Leaning into the Tensions of 'Lived' and 'Living Experience': The Ethics of Representation in the Social Work Classroom

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Abstract

Critical and feminist scholars contending with the ethics of representation in research have asked whether, or not, there is truly an ethical way of representing others. The ethics of representation refers to the good and harm that can result from the ways in which we, as researchers, and I contend here, as educators represent others. As a social work educator, not unlike others, I bring into the classroom examples from the field of the lives and identities of the people, families or communities, disadvantaged along intersecting social dimensions of power, with whom I worked. I do so cognizant that I am representing "Others" who are unable to represent themselves or have been [mis]represented, not only in the education system, but across systems: health and mental health, criminal justice, child welfare, or immigration. I am also cognizant that in the classroom are students with lived or living experiences of the very issues we are interrogating. Although I open classes with a qualifier about emotional triggers, self-care, and the importance of boundaries and of using the space for learning, rather than cathartic release, the acknowledgment of lived or living realities always produces awkward moments and unacknowledged tensions. Against the backdrop of these tensions, in this paper, I consider the implications of the ethics of representation for the classroom and conclude by suggesting decolonial and feminist practices of "multivocality" and of "reflexivity" or "reflection-in-action-in-action". I suggest that rather than engaging in voyeuristic learning practices of "gazing at the Other", or passing over the tensions, we lean in, and that the tensions become the "Other-case" for learning with the classroom reconfigured as the field we are aiming to change as social justice-oriented practitioners.

Keywords: *education, ethics of representation, lived or living experiences, Other or Othering, reflexivity*

Introducing the Tensions: Representations of the "Disadvantaged Other" in the Classroom

Critical and feminist scholars contending with the "ethics of representation" in research have asked whether, or not, there is truly an ethical way of representing others. Broadly, the ethics of representation refers to the good and harm that can result from the ways in which we, as researchers, and I contend here, *as* ***educators****,* represent others, the peoples and communities whose lives and conditions are at the centre of our social justice-oriented work [1], [2], [3], [4]. More than drawing attention to the harms that can come from "how" we represent others, the ethics of representation draw attention to "how who we are" come explicitly or implicitly into those representations, and in turn, cause or uphold harm. Falling under the purview of relational ethics, the ethics of representation align with critical and feminist pedagogies that question the ways curricula, instruction and assessment practices, as well as student-student and student-educator relationships can both uphold or disrupt unjust social relations, processes, and conditions [5], [6], [7], [8]. As a critical social worker and educator, I have always understood and treated the classroom as a microcosm of society – a place and space where racism, classism, sexism, cis-genderism, heterosexism, ableism, sanism, ageism, colonialism, and other forms of oppression, disadvantage, and marginalization are materially and symbolically reproduced and upheld, as well as confronted and resisted [9].

Additionally, my teaching and learning are organized by pedagogies of liberation that emphasize the transformative power of education for students and educators alike, positioned as both learners and knowers*.* I am committed to "interrogating the power differentials between educators and learners, encouraging empowerment and community building, acknowledging lived experience as 'a way of knowing', and respecting diversity" (p.1547) [10]. Although the academy has long faced criticisms for subjugating and erasing lived and living experiences as important knowledges and ways of knowing [11], critical social work pedagogies consider lived knowledges as important for our theories and training [12], [13] [14], [15]. Not unlike other educators, I bring into the classroom life stories as "case studies" or "cases from the field" of the people, families or communities with whom I worked – the "disadvantaged Other" – who as a structural dimension of their personal and

interpersonal experiences were unable to represent themselves or have been misrepresented, not only in the education system, but across systems: health and mental health, criminal justice, child welfare, or immigration. By bringing into the classroom their stories, lived and living experiences are represented [16], and from there, we engage in reflexive practices of interrogating power and the structural conditions of their lives imagining the changes that could and should occur for a more just society [17], [18], [19].

Additionally, I am cognizant that in the classroom are also students with lived or living experiences of the very issues we are interrogating, issues over which I am expected to demonstrate a certain level of "professional expertise" as a social work and instructor. Although I open sessions with qualifiers about emotional triggers, self-care, and the importance of boundaries and of using the space for learning, rather than cathartic release, the acknowledgment of lived or living experiences can produce awkward moments and unacknowledged tensions. For instance, sharing experiences of "mental illness" can trigger concerns related to the stigma of mental illness and of being judged or constructed as "incompetent" and other sanist microaggressions, such as the use of references like "crazy" or "this is crazy" [20], [21], [22]. Learning about race, racism, and racialization can trigger for white students fears of being called "racist" and shame of being implicated for upholding white supremacy [23], [24], while anti-racist and anti-colonial educators continue to raise concerns about the harms racialized and Indigenous students experience. These harms include microaggressions, such as the covert and overt dismissals of white supremacy and racial discrimination constructing it as issues of the past, or of being constructed as "angry" or as "white-passing" [25], [26], [27], [28], [29].

As an instructor, a major tension I experience is how voyeuristic and self-serving it can sometimes feel working with lived and living experiences (whether it be cases from the field or personalized disclosures) for the purpose of preparing and professionalizing students to become "social workers". From within decolonial studies, "voyeurism" refers to the ways in which the colonial logics of subjugation and erasure in the academy are reproduced and maintained through practices and processes of treating some people, the "disadvantaged Other", as objects to be gazed at, exoticized, and studied [30]. As a critical social worker, I am conscious of how, at times because of "who I am", ***I pass over*** the tensions and ***I lean on students***, racialized and other students with experiences of disadvantage, to verify, uphold, or give legitimacy to the knowledges, representations, and analyses I present as the instructor. Despite the best of intentions, by leaving the tensions unacknowledged and unaddressed, colonialism, white supremacy, and other forms of domination are upheld, reinforced, and reproduced by "who I am". As mentioned, critical and feminist scholars of the ethics of representation question whether, or not, there is truly an ethical way of representing others. They complicate notions of "objectivity" suggesting that the idea of a "neutral" or "unbiased" stance from which we can see and know, and thus, represent the people, communities, and the world is impossible; and instead, we are understood as positioned and located ***within social relations of power*** organized around our race, class, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, able-mind-bodiedness, age and generation, Indigeneity, and geopolitical geographies and locations. In other words, our representations of others are not apolitical but interconnected and intertwined with "who we are" and with "where we see and know the world" [31], [32], [33], [34].

Ethics of Representation: Moving from Asking "Who Are You" to Asking "What Histories, Relationships, Conditions and Experiences Bring You Here?"

As educators, the choices we make from the topics, theories, films, and reading materials we choose to include in a course, to the assignments, exercises, and activities we encourage or discourage, to the ways we present lived and living experiences are all influenced and organized by our intersecting embodied experiences, our lived and living experiences of our race, class, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, able-mind-bodiedness, age and generation, Indigeneity, and geopolitical geographies and locations. From a relational perspective, many argue that an ethical practice is "to make our gaze transparent" by disclosing our identities and social positions, not as a list of characteristics, but for ***how*** those categories and positions organize our interpretations and interactions with others [35], [36], [37], [38], [39]. At the opening of and throughout any course I teach, my aims are to facilitate conditions of open-mindedness, humility, and vulnerability for students and myself to open-up, suspend our fears and epistemic arrogance, and learn from one another.

Setting the stage for these conditions, I open courses with "introductions", an exercise of answering the question, "who are you" by sharing our names, pronouns, professional goals, and what we bring to and hope to learn from one another and the course materials. As an initial activity, introductions are an example of how lived and living experiences are invited into the classroom.

Moreover, throughout the course students are asked to consider how "who they are" – how the intersecting, interlocking social dimensions of their embodied experiences inform and organize their analyses and interpretations of the materials, the people, and issues under study. As suggested

> ...you may locate your epistemological claims, theoretical allegiances, and positionality on the various axes of recognized difference, but perhaps you also ought to mull over what your work cultivates and cuts off in you, what brings you to it, what you are looking for and thus likely to find (p. 616) [40].

As noted, revealing our stance by listing the categories or dimensions of our identities is not enough, and instead, questions of "who are you" shift to questions about "what histories, relationships, experiences, and conditions bring you here", bring us to the analyses and interpretations we make? The ethics of representation assert that it is not enough to show how we produce our interpretations, but that we locate ourselves and our interpretations within the ideological and institutional contexts from which the accounts are produced [41], [42].

Informed by this assertion, along with "introductions" I also open courses with a political historicizing, offering "acknowledgements" of the Lands; the Treaties over which the Lands are governed as the legal expectations of settlers (Stewart-Ambo & Yang, 2021); and of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples (and all other Indigenous nations referring to "Canada" as the context) whom from time and memorial are stewards and caretakers of the territories on which the classroom and university are located. As stated,

> …it is in our most intimate spaces (e.g., our bodies, the people that we are in community with across place, space, and time) that power operates most transparently to reveal its most stubborn dynamics. In declaring these truths, we provide critical knowledge about the politics of power that keep us trapped in the matrix of domination and/or shift us into a matrix of liberation (p. 781) [43].

While my efforts are to shift towards questions about the histories and legacies we carry [44], land acknowledgements are criticized as "performative" and "tokenistic" [45], [46], [47], [48]. Sometimes I feel that along with being voyeuristic, acknowledging lived and living experiences in the classroom is also performative and tokenistic.

Representations of others are the outcomes of epistemological and institutional processes. I understand that unless we reveal our "selves", or perhaps more accurately, our "politicized selves" over "place, space and time" for scrutiny, we run the risk of reproducing the very conditions we are attempting to change – performative educations embedded in colonial logics reproduced onto the bodies of students and other people who are or have been objects of our professional gazes as social workers. Representations reflect certain knowledges and ways of knowing and being, while obscuring and subjugating others. They reflect colonial logics of "singularity" – the filtering of diverse knowledges and ways of knowing and being towards a singular and essentialized way of knowing and being. Rather than engaging in voyeuristic practices of "gazing at the Other" [49], [50], I suggest ***we lean in***, and the tensions become the "Other-case" for learning with the classroom as "the field" we are aiming to change. The reconfiguration of the classroom, as a colonial territory, begins with a stance of "decolonial not knowing" – an epistemological approach for resisting the colonial logics of "singularity".

"Leaning In": Reconfiguration of the Classroom Through a Stance of "Decolonial Not Knowing"

As a social work educator, I am institutionally sanctioned to work with knowledge, specifically with knowledge about the human condition, social problems and their solutions – to produce, share, present, or endorse certain knowledges over others. As an epistemological process, when I present a case from the field – the disadvantaged Other – I take the details of their lives, interpret those details, and then [re]present those details as "knowledge". The same can be said of lived and living experiences of students and educators, alike. As the instructor, I decide what details are important, and in what ways those details should be [re]presented as the "problems" or "solutions" under study. Together, students and educators consider "professionalized", "social work" interpretations of those details and then [re]present those interpretations as "expert knowledge" [51]. In the professionalized "social work" descriptions, the person, their experiences, their communities, and the details of their lives and histories become subjugated, and ultimately unrecognizable against the professionalized renditions [52], [53], [54], [55]. For an action-practice-oriented discipline like social work, I also [re]present that knowledge as personal, interpersonal and social interventions for how the disadvantaged Other should be "treated" – what practices should be used and for what aims.

Ironically, while lived and living experiences in the classroom are ways of recognizing lived knowledges as important, epistemological differences are nonetheless erased through voyeuristic practices of commodifying, reducing, and treating people "as problems" [56]. The person and their conditions become objects, commodities for learning, and lived and living experiences in the classroom become tokenistic gestures of inclusion and diversity – tokenistic gestures of "social justice". The reconfiguration necessary of the classroom, and of education more broadly, starts with adopting a stance of "not knowing". From studies in cultural humility, "not knowing" is interconnected with ideas of "not acting on our assumptions" and instead, "assuming a posture of not knowing", which then in practice translates to "asking and continuing to ask for clarification", rather than assuming to know the other person [57]. This is what I suggest is the current practice, a problematic practice, for how lived and living experiences are treated in education that inadvertently reproduce the colonial logics of voyeurism, commodification, tokenism, and singularity. Delinking from colonial logics require epistemological versus cultural approaches or practices.

As a way forward, in research, there are calls for moving away from an ethics of representation to an emancipatory ethics grounded in a commitment "that the marginalized have a moral right to own and control knowledge produced about them" (p.p. 48-49) [58]. Others suggest that what is required is a democratization of social relations [59], [60], [61]. In liberatory pedagogies, this moral imperative is also recognized as important [62], [63] and relies on an epistemological (versus cultural) stance of "not knowing" born out of border or borderland epistemologies. Border or borderland epistemologies refer to the knowledges and ways of knowing and being born out of conditions of struggle and resistance to encounters with colonialism and coloniality as systems of domination and subjugation [64]. From border or borderland epistemologies, "not knowing" refers to a posture and practice whereby we "recognize and refuse the epistemic conceits of singularity by inhabiting the undecided situation" [p. 90) [65]. The premise of a "decolonial not knowing" is that we reject arrogance, epistemic arrogance, and the beliefs and practice that we have right to know another person's ways of being, knowing, and knowledges, and in turn are entitled to act on that knowledge and ways of knowing and being as if they are our own. As an educator, I understand the idea of "inhabiting the undecided situation" to mean resisting against approaches and practices of singularity, essentializing and universalizing knowledges and ways of knowing and being, and instead, practicing "decolonial not knowing" through two practices: 1) reclaiming "multivocality" [66] and 2) "reflexivity" as "reflection-in-action" [67] for practices of looking "with" [an]Other, rather than "at" the Other [68].

1) Practicing "Decolonial Not Knowlng": Embracing Multivocality

Rooted in border epistemologies, "multivocality" is anchored in assumptions that there are multiple ways of being, and in turn, multiple ways of knowing and knowledges of the same phenomena [69]. Within this framework, multiplicity and differences are valued, social power is organized and shared horizontally. The aims are not dominance and subjugation, but reciprocity and mutual growth, change, and learning. Multivocality centers practices that are not new, but that are reclaimed from what has always existed, for example, oral traditions of storytelling [70], but were subjugated, suppressed, and targeted for extermination by colonial and imperial violences [71], [72]. As an example of reclaiming multivocality, "encuentros" [translated from Spanish: encounters] are described as a praxis used in the 1980s and 1990s to bring women across Central America together to learn about and share their experiences of participating in revolutionary movements [73]. The "encuentros" were intended to document, support, and address the sexism and androcentrism women revolutionaries had encountered while in their fight for class justice. As a practice, "encuentros" are organized as horizontal exchanges and dialogues with all participants (women, observers, "educators") positioned as "testigos" [witnesses], while the exchange of the experiences is framed as "testigando" [witnessing], and the information shared are "testimonios" [testimonies]. Intentional to addressing the androcentric logics of the revolutionary movements, the erasures of women's epistemologies in their fight for justice, the aims of the "encuentros" were to visiblize the multiple knowledges and ways of knowing, being, and voicing women's experiences.

As a delinking from colonial reductionist logics, the aims are not to make visible the same experience, nor funnel diverse experiences through a process of essentializing, for example towards "best practices", but to make visible multiple voices and multiple realities of the same or similar experiences [74]. The implication for preparing professional social workers is that the classroom and social work training are reimagined, moving away from from being "experts of problems" (the disadvantaged Others) to being "facilitators" and "brokers" of epistemological differences where multiple knowledges and ways of knowing can emerge and flourish as non-hierarchical exchanges

and encounters. Critical to building pathways, the aim of social work education shifts from discovering, reducing, and professionalizing (colonial logics) to describing, voicing, and demonstrating complexities that make up the social world and the human condition [75], [76]. Critical for breaking away singularity, the exchanges and encounters are understood as resulting in more inclusive solutions or responses for addressing inequities because "professional knowledges" or "social work knowing" emerge out of and are constructed from more knowledges and ways of knowing and being, thus, are more inclusive of more epistemologies [77]. Intertwined with practices of multivocality are reflexivity as reflection-in-action for practices of looking "with" [an]Other [78].

2) Practicing "Decolonial Not Knowing": Reflexivity as Reflection-in-action for Practices of Looking "With" [an]Other

Broadly, "reflexivity" refers to a practice of self-reflection that occurs during our interactions with others [79], [80]. Reflexivity is differentiated from other types of reflection, such as reflection-on-action or critical reflection [80]. It is understood as occurring during the interactions, while reflection-on-action occurs looking back on interactions that has already occurred [82]. As a practice, reflection-in-action is useful for interrogating processes as they are occurring. Feminist approaches to reflexivity bring into question our claims to knowledge and to how power is enacted in our interactions and encounters with others [83], [84], [85]. Recognizing that power differences cannot be fully leveled because of the ways in which social roles and institutional power are organized along the social dimensions of a person's identities , the aim of reflexivity is not to erase differences, but to close the epistemological gaps between people [86] by moving each person in the exchange closer and closer to shared understandings of one another without losing or subjugating the "self/other" to one another [87]. Closing the epistemological gap does not mean coming to the same understanding but coming to multiple understandings which include mutual and mutually constructed understandings suggesting a third space. From decolonial or borderland epistemologies, this third space is understood as [an]Other possibility, and involves looking "with" [an]Other rather than treating the Other as an object, for example, of learning or research [88]. The classroom becomes the site for the third space.

The classroom is reconfigured from being a conceptual space of "expert knowledges" and "expert practices" to a space, place, and time for deep dialogue and contemplation where different epistemologies come together and interact with the aims of developing multiple, and some mutual and mutually constructed understandings of the issues, topics, and materials under study. The exchange is no longer conceptual but an exchange that requires us to interrogate our [inter]actions with one another as embodied experiences of one [an]Other as differently positioned learners-knowers [89]. The stance of looking ***with*** [an]Other has all parties in the encounter positioned alongside one another, not of experts of each Other, but as having different knowledges and ways of knowing and being, each epistemology just as relevant and important to the topic under study. Looking with [an]Other means abandoning, or at the very least, resisting notions of "expert" and "expert knowledges" and of knowing and speaking for Others. The classroom as a colonial territory is reconfigured as a space where subjugation and domination of expert knowledges are resisted, and multiple knowledges are embraced resulting in more inclusive solutions or plans for addressing inequities. Again, the implication for preparing professional social workers is that the classroom and social work training are reimagined as moving away from developing "experts of problems" (experts of the disadvantaged Others) to being "facilitators" and "brokers" – accompanying the processes of epistemological differences where multiple knowledges and ways of knowing can converge, emerge, and flourish as non-hierarchical exchanges and encounters and relationships.

Conclusion and Moving Forward

Throughout this paper, the implications of the ethics of representation from research were considered for education, and specifically social work education. To summarize, social work as a discipline is concerned with the human condition, with social, personal, and interpersonal "problems" and their solutions. Moreover, social work is a practice or action-oriented discipline, that is a discipline committed to social change and transformation at the levels of the person, family, communities, and institutions. Representations of others, and in the case of social work, representations of the "disadvantaged Other" are understood as constructions emerging out of colonial logics and epistemological processes: voyeurism, commodification, tokenism, and singularity in the classroom. In liberatory pedagogies, power differentials, empowerment, community-building, lived and living experiences, as well as respecting diversity are all considered important dimensions for producing a

more equitable, fair, and just educational system [90]. From the ethics of representation and border epistemologies, we include the democratization of social relations in the academy or what has also been referred to as relational reflexivity [91], [92], [93].

Moving forward, I wonder what it would look like if social work education was reconfigured outside of the academy, and instead, positioned fully in the community with curricula co-designed, co-constructed, and co-delivered with the people and communities we are socially and legally sanctioned to serve and support. While I recognize that many social work educators have lived and living knowledges, as asserted by the ethics of representation, even if we are closest to the issues under study, the representations are constructions that emerge from our positions as university-located and university-positioned educators/learners/professionals. In other words, having lived and living experiences is not an immunity from reproducing, upholding, or being the brunt of colonial logics of commodification, voyeurism, and tokenism in the classroom. By the time we make it to the university, regardless of our backgrounds, we are members of a professional elite, and our representations are constructions that represent our privilege as members of that elite. I am left unsettled by the tensions as they persist, and by the question of how a "decolonial not knowing" through practices of multivocality and reflexivity should be implemented when "social workers" and "social work practices" continue to be born out of the imaginations of "experts", "professionals", "educators", and "researchers" located and positioned primarily in classrooms and university settings? In my efforts to show the importance of lived and living knowledges, what I alluded to but never fully interrogated is the change required at an institutional level, particularly for of how we conceptualize "professional education". In other words, what would it look like if social work education and training for practice was reconfigured outside of the academy and positioned fully in lived and living knowledges as they occur in community in the local contexts and conditions of people's lives and realities?

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