

Elite Knowledge or the Reproduction of the Knowledge of Privilege: Social Work Doctoral Education

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Epistemology is fundamental to feminism. This editorial grapples with the cultural norming process that influences the way knowledge emerges, is developed, and shaped. It makes a case that social work scholarship continues to be shaped by a dominant paradigm that controls knowledge production through the reproduction of white racial privilege, the acculturation of alternative perspectives, and the pressures of educational institutions that are tied to a market economy. Doctoral students in social work develop as new scholars in an environment driven by these forces. Because of this, feminist epistemology and methods often are relegated to marginal spaces in the education and mentoring of new scholars. This marginalization begins early as the pool of students from which to draw doctoral students begins to be shaped as early as middle and high school.

Consequently, an editorial on doctoral education must begin with considering the available pool from which doctoral program can draw its students. In this way, we must tangle with who has access and under what conditions students are successful in high school and institutions of higher education. Pew Research Center in a recent report again affirmed high schools are failing Hispanic students at a greater rate than any other racial group (this excludes American Indians as they were not a part of the Pew calculation; Lopez & Fry, 2013). In the same report, Pew Research Center noted that college enrollment declined between 2011 and 2012 for all groups except Hispanics high school graduates (who were already a dwindled pool). This report exemplifies the roller coaster ride of higher education access. Many youth of color are eliminated from accessing higher education because of school failure rates and when youth are successful (or as some may say, survive), the primary and secondary educational systems they choose to continue on to college.

Unfortunately, this already grim story of educational access does not paint a complete picture of the struggle of students of color to persist and thrive in a system of educational inequity (Salazar, et al., 2008). In July of this year, Georgetown University Public Policy Institute released a report entitled, *Separate and Unequal: How higher education reinforces the intergenerational*

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reproduction of White privilege (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). This report dissects the research on higher education access across racial and ethnic groups. It concludes that there are higher concentrations of white students, based on population share, in the most well-funded, selective 4-year colleges and universities. These, 468 institutions spend, at a minimum, at least twice as much on students as other lower performing institutions. The higher spending leads to “higher graduation rates, greater access to graduate and professional schools, and better economic outcomes in the labor market” (p. 7).

Conversely, Latino and African American students are concentrated in the least well-funded, open-access, 2- and 4-year colleges and that have significantly lower completion rates. These completion rates are attributable to institutions that are overcrowded and underfunded (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Ultimately, students of color who are the most successful at managing educational disparities become at risk of being excluded from graduate school participation because their institutions are not conducive to delivering quality adequately funded education. Again, the pool of qualified doctoral students is reduced not because of the educational prowess of students but because of the structural inequality that continues to promote economically and racially elite students.

The conventional thought in the academy is that diverse doctoral students who are training to be academics will bring diverse perspectives to the endeavor of scholarship and teaching. Perhaps this expectation does not account for the process from which students of color survive several rounds of educational elimination. The question then is about, what some of our colleagues might describe as the resilience and we will describe as the negotiation of conformity by marginalized students in a process that demands that they accept intellectual acculturation in order to be academically successful. Consequently, the nature, tenor, and texture of diverse voices are influenced, if not shaped, by the dominant acculturative process of education.

Social work doctoral education is not only a recipient of student whose formation occurs in the culturally bound institutions, but it also contributes to the continued shaping of doctoral students to produce research and scholarship that may include underrepresented populations but may also inadequately question the inherent structural inequalities that produces underrepresentation (and conversely reproduces privilege). The application of critical race theory to this scenario would lead us to believe that this occurs so that the power of the dominant culture is at best mildly questioned while reinforcing individual responsibility in the absence of critiquing the social structural designed to support racial and gender privilege.

The education and mentoring of social work doctoral students is and should be a concern of feminist scholars. Doctoral programs have been one of the jousting grounds about a number of topics fundamental to the academy such as the primacy of particular methods (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed), viability of research topics (and their fundability), and the maximization of effort to produce scholarship. Not surprising, these topics are replicated in the faculty search process, thus creating a context in which the market shapes many aspects of the body of work that emerges from social work scholars. This has resulted in the pushing of doctoral students to publish rapidly and frequently to be considered marketable. Ultimately, doctoral education is the forum in which the goals, values, and future of the academy are situated.

Feminist scholars should be concerned about an investment in social work doctoral student development that reflects a commitment to the development of scholars who can reflect an analysis that pushes our understanding of the social problems beyond individual concerns. Too often, students who are committed to communities and problems appropriate for qualitative research methods decides to move toward mixed methods for fear that their questions and methods will not be considered market-worthy. In this way, qualitative research is made viable only as it is paired with quantitative methods.

The responsibility for concerns about the types of research being produced by the academy, the shift to personal responsibility as opposed to social structures that maintain privilege, and

the concern about the muting of feminist perspectives lies with feminist scholars. Ultimately, our ability to drive the questions and investigate solutions grounded in feminist theory and research lies in our commitment to doctoral education. Our commitment to the next generation of scholars will most certainly determine the future of feminism in the academy.

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