Adam and Groves' (2007, p. 199) term which refers to the 'performative nature of knowledge' and highlights 'its active and constitutive side' to convey the belief that 'transformed understanding and new knowledge [can] change our action potential'.

[2] Twelve participants volunteered to keep diaries for a month after the workshops. These were used to reflect on their experiences and how and if they utilised the techniques learnt. Five diaries were returned and one formed the basis of an interview which focused upon the diary entries.