

Dissertation link: # 22

How do discourses enable and constrain the power of development practitioners in interactions within The Women's Circle?

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2014

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Abstract:

This study investigates the work of development practitioners trained in REFLECT (Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques) in a small NPO in Cape Town. Through examining interactions the study investigates what discourses are at work and how they position practitioners. My argument is that multiple discourses at work in development settings, tend to constrain rather than enable the agency of individuals. These constraints lead to the unintended consequence of further entrenching dominant development discourses that practitioners may or not be aware of. Giddens structuration theory and concept of duality of structure is used to house additional notions of power, which include Foucaults panoptic power and Gramscis hegemonic power. This framework is interpreted through a critical feminist lens with which to understand development work undertaken by South African women. Feminist principles are additionally used to compose a qualitative research design aiming to encourage practitioners to question how they think about development. Overt participant observation was used in meetings and workshops, where interactions were recorded in the form of written field notes. After six months with the organisation, semi structured interviews were conducted with four practitioners that were recorded and transcribed. Both field notes and transcriptions were interpreted using critical discourse analysis. Themes were identified around the choice of language used and what ideologies informed patterns of interaction. By comparing literature on learning and development with empirical data, several discourses were identified. First, a development discourse that placed emphasis on specific terminology. This positioned practitioners in a hierarchy depending on their level of fluency in development terminology. Second, a practitioner control discourse set the norms of interactions in meetings, allocating practitioners distinct roles. Third, Western feminist discourses became reified where practitioners saw development purely in economic terms, largely focussing on a homogenous group of women. These discourses combined to foster conformity, rather than dismantling or challenging the status quo. The implication is that theoretically radical development strategies may ultimately breed acceptance, silencing individuals that do not espouse the merits of Freirean development ideology.

Reference: Perez, T. 2012. How do discourses enable and constrain the power of development practitioners in interactions within the women's circle?. University of Cape Town.

Full text link: [thesis_hsf_2012_perez_t.pdf](#)



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