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Negotiating discursive positions within a police culture: critical reflections of a student researcher

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I traverse a number of identity boundaries every day within a work context. This paper discusses the blurred boundary of two identities - (1) a part-time PhD student undertaking a cross-jurisdictional study of police training and education and (2) a full-time, 'unsworn' employee advising on education and training at a police academy. Study and work are concurrent. I describe myself as a token insider – different, partly accepted, yet tolerated, or alternatively as an outsider-insider. It is taxing to maintain an outsider's standpoint in a police organisation. My role regularly places me in a position of challenging the dominant ideology, D/discourse (words, beliefs, thinking styles) and subcultures whilst experiencing the imposition of power by the dominant to accept the status quo. Frustration combined with a desire to name and reframe everyday experiences has led me to engage in critical reflection, enlist a critical friend, and undertake doctoral research. As an outsider-insider, critical reflection is a tool that enables me to negotiate discursive positions by questioning my engagement and subject position within and against the taken-for-granted and unquestioned dominant D/discourses.

Keywords: D/discourses, identity, outsider-insider, critical reflection.

Introduction

The central focus of this paper is my engagement in critical reflection to address the blurred boundary between the "practice" and "research" contexts (Schön, 1991, p.147) of my work and student identities. I view reflective practice as a learning process with a generative intent: initiating actions and conceptual and behavioural change (Cressey, Boud & Docherty, 2006; Høyrup & Elkjaer, 2006). This is best achieved through critical reflection with a focus on power relations within "social, cultural, and political" dimensions of work and experience (Høyrup & Elkjaer, p.35), and questioning that which is taken-for-granted.

Shortly after I commenced work with the police organisation, dissatisfaction with my comprehension of daily experiences led to postgraduate studies and research. In my Masters thesis I identified dominant subcultures and prevailing D/discourses in recruit training (Ryan, 2008a), and analysed the power and truth within the D/discourses. D/discourse is defined as the correlation between "language-in-use" (little "d" discourse) and other elements (big "D" discourse) such as symbols, tools, values, and thinking styles (Gee, 2005, p.7).

In this paper, boundary, in relation to identity, is understood as a "conceptual construct" (Barth, 2000, p.20) and a framework that "separates what [it] distinguish[es]" (Barth, p.27). In terms of identity formation, a social and cultural construction of identity and capacity for "agentic action" (Billett & Pavlova, 2005, p.196) are applicable given the complexities of my practice context and my "subject position[s]" (Fairclough, 1995, p.39).

I cross a number of boundaries on a daily basis. One of those crossings relates to the title of 'unsworn' being applied to those of us who are not police officers, who have not taken a 'sworn' oath. Another is associated with the gendered nature of policing. Women are under-represented in executive, senior and middle management ranks, with the majority at the rank of constable. Combine this with the organisation's paramilitary ethos, its traditional hierarchical structure, hegemonic masculinity, and power relations, and my position and identity within and against these characteristics become more complex. The next section provides insights to my practice context and the tensions within it that contribute to my disequilibrium.

Disequilibrium – outsider-insider, practice context

I lack collegial affiliations in my practice context, unlike my previous experiences where supervisors and others were from the same or similar disciplines. When discussing professional issues, it is often necessary to deliberately establish a common ground for communication and understanding. Complicating this is the practice of transferring police officers every two to three years. This necessitates regular repetition of the process in an environment where I feel I am not fully accepted. This contributes to my disequilibrium.

My efforts to model, educate and encourage links between theory and practice are converse to the dominant D/discourse and practice, and are met with a degree of incredulity and hostility. This can be understood in part because policing is about "common sense, judgment" (Vinzant & Crothers, 1998, as cited in Marenin, 2004, p.109) and quick and decisive action which is proof of expertise, rather than the thought guiding that action (Bonifacio, 1991; Moon, 2000; Reiner, 2000). A focus on action and the subjective nature of the content therefore points to a difficulty linking theory and practice (Moon).

Critical reflection that questions assumptions and "...the taken-for-granted that influence individuals' thought and action" (Reynolds, 1998, as cited in Høyrup & Elkjaer, 2006, p.35) is unwelcome in a police organisation. Cressey et al (2006, p.23) note a number of situations in which critical reflection might be impeded, including where decision making rests with a limited number of individuals who know "the *right* way to proceed". The complexity of my practice context provided impetus for my decision to arrange external professional supervision in addition to postgraduate study and research.

Situating the study

The concepts outlined here represent firstly literature I am engaging with in my research context and, secondly, concepts that inform the critical reflections of my identities and the discursive positions that I negotiate within my practice context.

D/discourse

D/discourse that is the combination of language and other elements enacts "socially situated identit[ies]" and "taken-for-granted stories" to produce "situated meanings" (Gee, 2004, pp.40-41). Through social and cultural interactions, D/discourses create meaning and identity, and establish multiple truths or realities through "procedures" and "the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true" (Foucault, as cited in Cherryholmes, 1988, pp.34-35; Zembylas, 2005). Within my practice and research contexts, I have come to comprehend the D/discourses and their "disciplinary effects" (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000, as cited in Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004, p.238). The inflexibility of D/discourses, offering limited and

prescriptive realities or truths, means individuals' choices in terms of identity and agency can be constrained (Foucault, as cited in Dick & Cassell, 2004). This is certainly evident in my practice context within the dominant D/discourses.

Identity

Power, institutions and D/discourses function as “vehicles of classification” (Jenkins 2008:45) and impact on individual and collective identities (Fairclough, 1995). Institutions construct collective identities through roles, procedures, and D/discourses (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002; Zembylas, 2005), and construct the individual's stance towards “outsiders” (Fairclough, p.52). Individual and collective identities, or the “biographical” (“subjective”) and “relational” (“objective”) dimensions of identity (Dubar, as cited in FRAME Consortium, 2007, p.33), become “entangled”, with “difference” and “similarity” central to individual and collective identities respectively (Jenkins, 2008, pp.37-38). These individual and collective conceptions of identity resonate in a police setting with particular subcultures that enact similarity and belonging versus difference and exclusion.

The “biographical” and “relational” dimensions (Dubar, as cited in FRAME Consortium, 2007, p.33) of both my work and student identities are tempered by the interactions I have with others in the workplace. I regularly experience a lack of recognition by others of both my identities. This then impacts upon the strength of the “biographical” dimension and the boundary of my identities.

Boundary

Barth's (2000, p.20) notion of boundary as a “conceptual construct” resonates with Fairclough's (1995, p.25) claims that “ideological-discursive formations”, founded on hegemonic subcultures and discourses, represent forms of conceptual boundaries. This is underscored by the assertion that organisations “impose ideological and discursal constraints” on employees, thereby prescribing particular “subject position[s]” (Fairclough, p.39). In my practice context, the D/discourses offer limited and prescriptive realities or truths that create tension and stress on my identity and agency.

Agency

I have “a suspiciously narrow range of options” (Hall, 2004, p.1) with which to conform. These are complicated by the concerted efforts of individuals to maintain the status quo and to “exclude and marginalize unwanted members” (Owen-Pugh, 2007, p.92). Elias and Scotson (1994, as cited in Owen-Pugh, p.92) refer to “established-outsider relations” which enact exclusion and marginalisation through monitoring procedures and using discursive strategies such as “blame” and “gossip” (Owen-Pugh, p.92).

Nevertheless, Cohen (1994, as cited in FRAME Consortium, 2007, p.41) argues that individuals have “a choice of roles and performances even under a situation of constraints”. Further, McNay (2000, pp.2-5) refers to the “generative paradigm”, as opposed to the “negative paradigm” (i.e., passivity and compliance). The former has a productive capacity that enables explanation of the individual's creative response to challenging and different situations which might “hinder, reinforce or catalyse social change”. The generative paradigm is central to my practice context and my reflection upon it. I operate as an active “*identity worker*” (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002, pp.621-622) through activity *and* resistance; positioning myself simultaneously within and against the social, cultural, and institutional constraints (Klein, 2004).

Subjectivity

The complexity of subjectivity is captured in Gagnier's (1991, as cited in Hall, 2004, pp.2-3) description of its dimensions: "a subject to itself", "a subject to, and of, others", and "a subject of knowledge... [or] the discourse of social institutions". Hall argues that subjectivity is dynamic in that it is in response to tensions between prescriptive definitions and individual interpretations of those definitions, and enacting existing definitions versus enacting different possibilities. I regularly experience tensions between the role and subject position ascribed to me within the dominant culture and D/discourses, and by attempting to enact different roles and subject positions.

Police culture

Police culture is dynamic; being continuously produced and reproduced (Chan, 1996 & 1997; Chan et al, 2003; Foster, 2003; Sackmann, 1991; Reiner, 2000). Shearing and Ericson (1991, p.487) define police culture as "figurative logic" whereby culture is not literal. Instead, it is symbolic, rhetorical, and metaphorical: it is the product of narratives and 'war stories' which justify action. This conception of police culture resonates with the notion of D/discourses as "...a set of ideas and practices which condition our way of relating to, and acting upon, particular phenomena..." (Knights & Morgan, 1991, p.253).

The literature on police work, culture and leadership reveals common characteristics that are inherently interrelated, dynamic and need to be viewed as products and resources of D/discourses. These characteristics can be explained in terms of three subcultures that I named in my Masters thesis: "*family-relationships*", "*command and control*", and "*real police work*" (Ryan, 2008b, pp.6-8). A description of these is incorporated into the explanation of the dominant D/discourses.

D/discourses, subcultures, discursive positions

I distinguished three prevailing D/discourses in police training: "*Warrior*", "*Tough-love family*", and "*Perfect self*" (Ryan, 2008b, pp.9-14). These D/discourses will be explained along with the interplay of the three subcultures noted above. These D/discourses and subcultures coalesce to establish identities and to connect and disconnect identity boundaries for myself and others (e.g., police recruits and trainers). In explaining these D/discourses, statements of some of the recruits and trainers are included to illuminate the potential impact of the D/discourses. Examples of my position within and against the D/discourses are also provided. These represent what I contend with on a daily basis.

Warrior D/discourse

<i>Female</i>	"Males are always believed to be the stronger and tougher sex."
<i>Male</i>	"At some stage throughout the course ALL the females have been emotional (upset, crying) and no males have."
<i>Male</i>	"Being tough, strong and aggressive."

Gender and the body as a political object (Foucault, 1977; Westmarland, 2001) are at the heart of the "*Warrior D/discourse*" (Ryan, 2008b, pp.9-11). Whilst many types of masculinity can exist simultaneously, one type can dominate (Hearn & Collinson, 2006) and become "culturally exalted" (Connell, 1995, p.110). This is certainly evident within this D/discourse. Underscoring this D/discourse are the "*command and control*" and "*real police work*" subcultures (Ryan, pp.6-8). The former is founded on the paramilitary ethos and strict hierarchical command structure (Bonifacio, 1991; Heidensohn, 1992; Cain, 2002; Fleming &

Lafferty, 2003; Kappeler, Sluder & Alpert, 2001; Palmer, 1994; Panzarella, 2003; Waddington, 1999a) which represent a “punishment-centred bureaucracy” (Waddington, 1999b, p.301). The “*“real” police work*” subculture (Ryan, pp.6-8) signifies: “crime-fighting” and a “sense of mission” (Reiner, 2000, p.89); state power and the legitimate use of force; physical strength, power and ability to take control; and authority and compliance (Silvestri, 2003; Westmarland). A consequence of the *Warrior D*/discourse is that gender becomes a powerful resource, a “rationale” and an “outcome” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.126) for both females and males. The representation of policing as an essentially masculine occupation through D/discourse and images permits gender and other differences to be constructed and maintained (Brown & Heidensohn, 2000; Garcia, 2003; Silvestri; Westmarland). Garcia asserts that female police officers adopt various styles or “subject position[s]” (Fairclough, 1995, p.39) in response.

From my perspective, to be a woman is an issue, let alone a woman in an advisory role. An experience that reflects my subject position within and against the context of the *Warrior D*/discourse relates to an end of course review meeting with a team of police trainers. I was one of two females. The other female was an administrative constable. I had identified some practice issues pertaining to the timeliness of assessment feedback and language that was disrespectful and focused on the individual rather than her/his performance. In response to my recommendations, a male officer strode down the length of the table, and pointing his finger close to my face, expressed his anger at my feedback.

Tough-love family D/discourse

<i>Male</i>	“Team, loyalty, strength, unity.” versus “Look after mates, gossip, and bitchiness.”
<i>Female</i>	“It’s a huge gossip factory – if you don’t hear your own name, you must be doing OK.”

The “*Tough-love family D/discourse*” (Ryan, 2008b, pp.11-12) is about internal relationships, conformity, membership, and identification. It coalesces with the “*family-relationships*” subculture (Ryan, pp.6-8) characterised by solidarity, a common identity provided by peers (family) and the organisation (parent) (Bonifacio, 1991; Fielding, 1994; Neyroud & Beckley, 2001; Prenzler, 1998; Reiner, 1992, as cited in Shanahan, 2000; Waddington, 1999b), and tempered by support *and* punishment (Bonifacio, 1991). The *Tough-love family D/discourse* is both a product and resource of the dominant culture, the power relations inherent within it, and hence circumscribes individuals’ subjectivity and agency. It is about membership and acceptance within an organisation, occupation, and a peer group, and how one is “Othered” by others (Hall, 2004). “Othering” can be understood as a consequence of a number of D/discourses which construct difference and enact “Othering” based around a number of factors such as gender, sexuality, commitment to the family (peers) and the parent (organisation), and lack of conformity.

Experiences that reflect my subject position within and against the context of the *Tough-love family D/discourse* involve being regularly introduced and described as ‘unsworn’ thereby “Othering” me and implying a sense of difference and inferiority, and being told by a male senior sergeant, “You are only an adviser, so you can wait to be asked.”

Perfect self D/discourse

<i>Male</i>	“It’s <i>us</i> (police) versus <i>them</i> (general public).”
<i>Female</i>	“Insular, us and them mentality, and elitist.”

Male “Must not allow the public to get under your skin and change your course of action.”

Image, discipline, separateness, the ability to handle self (Westmarland, 2001) and a sense of superiority underlie the “*Perfect self* D/discourse” (Ryan, 2008b, pp.13-14) and combine with the ““*real*” police work” and the “*family-relationships*” subcultures (Ryan, pp.6-8). The *family-relationships* subculture is built upon the need to be or be seen to be perfect (Bonifacio, 1991; Neyroud & Beckley, 2001; Shanahan, 2000; Waddington, 1999a & 1999b). This supports the “*real*” police work subculture which is grounded in operational policing and political and legal sanctions to control society (Manning, 1977). The *Perfect self* D/discourse and complementary subcultures support the development of particular thinking styles that maintain culture, D/discourses, and power and gender relations. Central to this D/discourse is an élitist identity. Adlam (2002, pp.27-28) refers to the “socio-biological élitist rationality”, built on the notions of legitimate power and authority (Silvestri, 2003), the belief that police “know best” (Adlam, pp.27-28), and an obligation to “look the part” (Frewin & Tuffin, 1998, pp.178-181). The élitist identity and maintenance of image and reputation bring into play the “we/they [police/public] paradox” (Perez 1997, as cited in Garcia, 2005, p.68), and exemplifies an organisation’s capacity to construct a particular stance towards outsiders (Fairclough, 1995, p.52).

An experience that reflects my subject position within and against this D/discourse relates to being regularly excluded from meetings and decision making relevant to my role. The team of trainers I work with are police officers who are untrained in instruction and assessment, but whose capacity to train is judged on their abilities as police officers. Whilst they receive introductory training in instruction and assessment, the process of educating them is repetitive. The introductory training has been met with resistance and some hostility. Trainers’ comments indicate their perception of learning as “supplative” rather than “additive”: threatening their perceived level of mastery (Atherton, 1999, p.78). Their deliberate exclusion of me could be seen as a combination of factors: their perceived level of mastery as a police officer; their perceived ability following introductory training; an élitist attitude; or a commitment to maintaining the status quo. My subject position is based on a lack of understanding and acceptance of my role and the need for specialist input.

Equilibrium – Critical Conversations

I negotiate a number of discursive positions which contribute to my disequilibrium. This section details the nature, focus, and value of critical reflection and critical conversations. My personal and professional beliefs and “histories” are central to how I reflect upon my experiences and how I participate in my practice context (Billett, 2007, p.62).

I often describe myself as a token insider – different, partly accepted, yet tolerated. I am therefore an outsider-insider who is “part insider” and as such I need to be “able and willing to question organizational assumptions...” (Klein, 2004, p.176). Through the critical conversations, I look beyond the “situational factors” and examine a number of personal factors including my conceptions of the context, sense and demonstration of agency, energy, and personal and professional commitment to work and learning (Billett, 2007, p.62). I regain “equilibrium” and avoid “burn out” (Klein, p.182) through critical reflection.

Some organisations are open to and actively recruit outsiders because of the value of outsider perspectives (Klein, 2004). Others are closed to outsiders (Klein), aiming to maintain the

status quo through exclusion and marginalisation (Owen-Pugh, 2007). Organisational barriers to learning and change include: “homogeneity in ideas” and practices (Yeung, Ulrich, Nason & von Glinow, 1999, pp.50-51), “experience” being valued over “scientific reasoning” (Klein, p.72), and adherence to hierarchical structures and processes.

An outsider-insider’s capacity to critique things from an outsider perspective often conflicts with the reality that she/he must work with the opportunities *and* constraints of the culture (Klein, 2004). Klein (p.173) warns that “holding on to outsider views is not easy in organizations with deeply engrained cultures”. For me to continue working in the organisation, I have to make compromises and have limited engagement with the D/discourses. I therefore find myself standing simultaneously within and against the dominant D/discourses.

The subcultures and the dominant D/discourses mentioned earlier represent dominant “ideological-discursive formations” (Fairclough, 1995, p.25) with associated “discourse norms” and “ideological norms”. These are viewed as “common sense” and impact on individuals’ identity, subjectivity, and agency through the construction of particular “ways of talking” and “ways of seeing” which are “inseparable” and resistant to challenge (Fairclough, pp.40-41). I regularly encounter people, words, procedures, symbols, and thinking styles that are antithetical to my thinking and practice. I engage in “reflection-in-action” through “back-talk” and a “conversation with the situation” in order to develop an “understanding of the situation beyond initial perceptions” (Schön, 1991, pp.147-148). “Reflection-on-action” (Schön, p.276) occurs through conversations with my principal thesis supervisor and my critical friend.

These critical conversations enable me to comprehend and resolve practice issues through structural analysis of the “ideological-discursive formations” and their associated norms (Fairclough, 1995, p.25), and through the application of a range of theoretical lenses to the analysis. Thus, I have explored the various functions of the role and my professional practice framework. “Ideological-discursive formations” (Fairclough, p.25) are seductive and these critical conversations assist me to resist them. The value of these critical conversations is elucidated in the following examples.

I regularly experience a lack of power and the imposition of power (Young, 1990). The advisory functions of my role, combined with my professional commitment, often place me in a position of challenging the dominant ideology, norms, D/discourse, and practices whilst being subjected to the imposition of power by the dominant to conform and accept the status quo. I experience “difference against” (Burbules, 1997, p.108). The critical conversations assist me to recognise my questioning and advice as a legitimate form of “agentic action” (Billett & Pavlova, 2005, p.196). The dominant D/discourse and norms however establish it as a form of resistance and/or a personal deficiency, as opposed to maintaining professional integrity.

It is challenging to question that which is taken-for-granted or to suggest something different in a police organisation where conformity and following orders are required (Høyrup & Elkjaer, 2006). Those who do engage in critical reflection are often labelled as “troublesome” and marginalised (Høyrup & Elkjaer, p.36); outsiders are judged as “high maintenance” and “more trouble than they are worth” (Klein, 2004, p.128). Through these critical conversations, I have been able to explore the “marginalisation” (Young, 1990, p.53) that I experience. I have come to realise that it is directly related to my gender and role. I often experience

exclusion from or tokenistic involvement in strategic and other matters that are directly attributable to my role. I am not informed of meetings, my opinion is not sought in meetings and, I have to interject and offer advice or be ignored. To be a woman and to be assertive therefore challenges the history, culture, practices, and stereotypical perceptions of females as passive and in subordinate roles.

I represent “foreignness” and “strangeness” which are characteristics of “difference beyond” (Burbules, 1997, p.106). This also typifies “cultural imperialism” (Young, 1990, p.58) where the validity and reality of other D/discourses and ways of acting are imperceptible to the dominant. As such, my “subject position” (Fairclough, 1995, p.39) is the effect of the inflexibility of dominant D/discourses (Foucault, as cited in Dick & Cassell, 2004) or, to varying degrees, the “disciplinary effects” of the D/discourse (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000, as cited in Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004, p.238). These critical conversations help me to put these D/discourses into context and enable me resist the “disciplinary effects” of the D/discourses. I have come to understand the daily workings of the organisation, its subcultures and D/discourses, and I have the capacity to engage in “agentic action” (Billett & Pavlova, 2005, p.196) through a willingness to question “...the status of unnoticed or unquestioned certainty” (Reynolds 1998, as cited in Høyrup & Elkjaer, 2006, p.35).

Conclusion

My research and the critical conversations I have with my principal thesis supervisor and my critical friend have lessened the impact of the seductive nature of “ideological-discursive formations” (Fairclough, 1995, p.25) on my subject position as an outsider-insider. My critical reflections are about “hunting assumptions and posing questions” (Brookfield, as cited in Høyrup & Elkjaer, 2006, p.35) that focus on the “social, cultural, and political” rather than the individual, and with attention to “power” (Høyrup & Elkjaer, p.35). Through a structural analysis of the “challenges” and “organization” and the “social interactions at work” (Høyrup & Elkjaer, p.29), I learn about myself, my “subject position” (Fairclough, p.39), and my agentic capacity.

Thinking critically about practice can be perceived as “intimidating” and is often misunderstood as “finding fault” (Verlinden, 2005, pp.16-17). In a highly regulated setting such as a police organisation where finding fault or weakness is a feature of the *family relationships* and “real” *police work* subcultures, to ask “why” is often perceived as threatening and unacceptable (Høyrup & Elkjaer, 2006). Opportunities for critical reflection are reliant upon structural, cultural, and procedural situations. As Cressey et al (2006) note, a number of situations, typical of a police organisation, impede critical reflection.

I often feel vulnerable and professionally compromised, but through activity, resistance, and persistence, I bring coherence and equilibrium to my work and student identities. My critical reflections and actions are motivated by a personal and professional desire and commitment to understand my perceptions and to bring about change (Schön, 1991). I have come to understand the organisation, its subcultures, dominant D/discourses, thinking styles, and training practices, and how these operate in productive *and* restrictive ways. But, simultaneously, I am constantly seeking opportunities for learning and change for myself and others.

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