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Teaching Note—Reification and Recognition in the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program

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Abstract

An Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program course is held in a correctional facility in which roughly half the students are from the university ("outside students") and half are residents of the facility ("inside students"). The author participated as a teaching assistant in an Inside-Out social work course on drugs and crime that was offered in a prison for men and interprets the observed and reported experience of students using Lukács' concepts of recognition and reification as discussed by Axel Honneth (Honneth, 2008). This teaching note explores the implications of the Inside-Out course for outside students' reification and recognition of people who are incarcerated, and by extension, members of groups that typically receive social work services. The pedagogical elements of Inside-Out courses that promote recognition and the limitations of the program are discussed.

Keywords: recognition, reification, Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, prison education, social work education

Reification and Recognition in the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program

"I feel like a human again" (Mr. A.[1], inside student, personal communication, September 15, 2014). This comment was made by a man who participated in an Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program course, a course held in a correctional facility in which half the students were from the university ("outside students") and half were residents of the facility ("inside students") (Inside-Out Center, 2016). While restoration of humanity as an outcome was echoed by several students at the end of the course, the student quoted above made this comment after the first night of class. This student's comment is not unique; rather, it is a typical, yet powerful, response to an Inside-Out course (Allred, 2009; Draus & Lempert, 2013).

It is the transformation of outside students, however, that was most striking. Most of these students were junior and senior undergraduate social work majors, preparing to work as "professionals" serving "clients." The distant, hierarchical relationships denoted by these terms is not what outside students experienced in this Inside-Out class. Instead, inside students were partners, colleagues, knowledgeable informants, and, within the limited time and physical space of the course, friends. This paper explores the implications of the Inside-Out course for outside students' reification and recognition of people who are incarcerated, and by extension, members of groups that typically receive social work services.

Reification and Recognition

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[1] For privacy, students' initials have been changed.

Reification and recognition are concepts that social theorist Georg Lukács used to describe the effects of capitalism on interpersonal relations (Honneth, 2008). Reification occurs when persons, who should be valued for shared humanity, are treated as things. Honneth describes reification occurring in increasing commodification of persons, as in one's labor being valued for productivity instead of creativity. Interpersonally, we are "urged (a) to perceive given objects solely as 'things' that one can potentially make a profit on, (b) to regard each other solely as objects of a profitable transaction, and finally (c) to regard [our] own abilities as nothing but supplemental resources in the calculation of profit opportunities" (p. 22). When we interact with people as objects, we become emotionally detached from those interactions and instead take a neutral, objective perspective. These relationships are then marked by a lack of empathy or engagement that is foundational to human interaction—in short, we lose a portion of our humanity.

Recognition, Honneth argues, is a basic acknowledgement of another person in a genuine, attentive way. In recognition, we are emotionally engaged to the point of understanding another's emotional disposition as one requiring some sort of response. We can ignore the things in our landscape and remain fully human; Honneth suggests that we fail to recognize the persons with whom we interact at the expense of our rationality.

Since recognition and attachment are foundational to early child development, and since we remain capable of recognition despite social structures that lead us to reify others, Honneth describes reification as a "forgetfulness of recognition," a neglect of the engagement that is foundational to knowledge of and relation to other people (p. 56). Though detachment is sometimes necessary for problem solving or maintenance of interpersonal boundaries, reification occurs when "we lose the ability to understand

immediately the behavioral expressions of other persons as making claims on us—as demanding that we react in an appropriate way" (p. 57-58).

As elsewhere in society, reification is present inside the prison system, embedded in American corrections policy, and at times, enacted in social work practice. Within the prison system, people who are incarcerated are often referred to by a number rather than name and are regarded monolithically—as outside students were told in an orientation by prison staff, "[The inside students] will try to manipulate you." Several inside students described imprisonment as "dehumanizing." Corrections policies also reify incarcerated individuals. In an era of increased privatization of public services, people who are incarcerated have served as justification for development and continued operation of for-profit prisons (Aman & Greenhouse, 2014). Prison labor practices have also reified persons who are incarcerated as a flexible workforce—a "cushion in a global economy," even (p. 391)—and a means to greater competition in globalized markets through reduced labor costs. Reification is embedded in these mass incarceration policies and practices.

Social workers can reify clients as things as well, by describing client "populations" with broad strokes and by application of evidence-based practices with a "what works for some will work for all" approach (R. Walker, personal communication, December 11, 2014). Social workers are also reified in some settings, when our labor is measured in billable minutes of productivity rather than therapeutic benefit or social change. Both persons who are incarcerated and persons training to be social workers stand to benefit from education that encourages recognition and not reification.

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program

Inside-Out courses can be taught on any academic topic. This Inside-Out course, Drugs and Crime, has been offered in most semesters since fall 2013. It is listed and taught under the College of Social Work in the fall and the Department of Sociology in the spring. Topics covered in the course include an overview of how illicit drugs have affected communities and individuals, the history of drug use in America, the relationship between drugs and crime, and public policy options. As in other courses, students completed assigned readings and papers. For the final examination, students gave group presentations on policy proposals that they developed during the last half of the semester.

Classes were held in a large room at a minimum security facility in a city in the southeastern United States. Class sessions began with students seated in a circle, alternating between inside and outside students. Sessions often began with large group discussion of assigned readings, followed by a content-related activity. In the second half of the semester, students worked in their assigned groups to develop policy proposals and prepare their presentations.

Student Eligibility and Acceptance

For this Inside-Out class, inside and outside students were selected via a written application and in-person interview. All people who were incarcerated at the institution hosting the course could apply, as could all students of the partnering university. In the semester reviewed in this paper, it was a course in the College of Social Work, so mostly social work majors and some psychology majors applied and were accepted into the class. Outside students were assessed for openness to learning about and from inside students, interest in future work in criminal justice or substance use treatment systems (due to the course topic, Drugs and Crime), and good academic standing. Outside

students were required to submit to a background check to screen for felonies and significant misdemeanors and were ineligible to take the course if they knew someone incarcerated at the facility hosting the course. The class did not fill with undergraduate students. Graduate students were then invited to apply, and three M.S.W. students enrolled in the course. In semesters when more outside students applied than there were spots available, students who were close to graduation were given preference over underclass students, who would have more opportunities to take the course in the future.

Inside students also applied via a written application and in-person interview with the course instructor. More inside students applied to the course than there were spots available. Inside students were selected based on having a high school diploma or GED, experience in college-level courses, and expressing educational motivation. Inside students who were nearing their release dates were given preference so that they could complete the course before leaving the institution. Prison staff reviewed a preliminary list of inside participants and removed some students from the course if they had disciplinary violations within the past six months or were in on violent charges. Due to previous rates of incompletion of the course due to student choice or transfer to other facilities, more inside students (19) were accepted into the course than outside students (14). Fifteen (78.9%) inside and twelve (85.7%) outside students completed the class, for a combined completion rate of 81.8%. This was comparable to course completion rates in other semesters (mean = 83.05%, range 75.6% - 91.7%).

Pedagogical Approach

The Inside-Out program describes recognition as one of its goals, though in different terms. The program describes itself as "education through which we are able to

encounter each other, especially across profound social barriers," which "allows

problems to be approached in new and different ways" (The Inside-Out Center, 2016, ¶

2). This is a significant, unique outcome. In a recent Inside-Out course, students

collaborated on group projects to address a problem in the criminal justice or drug

treatment systems. Inside students, primarily, were the resident experts that were able to

describe problems and how innovations to address them could fit within current policies

and programs. Outside students, generally, contributed relevant literature and

information on how the problem in question had been addressed elsewhere. As

advertised, this collaboration produced innovative approaches to problems in the criminal

justice and substance abuse treatment systems.

A more fundamental benefit is the recognition promoted by the pedagogy of

Inside-Out courses. Students are seated in a circle, and most sessions include a class

discussion of course material. Whether due to students posturing for position within the

group (Draus & Lempert, 2013), conditioned compliant responses to authority, or

selection bias towards participatory personalities, inside students' enthusiastic

participation in class discussions established a culture of expressing one's ideas,

responding in agreement or disagreement to other students, and occasional self-

disclosure. These interactions promoted recognition of others as persons with unique

histories and perspectives, involving "the whole person" in the educational process

(Pompa, 2013, p. 131).

This pedagogical approach also encourages students' new perspectives on

themselves, perhaps a form of self-recognition. Werts (2013), a former inside student,

observed that through the Inside-Out experience, he "expanded as a human being; I found

a larger vision for myself and how I was connected to my community and the rest of the

world" (p. 138). An outside student wrote, "This [class] was an amazing opportunity to

explore undiscovered biases" and an inside student wrote that he had been "inspired to

continue my education" upon release (Mr. B., personal communication, December 8,

2014). The Inside-Out experience allowed recognition of selves that are more than their

commodification; rather, selves that are capable of growth and worthy of nurture for their

own sake.

Implications of Recognition

One result of the recognition by outside students is that inside students describe

the weekly Inside-Out class meetings as a temporary break from prison (Draus &

Lempert, 2013). When asked what the course meant to him, one inside student said it

was "a moment of freedom," and another wrote that it was "a break in the monotony"

(personal communication, December 8, 2014). This is a positive outcome that could

result from recognition in almost any social work context. When social workers are

attentive to an individual as a person instead of a thing, one can imagine that the client

could experience a "moment of freedom" from exploitative or violent relationships, the

child welfare system, extreme chaos, or other situations that reify people into objects.

Recognition belongs in the helping relationship.

As predicted by Honneth (2008), mutual recognition resulted in empathic

engagement.   An outside student who was working in the criminal justice system wrote,

> I have gotten the opportunity to work with [inside students] as peers rather than
> clients. Furthermore, it is because of this that in my professional career I will now
> be more empathic to the struggles this population faces. Rather than see these
> individuals as offenders I will see them as individuals who have a lot to offer to
> society." (personal communication, December 8, 2014)

There is potential for this sort of empathy to result from a variety of social work students'

experiences with unfamiliar groups, such as in a field placement. However, some

students' field placements are in agencies that reify their clients through depersonalized

services, bureaucratic distance between service providers and recipients, and language

that "others" (e.g., "offenders" in the above quote). Further, students in field placements

are learning *from* their field supervisors and *about* client populations; in Inside-Out

courses, students are learning *with* inside students. Theoretically, learning together as

peers has greater potential for empathy development than typical experiences in field

placements, especially if students in field placements are at risk of developing

compassion fatigue (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). For the student quoted above, the

engagement born of recognition within the Inside-Out class will potentially sustain this

student's empathic involvement with his clients as he begins his career.

　　　　Recognition is a practice skill that is foundational for all fields of social work. As

the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2008) Code of Ethics indicates,

respecting a person's dignity and worth is a core value of the profession. It is possible,

however, to avoid disrespect but still fail to see a client or colleague as someone sharing a

common humanity with oneself. This deeper awareness, or recognition, may result in a

different type or outcome of social work practice, and further research is needed to

explore these potential associations.

　　　　Recognition may also help social workers avoid psychological numbing.

Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004) warn that in ethical decision-making, psychological

numbing can occur with repeated experience of the same ethical dilemmas "in which

self-reproof is diminished" over time (p. 228). This can cause the ethical nature of the

situation to became less clear and result in an inaccurate belief that we are acting ethically. Psychological numbing can also occur when we believe that since we have had several clients of a certain group, then we already understand future clients from that group—a type of "seen one, seen them all" fallacy. This is prevented by recognition of each individual, family, and community with whom a social worker works as unique, perhaps similar to others in some ways, but never in all ways.

The recognition that occurred in the Inside-Out class may discourage social work students from psychological numbing when working with people who are or have been incarcerated. An outside student wrote, "This class gave me faces to a population highly stigmatized. I will never look at anyone with a record in the same way" (Ms. B., personal communication, December 8, 2014). Recognizing the humanity and individuality of the inside students may help social work students avoid unethical practices related to reification of people who are incarcerated.

While a criticism of the philosophy of recognition is that it does not necessarily produce critical social action, sometimes recognition is a catalyst for social change. In this Inside-Out class, students were assigned to groups for completion of a program or policy proposal to improve the criminal justice or substance abuse treatment systems. Since groups were comprised of both inside and outside students, there was an attitude within the groups that the proposals would improve systems for ourselves and for those with whom we had relationships, not for a reified population of others (e.g., "the homeless"). In other Inside-Out classes and resulting organizations, social action has occurred as a result of and alongside processes of recognition. "These two strands: questioning and improving oneself, and questioning and improving the world, are a

theme in students' [Inside-Out] and [Theory Group] discourse" (Draus & Lempert, 2013, p. 148). That group has hosted prison-based academic and practitioner conferences on criminal and restorative justice, as well as trained new Inside-Out instructors. While our group social action ended with proposals, others' recognition has resulted in action.

At a minimum, the recognition made possible in an Inside-Out course disrupts and ameliorates a small portion of the reification that occurs both within the prison system and in wider society (Seidman, 2010). While it is true that Inside-Out has not affected social change regarding mass incarceration in America, and that the outside students who participate in the course are likely to be more sympathetic to individuals who are incarcerated than students who do not participate, the recognition of people behind prison walls can still be transformative. Like all individual-level actions, the potential to affect social change (in both the prison system and in social workers' reification of others) requires large-scale repetition that is unlikely to be accomplished by Inside-Out courses alone. Still, Inside-Out education offers students a chance to see beyond reified categories, with the hope of enduring impact on students' future work and perspectives.

Limitations of Inside-Out

Unfortunately, some aspects of the Inside-Out experience still perpetuate reification. As Van Gundy, Bryant, and Starks (2013) note, the intersection of prison systems, educational institutions, and the national Inside-Out program produces practices that can conflict with the values of one or more of the systems. Though the pedagogy used allows for mutual recognition among students, program policies dictate that these relationships end at the close of the course. While this is understandable given

perceptions (and perhaps realities) regarding student safety and protection from exploitation, it is unclear if recognition persists when engagement, empathic or otherwise, ends. A blanket "no contact" policy seems to return students to reified groups of others. The benefits of recognition, then, are for future relationships among social workers and people with incarceration experience, not for the benefit of ongoing relationships developed within Inside-Out courses.

Inside-Out courses are unable to address all social work students' possible reification of persons who are incarcerated. Some students are not eligible for the course due to past convictions or knowing someone housed at the facility where the course is held. Other students, it is presumed, are not as motivated to take the extra steps for participation in an Inside-Out course (e.g., apply to the course, travel to the prison for classes, follow prison's dress code). It is also likely that some students are fearful of entering a prison or interacting with incarcerated people. Also, Inside-Out courses do not currently have the capacity to accommodate *all* social work students in a given program, even if every student were eligible and interested in participating. Due to these limitations and others, Inside-Out courses cannot be a universal approach to address all students' reification of people who are incarcerated.

Further exploration is needed to determine whether this model can be replicated to promote recognition of members of other populations. Prisons are uniquely suited to Inside-Out courses due to the general lack of intellectual opportunities offered and the time that inside students have to spend on the course. While it is possible to imagine other community-based social work courses with a similar structure to Inside-Out, such as a course on substance abuse for students and residents of a rehabilitation facility or a

social welfare policy course that involves residents of public housing, residents and

clients of most social service institutions are involved for the purpose of receiving

services, not for additional educational experiences. Ethically, the course must provide

some benefit to all students—otherwise, the inside students (of whatever institution) are

simply being used for the edification of the outside students. Thus, replication of the

Inside-Out model to address social work students' reification of members of other client

populations should be attempted when advantageous for all students.

Conclusion

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program offers an educational experience to

social work students that simply cannot be gained in a traditional classroom. Ms. C., an

outside student, wrote, "[The course] has restored my faith in the education system

because school is more than textbook learning" (personal communication, December 8,

2014). It is also particularly important for social work students, who are preparing for a

career of engagement with persons in a variety of reified populations. The Inside-Out

model uniquely accomplishes an educational benefit especially needed in social work

education.

Admittedly, Honneth (2008) revived Lukács' work on reification and recognition

to understand how fellow humans could commit atrocities, such as those witnessed

during the Holocaust. Reification of future clients by social work students is not

comparable to these acts, and yet the concepts of reification and recognition are at play in

the profession. Social work education should prepare students to address students'

abilities to communicate with clients as people rather than things. Inside-Out courses

appear to accomplish this as a matter of course, and therefore might warrant a prominent

place in the education of social workers.

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