

KONFERENCIJOS PRANEŠIMAI

The unworthy others

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This paper is based on an incident which took place this August in a park in Oslo.

The incident was as follows; a severely beaten Somali man was left by the Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs), because they thought he was a drug addict. What made this incident different from other episodes was that it took place on a summer afternoon and he was surrounded by his wife, friends and health care workers who all told the EMTs that he was not a drug addict. In this paper I will discuss whether what happened here was one version of meetings between representatives of the Norwegian welfare system and its users they see as marginalized. I will look into: 1. The power of definitions in discourses. Is it possible that these definitions can be so dominant that they project and twist the perception of reality? 2. The possible need to project, embodied in the Ethnocentric Syndrome; 3. Can we put under discussion both our perceptions and the reality of marginalized groups?

Key words: perception, marginalization, ethnocentric syndrome, professional discourses

On a beautiful August Sunday afternoon, a small family went together with their friends for a picnic in one of the parks in Oslo. The family consisted of a father, a mother and a newborn child. The father, a man from Somalia, was suddenly and unprovoked knocked down by another man and seriously hurt with a head injury. This was bad enough, but it is what happened afterwards that will be the theme of this paper.

When the Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) arrived, his head injury made him behave a little out of the normal and he was believed by the EMTs to be a drug addict. They decided to leave him in the

park. So far, this is not a totally unknown story. In the papers, we find from time to time stories like this.

What made this incident significantly different from other episodes was the fact that his wife, friends and bystanders, including two nurses, all informed the EMTs that he was seriously injured and his behaviour was not caused by drug addiction.

This information did not seem to change the opinion of the EMTs, the ambulance left, and the man had to be taken in a taxi to the hospital. He has spent months in physical rehabilitation since the incident. He is now out of rehabilitation, but still is not fully recovered.

My contention is that what happened here is a rather grave example of what may happen in many meetings between professionals and their clients. In this episode, the misjudgment of the degree of seriousness in the event was aggravating, but it is still the same story with more or less the same manuscript we¹ observe in professional practice again and again.

I call this phenomena “perception in action”.

To expand and explain this contention, in the universe of the EMTs the logic between observation and acting was coherent, even though for the bystanders the act seemed completely irrational. They acted according to what they thought was the truth. My interpretation here is supported by the EMTs’ negative attitude towards expressing any form of regret or reconsideration in the period following their decision.

In the rest of the paper, I will analyse this phenomenon from an angle where the power to define the truth is the main issue.

Scollon & Scollon (2001) in their book “Intercultural Communication” write about how discourses form professionals and their universes and how professionals create discourses in their own image. We talk about two-sided and self-affirmative processes in which one learns to talk, behave and expect in a given pattern. The discourses in the language of Scollon & Scollon are the fields of power and knowledge.

This means that a group of professionals working together always produces ways of

thinking and acting. They draw borders between what is normal and what is abnormal, what is legitimate and what is illegitimate, what is good and what is bad and so on. In other words, they draw lines between what they define as the truth and what is untrue. In the process of doing this, they also define who is on the inside and who must remain on the outside of the relevant discourse.

Thus, professional communities always produce and reproduce the dichotomy between us and them.

This interpretation of discourse coheres with Eriksen (2001:78) when he says that “professions are only caretakers of their own interests”. Professionalization means, in his language, that occupational groups close themselves around chosen knowledge, preferred abilities, and types of competence and procedures which stop other considerations. In other words, professionals construct and are constructed by the discourse systems they are part of.

According to Foucault (1972, 1999), discourses in themselves are forms of practice; they organize social experiences in such a way that they become understandable for those who are actors in the field of the discourse.

The truths produced inside a discourse are often implicit in the day-to-day activity of the participants and are seldom reflected on a higher level. When new employees ask why they handle their routines the way they do, the old employees often answers: “This is the way we always have done it” or “it is working, why should we change it?”

The welfare system is based on universal ideas about equality for all (Eriksen, 2001), also for people being on the “outside”, as

¹ We in this context are colleagues of mine and me who do our research on professionals working in the state and community systems. For references, look in the end of the paper.

long as they are considered to be worthy indigents by people on the inside. They have to qualify for support according to the general standards that are defined and interpreted by the professionals and the system itself. If they do not qualify, they are stigmatized, says Eriksen (2001: 200).

Moon in Eriksen (2001: 201) describe a phenomena as stigmatizing “when it in some ways singles out it recipients as having failed to meet some duty or expectations”.

Douglas’ famous saying “dirt is matter out of place” can further strengthen the process of marginalization and stigmatization when you are found not to fit in.

If we look back into the episode in the park, it is quite clear that the injured man was perceived as “dirt” (Douglas 1966) by the EMTs and thereby as not qualified for assistance. This was also underlined by the EMTs themselves when they called him out loud “a f..... pig” as he peed on himself and on the shoe of one of them. This is a rather concrete labeling of someone you define as dirty, but I and others with me, also wonder if the name had another connotation, because the man was a Somali. We leave that one for another paper.

By calling him pig, they made it possible to convert him from someone they should help /assist to someone not worthy of help. They underlined this by saying; “You f..... pig, the train has left without you”

How can professionals express these kinds of thoughts and attitudes in the public sphere with a lot of by-standers?

One thing is for sure; this is not an accepted way to talk about others in the Norwegian official discourse. Norway is, like the other Scandinavian countries, based on

the ideology of sameness, and similarity is a special code when cultural and social processes are organized and carried out (Vike 2004).

All this said; in our work and research at Oslo University College and in colleges in Norway we find tendencies of uncaring or insensitive use of words and attitudes. (Daae-Qvale 2006, Greek 2006, Jonsmoen 2006, Horntvedt 2002).

When we observe and analyse conversations taking place in the staff rooms, we often hear teachers talking about their colleagues and students in ways they never would use in front of the same groups. They tell jokes about homosexuals, minority people or other stigmatized groups without any scruples.

Both the teachers and the EMTs are in the safety of the discourse allowed ways of talking and to raise issues that they out of loyalty to their co-workers will never bring to the outside.

We are here talking about backstage and frontstage language and contents (Goffman 1959). One difference between the teachers and the EMTs is that the EMTs took the backstage language front-stage, while in the teachers groups it remains backstage.

In my abstract to this conference I presented three questions I want to use as the structure of the remaining part of this paper.

The first question is; is it possible that the power of definition in these kinds of discourses can be so strong that they project and twist the perception of reality completely?

According to some researchers (Raaen 2002, 2004, Vike 2003) the guidelines and structures in which the professional finds

him-/herself are at a high level defining and affecting the professionals possibilities for autonomy. We are all caught in the web of the spider (here this means in the rules and limitations developed in the discourse) and have to behave according to that if we want to be on the inside and belong to a common “we” in contrast to “the others”.

Raaen (2002) describes the professional discourse as being dependent on the recognition of others and that this recognition create a type of predictability and through that a form of safety. This safety and predictability make it difficult for professionals to act against the accepted and the recognizable. It is, according to Raaen (2002), a built in fear in the professionals of not following the guidelines in the order of the discourse (Foucault 1999). When one does not obey this order, the possibility to be marginalized or excluded from the professional community is very high.

It seems that the threat of being expelled from the group in many instances mute the participants and makes them restrain their ethical/normative opinions. Some of our students have described how they find themselves muted, when they return to their professional field after finishing their education in “Multicultural studies” (Sollie (2001), Holm (2000)). One even felt that the education was a mistake, because it had changed her way of thinking so radically that she did not feel part of the working community anymore.

Gullestad writes (2002:261)² that “Knowledge which challenges implicit power rela-

tions can seem alarming and can meet resistance and refusal of knowledge”

In my opinion, some individuals who find themselves captured between the pressure of the truth of the discourse and alternative solutions to a challenge, often suppress their own views just to survive. Further, they start seeing the situation in the way they find most easy to handle; the way they have premade solutions for. When we are in this kind of situation, we see what we want to see and not necessarily what is really happening. This way our conscience is left intact. The EMTs seem to have done this, they remained in their own interpretation through the whole episode, and even afterwards. In that way they avoided to have to requesting both their competence and decision.

The second question is; The Ethnocentric Syndrome, does it develop a need in human beings to project ones own truths about those who are defined as the others?

The Ethnocentric Syndrome (Lehman 2006)) can be described as set of cognitive and behavioral predispositions which are sprung from the universal human tendency to generalize groups. An individual will often identify with a group (called collective identity orientation) and will identify others with other groups.

Salinger (1971) and Pinker (1994) in Lehman (2006) say that this tendency to generalize about groups comes from a need for preparedness – to be ready in a short moment to know who my friends are and who my enemies are. This preparedness makes the individual ready to run or fight when needed. In other words, it is a strategy we bring with us from more chaotic

² My translation of the following: “kunnskap som utfordrer inneforståtte maktrelasjoner kan virke foruro-ligende og kan møte motstand og kunnskapsvegring”.

and dangerous times, before the infrastructure had become a support system. We talk here about our ability to create “in-groups” and “out-groups” (Van der Dennen, 2004 in Lehmann, 2006).

According to Brown (2003), Ethnocentric Syndrome is constituted by 20 symptoms and most of these tell how the truth about the others / the out-groups is constructed (for instance, selective essentialization, stereotypization, degrading and inhumanization of others and so on).

I wonder if it is this kind of construction of truth we met in the park in Oslo. The man was seen as a member of the others and defined as unworthy and dirty, and at one level he can be described as an enemy in the language of Brown and company.

Is this syndrome so strong that the EMTs remain sure about their own truth even though they were told by the two nurses, who saw the whole episode, that their truth was wrong? Is the need for a constant picture of the other more dominant than the respect for the opinion of fellow professionals? These are questions I would like to follow up later.

The episode in the park was extreme, but we see tendencies of the same in most of the professions we have been doing research on. One example is from colleges in Norway, where the teachers are convinced that they only have problems with minority pupils. When they are asked directly (Daae-Qvale, 2006) if there really is none of the minority pupils who succeed in school, they say; of course, but “these are so clever and do not stand out”. They are in the minds of the teachers moved from the out-group to the in-group, which

means that “a minority pupil becomes synonymous with one that has shortcomings, a pupil that is unmanageable and does not fulfil the expectations” (Daae-Qvale, 2006:31)³; the rest of the minority pupils had become majority pupils.

The third question: can we put under discussion both our perceptions and the reality of marginalized groups?

The problem with perception is that it is often unconscious. We think we see the truth and therefore are in our right when we act upon this truth, like did the EMTs. We need someone to tell us that we are twisting facts and acting on false premises. But will we believe the ones that tell us this?

Many of our students, on their return to work after an ended education: try to analyse the discourse they are part of in new ways. They often meet negative attitudes against what they are, doing, they are as they themselves put it, marginalized (Solle, 2001, Holm, 2000).

The hope of change, Raaen (2002) tells us, lays in a conscious process where the professional find space to confirm and keep his/her identity as a professional “by opening up for what is different than him/herself”⁴. The ideal professional is in his eyes exemplified by the ideal teacher, the one with a critical sense for the premises for the quality securing, and with an eye for the irregular and the unique in each pupil’s situation and their democratic rights to free professional reflection.

³ My translation of the following: “Minoritetseleven blir synonym med en som har mangler, en elev som er uhåndterbar og som ikke strekker til”.

⁴ From Norwegian: “gjennom å åpne opp for det som er annerledes enn en selv”.

One of the main problems we meet when we try to make room for difference and diversity within groups of professionals is the control mechanism within the groups themselves. Data from observations and interviews with teachers about what kind of jokes or stories they tell each other show that many of them wanted to protest against what was said and made fun of. They say they keep quiet because of a mixture of fright and uncertainty as to how the others will react. We also know for certain that many individuals are grateful if someone finds the guts to protest against too many stupid jokes. The former

Norwegian minister of the state Gro Harlem Bruntland once said that we have to reconstruct “the woman next door”⁵, the one who intervenes when things get out of hand. We need more of those in staff offices to keep an eye on us all.

We need a more open and less self-censored debate about the real issues in the multicultural community.

We must discuss the fact that to become an integrated society we have to let something go, and one of the most difficult issues to let go, I think, is our power to define the truth about “the others”.

⁵ Translated from “nabokjerringa”.

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NEGARBINGI KITI

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S a n t r a u k a

Šiame pranešime autorius aptaria, kaip diskurso sistemos gali kurti ir deformuoti sąveiką tarp profesionalų ir jų klientų. Diskusija grindžiama epizodu, veiksmo vieta – parkas Norvegijoje 2007 metų vasarą, ir tuo metu aptariamos tokios temos:

1. Apibrėžimų galia diskursuose. Ar galima teigti, kad apibrėžimai gali dominuoti ir kad jais

remiantis yra projektuojamas ir keičiamas realybės suvokimas?

2. Poreikis projektuoti etnocentriškumo sindromą;
3. Poreikis įtraukti į diskusiją tiek mūsų suvokimą, tiek marginalijų derinių realybę.