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CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

Reflections on group power differentials across one safety professional's career: In search of an optimal psychosocial safety climate

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Abstract

Background and context: The purpose of this paper is to declare my (EL's) conceptual perspective as a prologue to a PhD study on leadership and its impact on the psychosocial safety climate in the public sector. Using the reflection for action model, significant moments where the power differential between groups has resulted in the mistreatment of people are reviewed to illustrate how these events contributed to my worldview.

Aim: To critically reflect on my career and highlight my development journey from the time I became aware of the potentially deleterious impact of group power differentials on individuals. I and my co-authors argue that further study is needed to understand fully the reasons for the high levels of bullying reported in the public sector.

Conclusions: By reflecting on moments in my career, I have realised that power differentials between groups can be a cause of bullying in the workplace. The high level of bullying in the public sector is also not clearly understood and warrants further investigation.

Implications for practice:

- A person's current perspective can be formed by many key moments over time
- Group power differentials are predictors of ill treatment of people in the workplace
- Insights from reflection can have a positive effect on research practice

Keywords: Bullying, engagement, knowledge sharing, power differentials, psychosocial safety climate, reflexive learning

Introduction

It is common for social scientists to study a phenomenon in which they have a special interest. However, this interest can lead to the researcher being biased. To counter this, Bryman (2008) argues that social scientists should reflect on their research methods, values and beliefs and how they might impact on their research. How personal values are set aside to ensure objectivity is a matter of epistemological position. Social constructionists, for instance, argue for reflexivity and transparency about values, because this is part of the research narrative (Richie and Lewis, 2014), which contrasts with Bryman's (2008) assertion that values should be set aside. Richie and Lewis argue that researchers should provide much richer information, both in terms of technical details of research conduct and potential bias, to allow readers to assess the objectivity of an investigation for themselves.

My (first author EL's) interest in the power differential between different organisational groups and how this could lead to ill treatment in the workplace has led me to enrol in a PhD programme. I am studying the impact of leadership on the psychosocial safety climate of public sector organisations. This critical reflection provides an account of my career in safety management and presents a chronology of key moments in my career that have contributed to the formation of my worldview, and shaped my values and beliefs (Bryman, 2008). This critical reflection applies the reflection for action model to key moments in my career and is a first step towards Richie and Lewis's (2014) call for reflexivity and transparency in social research.

Reflection for action

The literature offers many models of reflection, but Schön's (1983) interpretation of reflective practice is a particularly useful starting point. Schön's model differentiates between reflection in action and reflection on action. While the former refers to reflecting on immediate actions to adjust actions in the moment, the latter is a process that takes place over a longer period and involves looking back to learn from experiences to improve future actions (Wain, 2017). Killion and Todnem (1991) built on this to present the reflection for action model. According to these authors, reflection for action is the desired outcome of reflection in action and reflection on action. They further argue that reflection, as embodied in Schön's (1983) model, is not done to simply revisit the past but is a process that 'encompasses all time designations, past, present and future simultaneously. The reflection for action model therefore facilitates examining past and present actions to generate knowledge that will inform our future actions' (Killion and Todnem, 1991, p 15).

Background

In 2013 my family and I emigrated to Australia from South Africa. As I applied for a skills visa, I was required to provide an in-depth account of my career as an occupational health and safety professional. The process of documenting my experience provided me with an opportunity to reflect on my career and, more importantly, to think deeply for the first time about how my experiences shaped me as a safety professional.

My early perceptions of group power differentials

My earliest recollection of the power differential between groups and how this contributes to ill treatment occurred around 1993, when my employer arranged a seminar, hosted by a scholar who had recently published his PhD thesis, *The Theory and Practice of Risk Management* (Valsamakis et al., 1992). What intrigued me most about this book was the graphic of a slave ship used on the cover. The authors wanted to draw the reader's attention to the fact that risk management was not a new concept; in this case, they went on to explain that when the ship hit rough seas some of the slaves were thrown overboard to reduce the risk of the ship sinking. For the ship's operators, this inhumane practice was a form of risk management. That example touched me deeply and made me conscious of power differentials and the negative impact of such power. Moreover, I felt the parallels between the slave ship example and the safety-management approaches of the early 1990s could not be ignored.

During this time, I became aware of two major incidents that illustrated how the difference in power between groups could lead to unjust safety outcomes and made me question the safety-management framework within which I was working. In the first incident, on 22nd February 1994, a tailings dam wall of a gold mine collapsed due to poor management and lack of expertise (Rico et al., 2008). Seventeen people from a mining village lost their lives and a further 600 were injured (Jones and Pearce, 1996). Many factors converged to cause this incident, but the scant attention paid to the management of tailing dams (artificial dams that store the byproducts of mining) – because they are not income-generating facilities – was highlighted by scholars (van Niekerk and Viljoen, 2005).

The second incident, on 16th December 1995, occurred when a fire at a sulphur stockpile released an estimated 14,000 tonnes of sulphur dioxide over a 20-hour period. Again, many factors converged to

cause this incident, but cost reductions seemed to be a driving force behind this failure (Batterman et al., 1999).

In both incidents those who suffered the most were those with the least power – the poor and marginalised of South African society (Jones and Pearce, 1996; News24, 2011). In the first incident, it was the economically vulnerable who lived next to the tailings dam; when the dam wall collapsed, an entire community was affected. In the second incident, the sulphur smoke, due to the prevailing weather conditions, affected a poor community that did not have the means to evacuate the area without assistance (Batterman et al., 1996). Many victims of this incident were reported to be suffering continuing effects of acute exposure to sulphur six years after the incident (Baatjies et al., 2019).

One of the elements missing in both cases was consultation with all stakeholders, including those with little power, such as the poor neighbouring communities. This is highlighted by Khan (2002), who notes that in a subsequent environmental impact assessment of the fire, the stockpile company only consulted the affluent farmers about the impact of the sulphur on their crops. At no point was there any consideration of the impact of the sulphur fire on the poor community.

Power differentials in the workplace

By 1997, I was working for a national transport utility when the industry was deregulated. In response to the deregulation, my employer engaged a consulting firm to lead a business planning and change-management project across all business units. I was selected to join the consulting group responsible for the change-management project and was introduced to concepts such as Ubuntu – an African philosophy that puts people at the centre of development (Karsten and Illa, 2005) and inclusiveness. We studied the organisation's readiness for change through the lens of diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers, 2003) and aimed to determine staff's perceptions of the prevailing organisational culture. The project soon reached an impasse, as we found few employees were willing to contribute to the focus group discussions. They did not feel safe to offer their views on the company for fear of retribution by management. Although we emphasised that no worker would be identified in the final report, widespread anxiety remained, resulting in little feedback from the focus group sessions.

Employees' unwillingness to participate in the focus groups was clearly as a result of the power differential between them and management. Although this exercise was part of preparations for deregulation, workers' perceptions were that they could be fired if they did not speak in favour of management. Although the concept was not yet in vogue, the psychosocial safety climate of the organisation was very low and proved to be an impediment to real change.

Ironically, I was one of those made redundant in response to the deregulation. I was, however, fortunate to secure an Australian international aid scholarship to study a masters degree. By this time, notions of equality, inclusivity, people-centred development and participatory management were integral parts of my consciousness. When I had to decide on a topic for my thesis, I leaned towards a study that reflected this conceptual perspective. I studied the development of a co-management arrangement in the South African abalone fishing industry. My study concluded that this arrangement was flawed as it did not adequately counterbalance the power differential between the local abalone fishermen, government representatives and the scientists who formed the management committee for the abalone fishery. In short, the co-management arrangement did not adhere to the fundamental principles of co-management, including inclusivity, equality of all members and group cohesion (Laloo, 2005).

Making a difference by applying our knowledge

In 2011 I was part of an alumni student group that had a brief audience with Emeritus Archbishop and Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Desmond Tutu. The archbishop impressed on us that our qualifications meant little if we did not apply our knowledge to the community.

By that time, I was also a part-time lecturer aiming to make a difference to aspirant safety practitioners by including the tailing dam and sulphur fire disasters as case studies in my lectures. Inspired by the words of Desmond Tutu, I wanted to make young safety professionals aware of the lack of inclusive and participatory elements in the prevailing safety-management practices.

Up to this point in my career I had observed the power differentials between groups as an outsider. This would change in the next chapter of my career. When I emigrated to Australia in 2013, I took up a position in the public sector. My role initially focused on physical safety but evolved to take on aspects of psychological safety. This role shift was how I became aware of psychosocial safety climate theory. This theory postulates that work conditions, worker health and worker engagement can be predicted when the psychosocial safety climate of an organisation is known (Dollard and Bakker, 2010). This theory is a major departure from earlier studies of psychological safety as it predicts workplace psychological safety by determining the psychosocial safety climate (Dollard et al., 2012). It therefore acts as a lead indicator of psychological safety in the workplace, whereas studies of stress, bullying and harassment are all lag indicators. I was intrigued by psychosocial safety climate theory and believed it offered practitioners an opportunity to determine the likelihood of psychological injuries occurring in the workplace.

As part of my new role I was required to implement a violence-prevention workplace programme. Getting all staff members' buy-in was difficult as there was discontent among some of the female staff regarding the programme. These staff members confided that there was no congruence between the organisation's culture and the violence-prevention programme, and gradually revealed to me a culture of bullying that was driven by some members of the leadership team.

I could not idly stand by. I had moved from observer to active bystander who intervened in a conflict situation without becoming a casualty of that conflict (Bloch et al., 2018). By this stage the expression 'the fish rots from the head' had become a part of the employees' idiolect and was regularly used to express staff's perceptions of the leader being the driver of the low psychosocial safety climate. On reviewing the literature, I came to realise that the situation in my workplace was not unique and that public sector organisations had much higher rates of bullying (Dollard et al., 2012; Hutchinson and Jackson, 2015; Plimmer et al., 2017). This increased my desire to understand why the industry in which I worked had this problem.

As part of a review of the violence-prevention programme (Laloo and Childs, 2018), I interviewed staff members and concluded that the leadership style was based on the leader-member exchange theory, which postulates that leaders form different relationships and categorise their followers into an 'in-group' and an 'out-group'. Preferred followers become part of the leader's 'inner circle' and are given resources, support and more responsibilities (Schriesheim et al., 1999). In the case of this workplace, the leader appointed trusted managers and support staff from his previous place of work. This, I believed, created an environment where the leader was surrounded by an 'in-group', not just at the executive level, but also at middle-management level, meaning the leader and his in-group's decisions, management style and behaviour were seldom, if ever, questioned. This amounts to a perfect setting for bullying, as suggested by Porter et al. (2018), who found that environmental factors like culture and the relationship between leaders and workers are strong predictors of bullying. Hutchinson and Jackson (2015) also argue that bullying should be viewed as a micropolitical exercise of power that is committed for influence or personal gain.

It was at this point that I started to seriously think about the link between leadership and the psychological safety in organisations. I was astounded by the number of people who confided bullying but would not report it for fear of retribution by managers. This reminded me of the fear people experienced during my change-management project.

The unwillingness to report bullying formally was compounded by the unique employment arrangements of my workplace. Due to the legislative underpinnings governing it, it resembled the contemporary workplace where many employees do not have tenure (Clarke, 2003). Non-executive employees were offered a maximum of three-year contracts or less. Staff perceived the renewal of contracts as a tool that could be used to prevent them from speaking out against bullying. I was concerned that the literature offered little insight into the power dynamics that could enable bullying in public sector agencies (Hutchinson and Jackson, 2015). It is hoped that my PhD studies will contribute to the reduction of this gap in the literature.

Reflecting on the journey

This reflection has revealed that my career has provided many opportunities to engage with macro-causes by investigating underlying or structural issues. The key moments that I have reflected on certainly contributed to the formation of my worldview, and my interest in studying the psychosocial safety climate in the public sector is an example of this. I have learned the importance of continuously reflecting on practice in the moment, but also on moments over time so that the reflexive learnings can provide insights into how to deal with future challenges. More importantly, through this reflection I have learned that:

- A person's current perspective can be formed through significant moments and incidents over time
- Regardless of the environment, group power differentials and contextual factors are predictors of ill treatment and warrant further investigation
- The application of knowledge and insights gained through reflection has a positive impact on practice

Implications for further studies

My experience and preliminary literature study have convinced me that the power differential between groups, as well as structural issues in the workplace, could be predictors of ill treatment and require further investigation. As a social scientist, it is however important to guard against bias (Bryman, 2008) and by laying bare my conceptual perspective I am taking a first step towards Richie and Lewis' (2014) call for reflexivity and transparency in social research. This suggests that my reflection is just one exercise in a range of reflections that I will have to do to ensure objectivity at every stage in my research.

In this reflection I used the reflection for action model (Killion and Todnem, 1991), allowing me to gain insights into how significant moments in my career, as well as the sum of these individual moments, have prepared me for the next step in my academic career. It is hoped that knowledge and insights gained through this reflection will have positive implications for practice development and will assist other PhD scholars and novice social science researchers on their research journey.

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