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'Exploring Heteronormativity': a teaching programme to develop experience-based knowledge of the reproduction of power asymmetries

'Utforskning av heteronormativitet': Et undervisningsprogram for å utvikle erfaringsbasert kunnskap om reproduksjon av maktasymmetrier

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ABSTRACT

Social workers have a mandate to reduce discrimination and oppression. However, training for social workers does little to equip candidates with knowledge of power structures, such as gender and sexuality. The purpose of this article is to show how social work students in a teaching programme, 'Exploring Heteronormativity', gain personal experience of how power asymmetries are reproduced. Central to the programme is a pedagogical fieldwork activity whereby the students break the tacit norm of heterosexuality by acting as same-sex couples in the cityscape. The students experienced various marginalising actions during the activity. This teaching programme has been conducted nine times with students in the bachelor's and master's degree social work programmes at UiT The Arctic University of Norway, in the 2013–2019 period. The article argues for increased application of power-critical theory, and for social work education to ensure that students gain first-hand experience of how power asymmetries are reproduced. In conclusion, recommendations are given for the education of social workers.

SAMMENDRAG

Sosialarbeidere har mandat til å redusere diskriminering og undertrykkelse. Sosialarbeiderutdanninger gjør imidlertid lite for å utstyre kandidater med kunnskap om maktstrukturer, som kjønn og seksualitet. Hensikten med denne artikkelen er å vise hvordan sosialarbeiderstudenter i et undervisningsopplegg, 'Utforskning av heteronormativitet', får personlig erfaring med hvordan maktasymmetrier reproduseres. Sentralt i programmet er en pedagogisk feltarbeidsaktivitet der studentene bryter den tause normen om heteroseksualitet ved å opptre som likekjønnede par i bybildet. Studentene erfarte ulike marginaliserende handlinger under aktiviteten. Dette undervisningsopplegget har blitt gjennomført ni ganger med studenter ved bachelor- og mastergradsutdanningene i sosialt arbeid ved UiT Norges arktiske universitet, i perioden 2013–2019. Artikkelen

KEYWORDS

Power asymmetries; everyday life; pedagogical fieldwork; sexuality; social work

NØKKEORD

Maktasymmetrier; hverdagen; pedagogisk feltarbeid; seksualitet; sosialt arbeid

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argumenterer for økt anvendelse av maktkritisk teori, og for at sosialarbeiderutdanninger sikrer at studentene får førstehåndserfaring med hvordan maktasymmetrier reproduseres. Avslutningsvis gis det anbefalinger til utdanning av sosialarbeidere.

Introduction

Norwegian state authorities' regulations for social work education in Norway, and the professional ethical basis of Norwegian and international social workers, state that social workers must have insight into power structures and the exercise of power, and must work to support inclusion, equality, non-discrimination and non-oppression in relation to gender, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation (Fellesorganisasjonen, 2015; IFSW, 2018; Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2019). However, research shows that Norwegian social work education programmes do little to equip candidates with knowledge of power structures (Kriz & Skivenes, 2010; Østby, 2008; Røthing & Engebretsen, 2019; Rugkåsa et al., 2017; Rugkåsa & Ylvisaker, 2021) or gender and sexuality (Giertsen, 2019a; Paulsen et al., 2020), which is also characteristic of European social work (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016; Morton et al., 2013; Nothdurfter & Nagy, 2016, 2017; Rumens, 2016) and more generally, international social work (Bubar et al., 2016; Galarza & Anthony, 2015; Giertsen et al., 2021; McKay, 2015).

In the Norwegian field of practice, it is reported that child welfare services rarely touch upon gender and sexuality diversity (Hope & Neby, 2010; Paulsen et al., 2020). One pattern is the way in which employees in child protection choose to overlook norm-breaking gender expressions (Paulsen et al., 2020). Such actions are examples of the reproduction of power asymmetries, where normative sexualities and gender expressions are privileged as taken for granted, leaving young people with non-normative sexualities and gender expressions feeling that their gender expression or sexual orientation are unimportant, invalid or not accepted (Paulsen et al., 2020). When power structures are not addressed, the assumption of the hegemonic position as the hidden centre is maintained. The marginalisation of the 'Other' is reproduced as a consequence, which among other forms, and typically in social work, is expressed in victim-blaming discourses constructing people in need of support (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Morley et al., 2020; Namaste, 1994; Shelton & Dodd, 2020). Knowledge of power structures is necessary for the social worker to understand the ways in which we participate in marginalisation and actively to interrupt oppression (Bubar et al., 2016). Thus, with such knowledge, the social worker can contribute to making asymmetrical power relations more symmetrical.

In response to recent demands for more critical perspectives in social work on sexuality (Giertsen et al., 2021; Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2022; Nothdurfter & Nagy, 2016, 2017; Willis et al., 2016), and the limited literature exploring such perspectives as a pedagogical framework (Nothdurfter & Nagy, 2017; Wagaman et al., 2018), this article presents a power-critical teaching programme addressing gender and sexuality as power structures. The purpose of the article is to show how social work students through a teaching programme gained personal experiences in how power asymmetries are reproduced. The author describes the 'Exploring Heteronormativity' teaching programme and explains how the application of power-critical theory reveals how power asymmetries are reproduced.

The article has two objectives: First, it argues for increased application of power-critical theory in social work education. Second, it shows how experience-based knowledge of power structures can be developed through the application of power-critical pedagogy. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first peer-reviewed article to present a teaching programme in social work wherein students can acquire first-hand experiences of the reproduction of sexual power asymmetry in everyday life.

Furthermore, the theoretical framework for the Exploring Heteronormativity teaching programme is presented. Next, the teaching programme itself and the students' experiences of it are presented, and finally recommendations for social work education are proposed.

Theoretical framework

Anti-oppressive educational approaches and power-critical perspectives

There is no consensus about anti-oppressive approaches in the field of social work education. A distinction can be made between social work strategies, not all of which are critical of power asymmetries. I find the educator Kumashiro's (2000) description of four anti-oppressive educational approaches highly relevant for social work education (Kaighin, 2020). Kumashiro (2000) writes that whether working from feminist, critical, multicultural, queer or other perspectives, educational researchers and educators seem to agree that oppression is a situation or dynamic in which certain ways of being (e.g. having certain identities) are privileged in society, while others are marginalised. However, they disagree about the cause of oppression, and about the curricula, pedagogy, and educational policies necessary to bring about change (Kumashiro, 2000).

The first two anti-oppressive educational strategies that Kumashiro (2000) describes are easily recognisable from international and Norwegian social work contexts. Kumashiro refers to these as 'Education for the Other' and 'Education about the Other'. Both strategies focus on groups that are marginalised and differ from the norm, such as homosexuals, transgender people and ethnic minorities. The aim of these strategies is to improve the experiences of others and correct stereotypical notions by showing how diversity also distinguishes minority groups. The strength of these approaches is their focus on groups that majority populations know little about, and they help to nuance ideas about minority groups, whereas the weakness of these strategies is that power asymmetries are not challenged and thus do not problematise the mechanisms that contribute to marginalisation (Kumashiro, 2000).

The Exploring Heteronormativity teaching programme is theoretically based primarily on the next two strategies that Kumashiro (2000) describes. In the third strategy, 'Education that Is Critical of Privileging and Othering', the focus shifts from minority groups to structural conditions, to what is defined as normal, and to the privilege of some groups. A strength of this approach is that knowledge of oppressive structures makes it possible to change them, while a weakness is that knowledge of oppressive structures does not necessarily lead to action and change (Kumashiro, 2000). However, this last point is central to the fourth strategy, 'Education that Changes Students and Society'. In this strategy, oppression originates in discourse and in the citing of particular (harmful) discourses that frame how people think, feel, act and interact (Kumashiro, 2000). Post-structuralist theory, with a focus on how power is exercised via discourses and how we ourselves are implicated in othering discourses, is central to this strategy. When Kumashiro (2000) describes this strategy, he also refers to various queer readings of psychoanalysis because learning in light of this strategy involves crises caused by psychological resistance to change, as it moves the student to another intellectual, emotional and political space. A goal of this latter strategy is altering citational practices so that power-asymmetric relations become more characterised by symmetry. As Youdell (2006) points out, changes in power structures do not take place through legislation and policy development (although such reforms for justice are still welcome); rather, they occur through practising differently in the everyday, from moment to moment.

Based on the two power-critical anti-oppressive strategies Kumashiro (2000) describes, power-critical perspectives are defined in this article as those that invite power-critical investigations of conditions and processes that create and maintain power relations, othering and majority privileges linked to factors such as culture, ethnicity, religion, skin colour, functionality, sexuality, gender, gender identity or social background (Røthing & Engebretsen, 2019). A core term in power-critical analyses of gender and sexuality is 'heteronormativity', which students can explore in the pedagogical fieldwork. Heteronormativity is defined as 'the institutions, structures of understanding and practical orientations that make heterosexuality not only seem coherent – that is, organised as a sexuality – but also privileged' (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 548).

Power-critical pedagogy

Post-structural pedagogy (Parkes et al., 2010), and the closely related queer pedagogy that addresses gender and sexuality specifically (Britzman, 1995; McWilliams & Penuel, 2017), form the basis of the Exploring Heteronormativity curriculum.

Post-structural and queer pedagogy are not primarily about establishing better standards or 'correct' perspectives, but rather about disrupting established teaching standards. In particular, they concern how established ways of understanding and practices contribute to reproducing hierarchies (Giertsen, 2019b). More specifically, the following teaching strategies are central in power-critical pedagogies: a) focusing on hierarchies and privileges; b) focusing on how historical, social, cultural and linguistic practices normalise privileged positions and hegemonic discourses; c) analysing how professional approaches (theory and action models) reproduce power asymmetries; d) focusing on personal experiences and actions that illustrate the (re-)production of power asymmetries; and e) focusing on violations of hegemonic discourses and power structures (Giertsen, 2019b). While no specific utopia or ideal is the goal, the intent is to extend the legitimacy of bodies and relationships that have been deemed false, unreal and incomprehensible (Jones, 2019).

Marginalising actions – the epicentre of reproduction of power asymmetries

The students register marginalising actions in their pedagogical fieldwork. However, the term 'marginalising actions' is not precisely defined in the literature (Dookie, 2015; Greatbatch & Dingwall, 1999; Hughes-Watkins, 2018; Trinder et al., 2010; Yih, 2023), and the application of the term indicates different understandings, from close similarity to the term 'micro-aggressive actions' to denoting systemic features and processes.

The term 'marginalising actions' is a central concept of the teaching programme: therefore, it is necessary to give it a more precise content. First, the concept in this article is inspired by microaggression theory. The term 'microaggression' was developed by Chester Pierce in 1970 to describe racist aggression that is difficult to detect (Sue, 2010). Sue (2010) defines microaggressions as brief everyday exchanges that send derogatory messages to particular individuals because of their group membership. On the concept of microaggressions and the associated research tradition, I share the objections of sociologists that theoretical and empirical research on microaggressions has been limited to understanding the phenomenon as individual or psychological acts of discrimination (Embrick et al., 2017; Fleras, 2016). With this as a background, the concept of marginalising actions is proposed to mean the following: First, similar to the definition of microaggressive acts, marginalising actions are brief everyday exchanges that send derogatory messages to particular individuals due to a visible norm violation. Second, marginalising actions have cultural and structural aspects and contribute to the reproduction of power asymmetries. Third, and inspired by post-structural theory, I include in the concept of marginalising actions those that can also be understood as being driven by good intentions and attempts to include. Based on this, marginalising actions are defined in this article as ordinary, everyday, verbal, behavioural or environmental expressions where the contrast to the hegemonic norm is reacted to, and which positions the dominant culture as normal. This concept of marginalising actions illustrates how institutionalised power structures are reproduced in social systems and in encounters between people. In this way, the concept of marginalising actions forms a bridge between the macro and micro levels.

Brickell (2009) states that four interlaced dimensions of power operate upon the sexual: definitional (where some kinds of sexuality are 'acceptable'), regulatory (which includes the possibility of enforcing norms and definitions), productive (where sexuality is shaped through knowledge) and unequal (as in the asymmetric relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality). Based on Brickell's (2009) theory, marginalising actions constitute the epicentre of the reproduction of sexual power asymmetry. They are expressions of reactions triggered by an understanding of heterosexuality as the 'acceptable' sexuality. They are regulatory as the power asymmetry is consolidated, are a result of productive power, and illustrate the power inequality between heterosexuality and non-heterosexuality.

The Exploring Heteronormativity teaching programme

The aim of the Exploring Heteronormativity teaching programme is to develop knowledge of how power asymmetries are reproduced. Central to the programme is a pedagogical fieldwork activity using anonymous participant observation, whereby the students act as same-sex couples in the cityscape and shopping centres. Same-sex couples in the public space break with cultural and implicit heteronormative notions, and as a result, can trigger reactions. Such reactions illustrate a power asymmetry between heterosexuality as privileged, taken for granted and normalised at the expense of non-heterosexuality, which constitutes the contrasting non-privileged and non-normal behaviour (Giertsen et al., 2021; Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2022; Ohnstad, 2009; Paulsen et al., 2020; Rosenberg, 2002; Røthing, 2008). The Exploring Heteronormativity teaching programme consists of three parts. Initially, power-critical theory on gender and sexuality is introduced in the classroom using primarily post-structural and queer theories, which problematise social structures and knowledge regimes concerning gender and sexuality (see McIntosh on privileges, Foucault on knowledge, power and sexuality, Butler on gender, sexuality and performativity and Derrida on binary hierarchical oppositions), and references Kumashiro's (2000) third and fourth anti-oppressive educational strategies. Hegemonic discourses in the social work field, equivalent to Kumashiro's first and second anti-oppressive educational strategies, are addressed and problematised. This part of the teaching programme lasts from approximately 7–15 h (depending on the other teaching programme in the course), with the use of various student activities, including a critical reflection of a personal experience of a critical event where a power-asymmetric relationship was present (King, 2020). There is also work in the classroom with how power-critical perspectives generate uncertainty and resistance and affect emotions (Kumashiro, 2000; Ohnstad, 2014; Røthing, 2019; Zembylas, 2011). As a pedagogical tool in line with post-structuralist theory, the teachers in the programme also present examples from their own lives of how various events in connection with asymmetric power relations have created different types of emotions and resistance, as well as how we contribute to the reproduction of power asymmetries through actions and taken-for-granted understandings.

The second part of the teaching programme consists of a fieldwork activity, when the students go to the city and pretend to be same-sex partners. Based on power-critical theory, on which the earlier lessons have built, in this activity, the students acquire experiences of how power asymmetries are reproduced in everyday life.

In the third and final part of the programme, the participants' fieldwork experiences and impressions are shared in the classroom with their fellow students and teachers. Finally, the theoretical basis, experiences and post-activity reflections are linked through a discussion. A more detailed description of the fieldwork is provided as follows.

The pedagogical fieldwork: students as same-sex partners in the city

Time frame

Approximately 3 h is allocated to this fieldwork activity, which allows time for the practical preparation in the classroom, the activity itself, reflections afterwards and breaks. The activity is conducted near the university.

Fieldwork methodology

Anthropologically speaking, the fieldwork is an anonymous participant observation activity conducted in a public space. It is anonymous in that people in the local area are unaware that they are being observed, and it is participatory in that the students participate in social life with the activities and roles that are part of it (e.g. walking in the city space, and as customers). Sociologically, the field methodology draws on Harold Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodology, where norms are investigated using so-called breaching experiments, where norms are broken to study reactions that arise. The reactions that occur show everyday behaviour and interaction and demonstrate how taken-for-

granted notions are internalised. In this fieldwork activity, heteronormative notions are challenged by the students acting as same-sex couples.

Implementation of the fieldwork activity

A more detailed description of this fieldwork is given to the students after they have studied post-structural and queer theories, and about discomfort as a source of knowledge.

The background for informing the students at a later stage in the teaching programme is that the students then have relevant professional prerequisite knowledge to understand the theoretical basis of the fieldwork – not about what it is like to be gay or lesbian, in line with hegemonic social work discourse, but primarily about how power structures are reproduced.

The pivot point in the fieldwork is the couples, who are perceived by those around them to be same-sex couples. The reason why they are so perceived is primarily that they hold each other's hands, as lovers do. This is not as simple as it may sound. Therefore, we spend time preparing the students for the role, reviewing how couples relate to each other – with shared glances and a taken-for-granted close contact – which in any case is challenging for students who are about to enter an unfamiliar role in relation to a fellow student.

Each same-sex couple has two fellow students following them. Their task is to observe and record actions that were triggered by the presence of the same-sex couple. The rationale for having two observers follow the same-sex couple is twofold. First, the observers must pick up those reactions that are subtle or invisible to the couple. The second reason is that the observer pair must focus on the same-sex couple being perceived by others as a same-sex couple, as it is demanding to be in a role that is associated with cultural discomfort. As one student said, after being reminded that the couple did not look like a couple: 'Yeah, I guess we look more like a health worker and a patient'.

After a brief period in the field, approximately 20 min, all students and teachers meet for a break at a café in the shopping centre. In addition to giving the students a break from their role-play, the purpose of the break is to provide an opportunity for the students to discuss and convey their experiences so far during the exercise. Pedagogically, this is a good move, as they also remember their experiences better when we reflect on them in the classroom after the fieldwork. This break is also used to switch roles, so that those who have been observers take on the roles of same-sex partners, and vice versa.

With between 15 and 20 students, the fieldwork can be conducted with one teacher. If the group has close to 30 students, the activity is conducted in two rounds, or the group is divided into two, so that the teacher can maintain good contact with their students.

Ethical considerations

Although the research ethics principle of informed consent was not followed during this fieldwork, the method is nevertheless considered justifiable as it is not intrusive for the people who see and meet the 'same-sex couples'. No personally identifiable information is recorded, or otherwise registered. The fieldwork is done early in the day (and not in the evening, or in places where alcohol is consumed), and the students did not experience any physically unpleasant incidents.

When students have refused to participate as a same-sex couple, we have encouraged them to join the activity as an observer. We have also sometimes used gentle persuasion to encourage their participation in the role-play in the fieldwork. Over all the years that this activity has been conducted, fewer than 10 students have refused to play the role of partner in a same-sex couple. In any case, not being part of a same-sex couple can be used as a starting point for the subsequent reflection.

Post-activities in the classroom

The last part of the teaching programme is various post-activities in the classroom. The first classroom activity is to record reactions, impressions and experiences (writing them on the whiteboard)

and discuss them. It is important to spend time on this, and everyone must have an opportunity to share their experiences. We find that most students have experienced much that is new to them.

Examples of marginalising actions

Below are some examples of marginalising actions reported by students after the fieldwork in 2019. Throughout the years the fieldwork has been conducted (2013–2019), there has been little variation in the types and numbers of reactions the same-sex couples have triggered.

- A heterosexual couple looked twice.
- Several same-sex couples were in the same store. A customer said, 'What's going on?'
- An older person stared for a long time and said, 'What the hell?'
- A clerk stared at the same-sex couple, and then became busy with a task in the store and did not approach them.
- Young male clerks behind the counter shouted and whistled at the female same-sex couple.
- In a store with several same-sex couples, another customer said: 'What is this? ... Why are they doing it? Do they have to be so obvious?'
- 'Are they for you?' said a clerk, to make sure that it was those in front of the counter who should have engagement rings.

The fieldwork shows that marginalising actions often occur in public spaces. Many students, primarily those in privileged gender and sexuality positions, were surprised by the reactions they provoked, such as being stared at, shouted at, or not helped by clerks. However, it is not just unequivocally negative reactions that are triggered. An example is the friendly clerk who wanted to make sure that the engagement rings were for 'our' couple. A common student response to the latter reaction is that it must be the ultimate good thing to do. When students believe that such actions are positive and must be considered a good thing to do, it becomes an opportunity to remind them about power-critical theory and how the 'Other' is either invisible or self-luminous (Ohnstad, 2014), in contrast to the privilege of being taken for granted, as those with a normative gender and sexuality expression are.

Oral and written reflections

The last part of the teaching programme is reflections in the classroom. These are some examples of questions the teachers have asked the students afterwards: 'What thoughts and feelings did you have before you went out?' 'What did you observe?' 'What were your thoughts and feelings during and after the fieldwork – did they accord with your preconceptions?' 'Was there discomfort?' 'What happened that caused you to have this unpleasant feeling?' 'Where does the discomfort come from?' 'What kind of normality underlies the experience of unpleasantness?' Through reflection on these questions, we connect the experiences of students with the introductory lessons about power and knowledge, binary oppositions, heteronormativity, privileging, silencing and discomfort with breaking norms.

Written views over all the years of the course (a total of approximately 300 students have completed the course), have been reviewed with a view to writing this article. Following are extracts from the written views giving the positive feedback and almost all the critical feedback. First, views on the fieldwork are presented, followed by views on the power-critical theory that frames it (translated by me from Norwegian).

Some positive comments about the day of the fieldwork (in the city, also referred to as City in Norwegian, and at the Amfi mall) are as follows:

- 'I thought the seminar was educational when we were in City because I felt my own emotions, thoughts and feelings so clearly. The thought crossed my mind many times that I am helping to reproduce what is taken for granted, and how to become more aware'.

- 'Extremely happy with the trip we had as lesbians – a lot of learning in walking in “other people’s” (smiling emoji) shoes’.
- 'Best learning experience, role-playing at Amfi. Very instructive to be able to feel the feeling of being checked out as well as feeling of being different from the norm in a small community’.
- 'Critical reflection assignment very good, also the exploration of heteronormativity. Practical exercises I will not forget’.
- 'Challenging to go out in the city, but I’m glad we did it’.

Some critical assessments of the fieldwork include:

- 'It may have been better to divide the class into two before going out into the city for the experience. This is to avoid the parade’.
- 'In the task out on the town, things could have been done a little differently, so that everyone could get a task that would breach the norm for the different people with different experiences in the class’.

The general feedback on the power-critical perspectives was also overwhelmingly positive:

- 'I have learned to analyse and be power-critical of the normative. This has meant that a lot of free time has been spent picking apart news articles to study how the author uses words’.
- 'Very good, but I wish this course came earlier in the study programme’.
- 'I became more aware of othering and how I formulate myself. I have – without being aware of it – contributed to categorisation, and although I still do it, I at least have a greater understanding of how important it is to be open in language’.
- 'It has been very interesting and good. I feel I have learned a lot and gained new eyes’.
- 'Lessons learned: To be critical of theory in one’s own field, to be open to new points of view’.
- 'About the academic content: Highly relevant, and important to clarify’.
- 'Very useful in relation to jobs’.
- 'Very good!' 'Very important!' 'Very relevant’.
- 'What have I learned from the course? Be norm-critical!!!'

More critical comments on the power-critical perspectives are as follows:

- 'I have been shamed in class because I am referred to as the big bad wolf with all the privileges. Sorry, but I didn’t choose to be straight/the way people don’t choose to be gay. We are just ourselves!’
- 'Left with confusion’.
- 'Good but wanted a little more about the biology’.

The participants’ perspectives of the teaching programme and fieldwork were overwhelmingly positive. The statements by the students indicate good achievement of learning objectives (e.g. has knowledge of gender and sexuality in social work theory and practice, can reflect critically on the relationship of theoretical foundations for working methods, and can reflect critically on the knowledge base in social work), as other studies of similar power-critical teaching programmes show (Acquah & Commins, 2015; Avant, 2022). We have focused most on the critical comments in the evaluation work, not least because some are based on hegemonic discourses. Thus, these inputs provide important feedback on what we should address next time, so that the teachers do what power-critical teaching requires: to walk the learning path together with the students.

I met one student a year after he had taken part in the teaching programme. I will let his statement to me be the starting point for a concluding comment about the students' experiences in relation to objectives of the teaching plan. He said: 'I didn't think about the mall having anything to do with sexuality. I thought it was a place where you shopped'. The background for the comment was that the couple he was part of during the fieldwork activity had received numerous and often long – as well as what he perceived as ugly – looks. This was new to him, and he found it uncomfortable. He had been unaware that this could occur until he conducted the fieldwork. The statement illustrates that the student has gained precisely what we are seeking with this teaching programme: that is, experience-based knowledge of the reproduction of gender and sexual power asymmetries in everyday life.

Discussion

In the Exploring Heteronormativity teaching programme, the reactions to same-sex couples shed light on structural and discursive conditions and how they regulate and reproduce superordination and subordination. In this way, the teaching programme facilitates critical reflection on how we all – regardless of our social positions in various power structures, and attitudes towards people in non-privileged positions – contribute to the reproduction of power asymmetries.

Understanding marginalisation as a result of bad attitudes ignores how othering and marginalisation are built into society's structural design and hegemonic discourses. Moreover, a discourse on attitudinal problems in the understanding of marginalisation favours and reproduces privileged positions, working against power-critical anti-oppressive strategies.

Teaching with a focus on minorities invites scepticism as to whether such marginalising processes take place at all. For the majority of students, who likely identify with privileged positions in the gender and sexuality hierarchies, a common reaction is to deny that they have any role at all in such processes (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014). Experiences from the Exploring Heteronormativity teaching programme shows that it is possible to have teaching arrangements wherein power asymmetries between the 'first' and the 'Other' are not reproduced; as teaching with a focus on minorities can contribute to. Moreover, the inclusion of an everyday context as a learning arena, has some obvious advantages compared with classroom-only teaching practices, not least in that the evidence gathered consists of fresh examples from public arenas that the students have experienced personally. In combination with power-critical theory, it simply becomes more difficult for students to be unaware that marginalisation is in processes linked to established power structures whereby some are privileged at the expense of others' subordination.

This leads to a final reflection related to teaching about power structures. In the neoliberal regime in which higher education is entangled, students are increasingly understood to be customers. The role of higher education in many ways is to compete for customers and to 'produce' as many candidates as possible, because its income only comes when the student graduates (cf. the Norwegian funding system). Under such a regime, it is not primarily power-critical education that is in demand. This institutional framework can explain why power-critical teaching is virtually absent from social work education, and in higher education in Norway (Røthing & Engebretsen, 2019). A typical feature of Norway that may explain the absence of power-critical theory in education may be the emphasis on the value of equality (as sameness) in state governance, and the close connections between activists and the authorities in Norway seeking inclusion (Roseneil et al., 2013; Rugkåsa & Ylvisaker, 2021).

Recommendations for social work education

First and foremost, and as previously pointed out, power structures are rarely addressed in social work education. When othering and marginalisation are practices rooted in power structures, it should be a matter of course that power-critical teaching is central to social work education. It

goes without saying that teaching power-critical theory requires teachers who are well schooled in it, which applies not least to knowledge and experience in reflection on how one personally reproduces power asymmetries.

Although this article argues for a focus on the reproduction of power asymmetries regardless of the social positions that students and teachers hold in power hierarchies, our experience suggests that for strategic reasons (Spivak, 1996) it is important that at least one teacher hold a relevant privileged position. Leaving power-critical thinking to the group with the least power can be understood as a marginalising act. Furthermore, in relation to prevailing discourses that marginalisation is a result of someone's prejudices, doubts may be expressed that power-critical teaching of teachers holding non-privileged positions in power hierarchies is conducted for private reasons, and has no relevance to social work, academic competence, or professionalism (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014). However, it is important to be aware that teaching power-critical approaches can be most challenging for those teachers who hold privileged positions, because the role of privileged positions in marginalisation is discursively silenced. For teachers in non-privileged positions, the situation is somewhat different because they have experienced how power asymmetries are reproduced.

Our experience indicates that an important prerequisite for active learning methods in power-critical teaching to achieve the expected learning outcomes is that students and teachers meet physically. We have experience from extensive digital teaching about power-critical theory. Our experience suggests that the advantages of physical presence far exceed the possibilities of digital teaching. For teachers and students, this means being able to read bodily reactions as well, and as part of this, also the ability to be flexible about changes in the teaching plan. We consider demanding dialogues, discussions, and flexible teaching plans to be important in power-critical teaching. Physical presence in the classroom facilitates this pedagogy in ways that are difficult to achieve in digital teaching. For students, this means spending time on (self)-reflection linked to the reproduction of power asymmetries. This requires a close learning community, which students can hardly build on their own. Compulsory attendance at classes may be a necessary tool because education often competes with the students' other obligations.

Conclusion

The Exploring Heteronormativity teaching programme illustrates how marginalising actions in everyday life reproduce power asymmetries. To understand marginalisation, it is necessary to understand what characterises social structures and hegemonic discourses, and how we all contribute to the reproduction of power asymmetries, often without thinking about it. This is what we seek to uncover in the teaching programme.

We have this focus because social workers have a mandate to contribute to the reduction of discrimination and oppression. Knowledge of power structures is also necessary to develop because equality is a core value in Norwegian culture, which leads many of us, including social workers, to believe that institutionalised and structural marginalisation does not exist, and that our own understanding, attitudes, and actions are good and correct, which is also a typical understanding among students at the beginning of the teaching programme.

A power-critical teaching programme can help reduce power asymmetries from the macro to the micro level. In this way, social work can contribute making diversity the norm and thereby enhance human well-being.

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