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(Dis)gracefully engaging with diversity learning – reflections on the social graces as a training tool

Lizette Nolte

Teaching about issues of diversity can be seen as primarily underpinned by a hope and striving for social inclusion and equality. This makes the present moment particularly challenging for anyone teaching in this area. All around us, there are many reasons to feel despair in relation to progress on issues of equality. I wanted to acknowledge this context, and the sense of responsibility that comes with it, as I reflect on the use of the social graces as a training tool.

In our own teaching (on the University of Hertfordshire doctorate in clinical psychology course) we have worked hard to resist tokenism, superficiality or ‘ticking a box’ when it comes to diversity learning, but rather we want to invite trainees into a more adventurous relationship with diversity (Nolte & Nel, 2012). We hope to capture the excitement, camaraderie, challenge, and exploration, but also the struggle and discomfort that can form part of any worthwhile adventure. The social graces framework developed by Alison Roper-Hall, John Burnham and colleagues (Roper-Hall, 1998, 2008; Burnham, 1992, 1993, 2013; Burnham & Harris, 2002; Burnham *et al.*, 2008) has always been part of this teaching.

The gracefulness in the social graces

The social graces framework provides a helpful way for us to become intentional in our developing awareness of, reflexivity about and skillfulness in responding to sameness and difference. There are a number of characteristics of the framework I have particularly appreciated as I have used it over the years.

First, I find it helpful that all aspects of social difference are continuously highlighted as equally important in our thinking and practice. As John Burnham says, this “*can facilitate a rigorous exploration of each aspect*” (2013, p. 142). This has particularly been brought to life for me in recent years through Yoko Totsuka’s exercise that asks, “*Which aspects of social GRRRAACCESS grab you the most?*” (Totsuka, 2014). There has never been the space to go through the full exercise as described by Totsuka but, using the idea of being grabbed or not by different graces – for example, in pair work during a teaching session – has felt very useful and meaningful. It seems to be effective in moving away from diversity being ‘something out there’ to putting trainees in relationship to each of the graces and connecting them with their personal life experiences in relation to each of them. Each can in its turn be fully considered and those that have been out of each individual’s view can be reflected upon.

Furthermore, I have found it helpful that John Burnham and others have always treated the social graces acronym as flexible and ever evolving. Updated versions of the framework have been presented in the literature and John describes starting training workshops with an invitation to add to the list (2013). There is a feeling of ‘permission’ to adapt and evolve the framework and

others have expanded the list and developed their own versions (for example, see Smith, 2016). In our teaching, we have also invited consideration of what is and what is not on the list and have worked with an ‘adapted from’ version of the graces, at times including aspects relating to migration history and status, impairment and/or contested-illness identities. This generosity from John and his colleagues has allowed for an ownership and personal relationship with the graces framework, for it to be more than ‘a list’, but rather to become an evolving and fluid scaffold for our consideration of sameness and difference. This also moves us away from a position of certainty to one of curiosity and imagination (Burnham, 2013).

Finally, I have appreciated the challenging demand for self-reflexivity and relational risk-taking as described by John and his colleagues’ (for example, Burnham & Harris, 2002; Burnham, *et al.*, 2008) and others’ (see Helps & Mulla, 2015; Karamat Ali, 2007) creative and courageous uses of the graces. The fine balance between creating a context that feels emotionally safe enough, while creating a culture where relational risk-taking is valued, has been highlighted in the literature as central to robust diversity-learning (Barnett, 2011; Mason & Sawyerr, 2002; Reynolds, 2013) Therefore, these uses of the social graces have provided an on-going challenge and inspiration in my own striving for this balance in my teaching.

Finding the Ps in social graces

So, in many ways, the social-graces framework has been a recognisable, clear, adaptable and graceful tool to use within diversity teaching. However, these strengths have at times felt more to do with how the framework is used, rather than the framework itself. I have already referred to literature in which the graces were used with creativity, reflexivity and with a great awareness of power and privilege. However, I would argue that using them in this way builds on an already-existing stance, a deep commitment and an intentionality in relation to diversity and social inclusion that came before and led to the work John Burnham and others have described in developing and using the graces. Using them as a teaching tool without making these values explicit could easily reduce them to a list of areas of difference. Therefore, I believe that these underpinning values need to be ‘brought forth’, fostered and nurtured within a training context. I will represent these values as three Ps, namely politics, personal commitment and participation.

Politics

Thinking and talking about and responding to diversity issues is always political and, where the list of social graces can appear rather ‘neutral’, what it stands for never is. Central to diversity learning needs

to be an awareness of, and response to, the implications of power and privilege for people's lives in society, our workplaces and in our relationships with our clients. Vikki Reynolds warns against the "politics of politeness" that can easily show up in our diversity teaching-sessions if we avoid "reckoning with privilege" (Reynolds, 2013).

Creating a safe-enough context where such reckoning with privilege becomes possible thus becomes the most important starting point for diversity learning. This context should enable us not to have to pretend to know, while also remaining aware of the effects of our conversations on one another (Raheim, *et al.*, 2004); it should challenge the discrimination of tentativeness and support us in managing the influence of shame and guilt on those of us in positions of privilege and power so that this does not become paralyzing (Nolte, 2007); it should aid us in tolerating uncertainty and taking emotional risks (Mason, 1993; Mason & Sawyerr, 2002); and it should inspire us to act (Reynolds, 2013).

Using the graces as a training tool within this context goes beyond curiosity about and awareness of all the graces, towards responsibility for addressing relations of power (Divac & Heaphy, 2005). From this position, we can become aware of and then own and meaningfully respond to our own privilege. We can consider and attend to the impact of structural, discursive, ideological and political power-imbalances imbedded in our organisations, our services and our theories (Smith, 2016). Also, we can consider and respond to the impact of inequality and social exclusion on the lives of those who consult with us, and on how this shapes the difficulties they bring.

To cultivate such a deep and embodied awareness of issues of power and privilege, we have used a number of tools in our teaching. For example, we have adapted Peggy MacIntosh's White Privilege Checklist (1998) by changing the questions to refer to all aspects of the social graces – for example, "I can turn on the television, open a magazine, look at a billboard or look at the front of the newspaper and see people of my race/culture/class/sexuality/gender identity/ability widely represented" – and have added questions to bring privilege in relation to other graces more to the fore too – for example, "I can show affection for my romantic partner in public without fear of ridicule or violence". Of course, many trainees have spent much time thinking about and responding to these issues already. However, having these conversations together builds trust, fosters relational risk-taking and creates a shared awareness of and language for reflecting on privilege and power as training proceeds. These conversations can be difficult and uncomfortable to have, at times, so such work can become challenging and messy; yes, quite un/dis-graceful, at times, which brings us to a second P.

Personal commitment

When we actively consider power and privilege in relation to the social graces, we need to guard against a discourse of identifying 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong' and, for those in positions of privilege, against being overcome with feelings of blame, guilt or shame. As trainers, we have a responsibility to co-create a safe-enough environment where we can have compassion for one another and ourselves (hooks, 1994) and where we can give and receive "permission to take risks, make mistakes and extend the boundaries of (our) comfort zones" (Divac & Heaphy, 2005, p. 281).

One way we have worked towards this is by using a values-based approach to identify why this challenging and potentially painful work is worth doing for each of us individually. A space is created where each of us can connect with our values in relation



to issues of diversity, to our preferred ways of being and to what we want to stand for in life and in our work as therapists. In this way, we can create a space where we can accept one another's challenges and critiques with 'good grace', knowing that it is not our selfhood that is on the line, but rather that we are supported in moving more in line with our preferred values.

Here, we draw on the philosophical idea of the rhizome, originally introduced to theory by Carl Jung (Jung & Jaffé, 1965), evolved and developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and since applied to a number of fields, including the arts, media, politics, critical theory and also systemic theory and research (see, for example, Anderson & Hoffman, 2007; Reynolds, 2014; Sermijn *et al.*, 2008). The rhizome concept (using a particular type of root system as metaphor) has a number of key characteristics we apply to diversity learning, namely multiplicity, non-hierarchical entry and exit points and connection. Hereby, it resists a hierarchy of knowledge and the idea of an endpoint or 'arrival'. From this perspective, we can realise that we all already know much about diversity; however, no one yet knows everything – we can all learn from one another and we are one another's best resources. The important thing becomes not where we each are in our own diversity learning, but rather the personal commitment we want to make in terms of what we want to move towards. Such a personal commitment naturally implies action, which brings us to the final P.

Participation

A final P reminds us we cannot only just notice, acknowledge and reflect on diversity and issues of inequality – we also need to act. As Reynolds puts it, "What matters most in our work with clients is that we enact our ethics, not how we talk about them. It is in the doing that ethics are revealed" (2013). Therefore, there is a need for intentionality, a commitment to taking action.

One way we attend to this in our training is to make a clear connection between our values in relation to diversity and each of our actions as people and as therapists, from the largest to the smallest (for example, which books we read or films we watch, which questions we ask in lectures or team meetings, what we talk about in supervision and how we do that talking, how we write letters about our clients, what topics we choose to research etc.). Thus, each individual choice or act is a potential step closer towards or away from a more fair and equal world. We then invite trainees to make clear, pragmatic commitments to particular acts in response to what we are all learning about diversity, privilege, power and social inclusion. This fosters some sense of agency within what can feel like an overwhelming challenge.

Conclusion

Roper-Hall, Burnham and their colleagues have created a recognisable and flexible tool and have guided us toward using this tool with creativity and courage. However, in order for us to, in John's words (1992, p. 27) "all become graceful" in thinking about and working with difference when we are with our clients, maybe we first need a context where we can engage with the social graces somewhat more un/dis-gracefully; where there is room for struggle and where things can get messy. Maybe the training space is the best place for this to happen, a space where we are freer to be "clumsy rather than clever" (Burnham & Harris, 2002, p. 25), get it wrong, and be curious primarily for our own benefit. I have argued that in our diversity teaching we need actively to attend to what 'comes before' in relation to creating a context where good diversity-learning can take place (Mills-Powell & Worthington, 2007); that is, to the values that underpin the graces. Three 'Ps', namely politics, personal connection and participation, can help foster a culture where these values can be brought to the foreground. When acting from within these values, the social graces provide a valuable framework for our diversity adventure.

Happy birthday social graces!

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