

Running head: THEORETICAL CONCEPT

Theoretical Concept of Power vs. Oppression

Nicholas D. Hartlep, M.S.Ed.

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Date of Publication: December 5, 2008

Abstract

This urban synthesis paper encompasses the works of Drs. Joel Handler, Yeheskel Hasenfeld, Ann Winfield, John Rury, and Jean Anyon. The main purpose of this paper is to synthesize arguments contained within their books relating to the theory of power vs. oppression as it plays out within our society. This synthesizing acknowledges and elucidates the notion that power and oppression follow along predictable and verifiable lines of gender, race, and socioeconomic class.

### Urban Synthesis: Theoretical Frameworks of Power vs. Oppression

This final urban synthesis paper encompasses the works of Drs. Joel Handler, Yeheskel Hasenfeld, Ann Winfield, John Rury, and Jean Anyon. The purpose of this paper is to synthesize the foremost arguments contained within their books relating to the theory of power vs. oppression as it plays out within our society.

This paper acknowledges and elucidates the notion that power and oppression are predictable based on gender, race, and socioeconomic class. Utilizing the authors' theories I propose possible paradigms/solutions.

The aforesaid professors have each created their own theoretical framework. Handler and Hasenfeld's research examines the "welfare state." Handler and Hasenfeld (2007) assert plainly, "Women are more likely to be poor than men" (p. 39). They extend their argument by discussing the glass ceiling effect, showing, that "[...] gender discrimination continues to play a large role in the difference in earnings between men and women" (p. 40). The "glass ceiling" is most certainly a phenomenon we must treat with care and tackle head-on. The conjecture is that work done by men is highly valued, whereas work done by women is given diminutive significance. Consequently, men possess power within society, women are recipients of oppression. This unjust balance of power and oppression merits more focused attention. Gender equality will only take place when and if, this imbalance of power is corrected. As one can ascertain through the facts presented hitherto, a person's gender is a critical component within Handler and Hasenfeld's theoretical framework of welfare—informally a theory of empowered persons and oppressed persons. Of similar importance within this welfare theoretical framework is a person's race.

Handler and Hasenfeld specify, “Since the early 1970s, black-white male inequality has increased”<sup>1</sup> (p. 35). As we are able to deduce from the data used in the previous quote, impartiality is nonexistent in terms of racial equality. This lack of impartiality implies that the free world is not colorblind as many wish to believe. Institutionalized racism and prejudicial attitudes have and continue to be woven into the social fabric of the United States. Sadly, there also continues to be a clear division in relation to one’s race in regards to equality and fairness on several fronts. An example of this imbalance is the value society places on individuals. Whites have traditionally been treated as having more value than nonwhites. Clearly, a person’s race directly impacts their life experiences, however, socioeconomic status also plays a significant role in shaping a person’s life experiences.

Handler and Hasenfeld note, “Instead, the *most* [emphasis added] critical factors appear to be to socioeconomic ones” (p. 107). Both professors—Handler and Hasenfeld—go on to later posit that “[...] [S]ocioeconomic status itself is a proxy for many underlying factors” (p. 107). The notion that socioeconomic status serves as an approximation for many factors in life experiences makes common sense. One’s socioeconomic status is a significant factor in mitigating one’s potential life chances. An example of this mitigation is someone occupying a low-socioeconomic status. People occupying such positions in society have a higher likelihood of having little recourse in their ability to meet their fundamental needs and inadvertently more problems.

There are a myriad of problems that accompany the lives of people who constitute low-socioeconomic levels; an example could be access to proper medical care. Many

---

<sup>1</sup> In terms of earnings, incomes, positions of management/administration, and periods of unemployment, with comparable levels of education

working poor have no insurance therefore are unable to enter the health care system. Food insecurity also becomes an area of concern with those occupying a lower socioeconomic status. Food insecurity is when you are uncertain when your next meal will be, or you have to reluctantly skip one or more meals.

At the opposite end of the socioeconomic continuum are people occupying higher socioeconomic statuses. These people have adequate funds and adequate health care. These people have advantages people occupying lower socioeconomic statuses do not. Examples of these powerful and influential advantages include, but are not limited to the following: (1) access to quality education, (2) food security, (3) safe and affordable housing, and (4) lower levels of financial stress.

Handler and Hasenfeld's theoretical framework has a rich historical origin. This is a judgmental history, a history of blaming the victims, whom are traditionally women. It is helpful to keep in mind that Handler and Hasenfeld's theoretical framework of welfare is based upon inequalities preexistent within the social fabric of the United States. Handler and Hasenfeld so poignantly state, "The deserving poor programs are universal and administered at the federal level—Social Security and Medicare. The undeserving poor programs are administered at the state and local level—AFDC (now TANF) and general relief" (p. 187). As one can determine from the terminology used in the abovementioned quote, society clearly demarcates who the *deserving* and *undeserving* poor are through the use of value judgments.

Historically-speaking, the establishment of the deserving and undeserving poor, through legislation acted and continues to act as the catalyst for the social stratification we continue to witness in the twenty-first century.

Winfield's theoretical framework centers on eugenics in education. Power and oppression visibly flow through eugenic ideology. It (Eugenics), like the previous theory, follows along predictable and verifiable lines of gender, race, and socioeconomic class.

Eugenics is the aversive and racist attempt to create a perfect—Nordic—race. As Winfield clearly posits, “[...] [A]ctions in the present that preserve and promote oppression from the past are, in effect, paramount to depriving non-dominant group members from the influence, and thus the capacities therein [...]” (p. 27). The inequities that exist in education originate from eugenic practices of the past; however, the actions or inactions of current educators and those in the field of education have the power to either perpetuate or end the inequities therein.

Gender biases were and continue to be active in carrying out eugenic practices. Eugenicists manipulated information regarding gender based abilities as a means of creating problems that could only be mitigated through eugenic solutions. Holistically, eugenics perpetuated gender biases by encouraging women to return to more traditional home-maker roles. Racial biases were also salient within Winfield's eugenic theoretical framework.

Racial mixing was considered taboo and unthinkable under the banner of eugenics. Race was fabricated as a reliable determinant of one's innate and potential intelligence. Winfield states that as late as 1954, “[...] it might seem surprising that nearly 75% of African American students are classed as imbeciles” (p. 142). This classification was based on I.Q. testing. I.Q. (intelligence quotient) testing was an oppressive tool that was utilized to spread the false belief that African Americans were

less intelligent than whites. Society as a whole believed these tests were credible, therefore, indirectly supported African American inferiority.

Additional to racial oppression, socioeconomic class served as an element within Winfield's theory. Socioeconomic class is embedded and ingrained deeply in this theory of power vs. oppression within society. Social class was used to evaluate human worth. Social inferiority was something that was linked with one's socioeconomic status. If you occupied a lower socioeconomic status you were classified inferior to those above you in the socioeconomic continuum.

Winfield's way of thinking coincides well with the work of Rury. Rury's theoretical framework pertains to urban education. The critical components of Rury's theoretic purview, like the other aforesaid professors are gender, race, and socioeconomic status.

Gender inequality according to Rury (2002) could result from insufficient levels of education opportunity for women in the United States. Rury repudiates the notion that education is egalitarian when he states, "Early in American history women were largely uneducated" (p. 18). There were many reasons why women were largely uneducated; however, this is not the focus we need to draw, but rather, the mere fact that women *were* less educated than men is where we need to focus. Gender inequality has existed and currently thrives within our patriarchal, male-empowered society. Women have historically been oppressed and recipients of unequal treatment. Society has and continues to provide inordinate amounts of power to men. Another influential factor central to Rury's theory of power vs. oppression is race.

In examining educational opportunities, Rury (2005) states in the mid-1960s, “Overall, class sizes were 25 percent larger in Black schools” (p. 226). Class size(s) impacts learning. Lower class size affords more attention per pupil. The classrooms of Black schools in the past had disproportionately higher amounts of students than those of White schools. Why did Black schools and White schools not have equal class sizes? Again, asking this question is not as crucial as acknowledging that inequalities existed within Black—predominately urban schools—and continues to exist. Others and myself suspect that this racial inequality and oppressive protocol was tolerated due to the *de facto*, as well as, *de jure* segregation prevalent in this particular era.

Society undoubtedly acted under a discriminatory and biased manner for particular sections of the aggregate. This oppressive experience appeared within urban education and was pervasive. Regrettably, this power vs. oppression dynamic transcended into different areas of education. An example is the unequal distribution of financial resources within schools—particularly urban (Black) schools.

Rury states, “[...] [P]er pupil expenditures in majority Black schools were only two-thirds of those in White schools” (p. 226). White schools spent more money per student because they were given higher amounts of funding per student when compared to Black schools. This is a clear message that white students were predetermined to be more deserving when compared to Black students. This racial inequality oppressed blacks, while empowering and granting additional privileges to White students.

Unfortunately, Rury’s theory of power vs. oppression is successful, insofar as he states that “[...] social stratification was learned and enforced in personal relationships” (p. 20). Rury’s theoretical framework is based upon sociological principles. One of these

principles may include, socially-speaking, blacks being undervalued when compared to whites. This culture and attitude (power vs. oppression) is learned; therefore, social stratification is learned and continues to grow in credibility.

Deliberate social stratification is evident, in the practice of redlining. Redlining within the real estate industry is an oppressive practice which leads to the polarizing of socioeconomic status within cities. The byproducts of “white flight” were: a segregated citizenry and city; higher concentrations of African Americans in the inner-city, or urban city centers; and higher levels of poverty. The perversity of white flight resulted in an erosion of the urban tax-base, so profound, I argue it will be nearly irreversible. I make this argument because it will take prolonged periods of time to undo the already highly splintered metropolitan cities.

Socioeconomic levels are powerful within Rury’s framework because socioeconomic status affects many elements in one’s life. The oppressed inhabit environments that are *not* conducive to education, while the empowered inhabit educational-rich environments; environments that will serve to maintain the status quo; this is the powerful oppressing the powerless. Rury (2002) clearly posits, “Children with highly educated parents, for instance, have access to books, music, magazines, and media technology that may give them an advantage in school” (p. 7). I argue that a great many students in urban schools do not have these aforesaid luxuries; they quite possibly do not have anything. It is the power vs. oppression theory that serves as maintenance of the status quo. The powerful continue to oppress the powerless.

Rury’s theoretic purview is situated upon a diverse history. Rury (2002) states that “[..] cultural capital are highly relevant to education today, but every historical period

has been marked by one form or another of cultural advantage that can be transferred from one generation to the next” (p. 7). This quote speaks to the issue at hand that is deeply embedded within this theory of power vs. oppression—an issue of powerlessness a number of people face. Oftentimes the nature of poverty is that it is cyclical and cross-generational. It is the powerless—Blacks, the financially poor, the uneducated, etc.—who are the recipients of oppression being that they are the dominated group.

Anyon’s theoretical framework focuses on the idea that there are enumerable amounts of sociological factors which influence education. Anyon’s theory classifies gender, race, and socioeconomic class as sociological influences within society.

Society has the ability to grant power and oppress simultaneously. Society follows along predictable and verifiable lines of gender, race, and socioeconomic class. Gender biases saturate our world. Anyon (2005) indicates, “And women with post bachelor’s degrees earn less than men who have just a bachelor’s” (p. 34). The irony in this quote is that education is highly revered as the panacea for securing a financial secure life. However, given Anyon’s alarming information, it appears simply being a man helps individuals earn more money. This is given that you hold the factor of education equal. Additional to gender, race is a critical influence within Anyon’s theory.

Race is a quasi-determinant whether you will be an empowered or oppressed citizen. On frequent occasion, nonwhites are oppressed individuals, whereas, whites frequently maintain power in society. Racial power is exposed through institutionalized practices. Moss and Tilly indicate, “Thus, the increased desire by managers for soft skills may make it harder for non-White applicants, because it may increase racial discrimination by employers” (as cited in Anyon p. 42). Racial discrimination is

manifested through hiring practices. The soft skills whites possess, may *not* be the soft skills nonwhites possess. Keeping with this power vs. oppression dynamic, those individuals who are more often hired possess soft skills more aligned with whites.

Socioeconomic class has the power to either assist or hinder one's life. Anyon cites, "Persistent residential segregation still prevents large numbers of Blacks and Hispanics from moving to better neighborhoods" (p. 79). Socioeconomic status affects where one lives. The amount of money one makes and race influences what neighborhood a person will reside. Redlining is the singular contributor for the maintenance of racial apartheid in terms of housing.

Reflections of social and structural inequalities are harsh realities of the broader society that we must acknowledge exist. The United States continues to be a society plagued by racial, socioeconomic and gender discrimination, therefore, we must realistically think of possible solutions. I am hopeful our precarious problems are correctable. I would argue society must reverse the elements that have led us to where we find ourselves currently. For this reason I would argue redlining needs to be eradicated. Breaking apart the many enclaves that formed as a result of redlining will reduce racial segregation and serve to enrich the eroded tax-base. This mixing and movement of people from all walks of life can be realized through the assistance of the United State Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Low-income housing needs to be offered in all sections of cities and towns. Mobility programs need to be constituted and carried through these reforms.

We are naïve to believe there will be an improvement of power vs. oppression over night. However, we would also be naïve to believe we are incapable of improving

this dynamic. Those who possess power do not want change. They reap the benefits of oppressing others; however, the oppressed must acknowledge they have collective power if they work with one another. The veil will be torn and there will be a day of equality, we will overcome.

References

- Anyon, J. (2005). *Radical Possibilities* (M. W. Apple, Ed.). New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group. (Original work published 2005)
- Handler, J. F., & Hassenfeld, Y. (2007). *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 2007)
- Mertens, D. M. (2008, March). Which Public? Whose Interests? Two Points of View. *Educational Researcher*, 37(2), 101-105.
- Rury, J. L. (2002). *Education and Social Change: Themes in the History of American Education*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Rury, J. L. (2005). *Urban Education in the United States: A Historical Reader*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan. (Original work published 2005)