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When the Classroom Gets Personal: Teaching about Gender Violence

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When the Classroom Gets Personal: Teaching about Gender Violence

Cover Page Footnote

I thank Dan Skidmore-Hess for his comments and support.

Students in sociology courses often talk about how the material they learn is both “useful” and “relevant” to their lives. The topics discussed often relate to students on an individual level. From my perspective as a professor, witnessing students cultivate their sociological imaginations and connect their “personal troubles to public issues” (Mills 1959) creates the “aha” moments for students that I have grown to cherish. However, I have found that some of the material in my courses relates to the lived realities of my female students in profound and deeply disturbing ways. As a “gender sociologist” teaching in both sociology and gender and women’s studies programs, all of my classes discuss gender inequalities. In each course, I devote a few weeks solely to the topic of gender violence, with the exception of a gender and violence course, in which I devote an entire semester to the topic. In each, I have found that our class discussions about gender violence, specifically on the topics of rape and intimate partner violence (IPV), relate to many of the female students on a very personal level. One of the primary goals of my classes is to help students recognize that gender violence is not simply about random individual criminal acts, but instead about issues related to the larger social structure. In the course of this learning process, my students have shared many horrific stories about their experiences with gender violence, and I have been present for some very emotional responses to the material. This has raised a variety of questions in my mind as to what role and responsibility we have as instructors when the material we discuss brings up painful memories and/or precipitates difficult emotional responses in our students. Specifically, what teaching tools can help survivors of gender violence feel comfortable in a class that discusses this topic, while simultaneously encouraging them to apply their personal stories to sociological concepts?

In this paper I discuss the risks, when teaching about sensitive subjects, of alienating and silencing survivors and conversely, the risk of forcing students to share personal stories when they might not be ready or willing to do so. I discuss the application of engaged pedagogy and some teaching tools that I utilize in order to navigate this fine line and to create a “safe space” in the classroom that allows students to share personal stories if they feel comfortable doing so. Additionally, I discuss the difficulties I face as an instructor with protecting my own emotional well-being in the face of such distressing accounts.

According to the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey nearly one in five (18.3%) women report experiencing rape in their lifetime, and 19% of undergraduate women have experienced completed or attempted sexual assault since entering college (CDC, 2012). Additionally, one in four women has experienced severe physical violence at the hand of an intimate partner (CDC, 2012). Based on these statistics alone, it is highly likely that in most college classrooms there are a handful of survivors of sexual assault and/or IPV. In addition, classes that explicitly address the issue of gender violence may

have even higher numbers of survivors based on student self-selection and personal interest in the subject (Konradi, 1993). While the vast majority of sexual assault and IPV survivors in college classrooms are women, there are male survivors of violence sitting in college classrooms as well. If the low rate of reporting sexual and intimate partner violence is any indication, it can be assumed that few survivors in the classroom, female or male, have told many (if any) people about their experiences and few have sought professional counseling. As such, it is important that instructors give special consideration to how material on gender violence is best delivered in the classroom.

THE RISKS

For survivors of sexual assault and IPV, a lecture or conversation about gender violence in the classroom is not a purely academic experience. While instructors may speak in abstract terms about sexual assault, provide national and international statistics, or explain theoretical perspectives, a student who has experienced violence has a layer of understanding that transcends any intellectual theorizing. When we ask our students in classes dealing with gender violence to use their sociological imaginations and apply their personal experiences to public troubles, we are asking survivors to remember traumatic experiences. In this vein, instructors run a very real risk of silencing the students who have survived violence and to which the classroom material has the most individual meaning.

Amanda Konradi (1993) recognized the potential of silencing survivors when teaching about sexual assault. She found that students who had experienced sexual assault felt they were unable to participate in the class when they heard abstract discussions and apparent “casual” attitudes about the subject. Additionally, she found that students who experienced sexual assault fear of being identified as *the* sexual assault survivor, or of having to speak to “the rape experience” as a representative for all victims. Their silence may be understood as a defensive tactic, a refusal to provide information that would enable others to identify them as members of a stigmatized group, or a refusal to accept the characteristics of the experience as it is taught in the classroom (1993). As Konradi argues, “students’ silence should be a concern to us as teachers because it flattens both the expression and the identification of differences in the classroom...(and) when we leave students’ silence unaddressed, we help perpetuate their oppression” (15). I would add to this the potential of unintentionally creating further trauma to the student. If the material is covered in an impersonal and purely academic way, this leaves little room for the student to process the memories and emotions that come to the surface.

Ultimately, it is important that survivors do not feel silenced when discussing gender violence, and students will not feel as though they are able to share their personal experiences if they perceive a lack of safety in the classroom.

However, there is a fine line between students feeling silenced and feeling as though they *must* participate. Much harm can come from asking students to reveal personal experiences when they are not comfortable doing so. Elizabeth Grauerholz discusses using an experiential teaching method in her “Gender Violence” seminar (Grauerholz & Copenhaver 1994). Experiential teaching methods, those that encourage students to rely on their own knowledge and life events, are commonly employed in many sociology courses. The process of personal disclosure may help students “come to understand more easily the connections between personal experiences and sociological phenomena” and thus be “better able to develop their sociological imaginations” (320). Encouraging a high-degree of self-disclosure is especially tempting in courses that deal with difficult or controversial subjects, as it helps personalize the information, and for some it has a cathartic effect. Additionally, self-disclosure can increase student interest and enrich classroom discussion (Rosenbloom & Fetner 2001). In Grauerholz’s seminar, she chose to assign an autobiographical journal “in which they explored the impact of violence in their lives” (1994:321). In the end, a few of her female students who had experienced gender violence came forward to explain that they found the assignment to be problematic. These students had a variety of concerns, including feeling “exploited and exposed,” feeling uneasy with bearing “personal experiences of violence to a professor,” and concerns about how it was possible for the instructor to “grade life experiences” (323). Additionally, there was concern about how survivors would cope with the painful memories that the assignment elicits. For those who had not yet dealt with their experiences, the assignment effectively forced them to confront it when they might not have been ready to do so. Thus, a required and graded journal assignment of this nature raises some very important ethical concerns. While the intent of such an assignment is to use personal experiences to see the connections to social phenomena, the effect may have survivors of gender violence feeling “disempowered and once again victimized” (324). As such, while recognizing the potential benefits of experiential techniques for teaching about gender violence, Grauerholz & Copenhaver encourage a good deal of care, planning, and forethought when using such methods.

Much can be said about the benefit of students sharing personal stories if they are willing. Students who have not experienced violence tend to see it as a general social problem but have little understanding of the personal impact of violence (Phillips 1988). Hearing from their peers about their experiences with violence makes the issue “real” to them, and helps them understand the impact it has on someone’s life. In my own experience, I have found that students who have survived sexual assault can help others understand that there is nothing one does to “ask for it.” I have witnessed students who have experienced sexual assault successfully shed light on the complexities involved in choosing whether

or not to report the incident to the police. Additionally, students who have experienced violent relationships have explained the complexities of such a relationship, and why it isn't always as easy and clear cut as "just leaving." For other survivors, hearing that their peers have also experienced violence can offer some sense of reassurance that they are not alone. Sharing personal stories may also offer a cathartic experience for some, I've had students tell me they felt better after "they said it out loud" and/or "finally told someone." However advantageous hearing personal accounts may be to the class at large, such declarations should only be made by students who feel comfortable, and not pressured, to make them.

Ideally, it seems that the best course of action when teaching about gender violence is to guard against silencing students while simultaneously not pressuring students to share personal experiences if they do not feel comfortable doing so. Even if the instructor does not assign a mandatory experiential learning assignment about personal experiences with violence, the class material will most certainly raise painful memories for survivors. Thus, special care should be given to how the material is covered. By following the tenets of "engaged pedagogy" (hooks 1994), I utilize a few specific strategies in my courses in order to create a safe learning environment.

STRATEGIES

When I was a graduate assistant in a course dealing explicitly with violence against women, I witnessed the effects of teaching the material in broad and abstract terms. The professor taught the course from purely a policy perspective, focusing on social policies that have been employed historically and contemporarily to address issues of gender violence. I had female students, typically survivors of sexual assault, express that they felt the teaching method employed by the professor was "cold" and allowed for no room to emotionally process or cope with the information. To guard against this, I believe approaching gender violence in the classroom is better served by an "engaged pedagogical" approach as championed by bell hooks in her text, *Teaching to Transgress* (1994). hooks argues that teachers should strive for engaged pedagogy by facilitating interest in the material, encouraging intellectual growth in their students, and by helping them to understand how the information can change their lives. Additionally, hooks stresses the importance of letting students articulate their thinking and experiences in a safe classroom community. From my perspective, to take an engaged pedagogical approach when teaching about gender violence means creating a classroom where students feel as though they are safe to share their experiences, should they choose to do so, without fear of judgment or ridicule. It means presenting the material in a way that encourages students to understand how intensely personal events also connect to larger social phenomena, like patriarchal systems of violence and control. It also means

encouraging students to think critically about systems of injustice and what can be done to combat gender violence. Ultimately, it asks students to *engage* with the material. To this end, I utilize a few different strategies to encourage engaged learning and a safe classroom community. Specifically, I use my syllabus, assignments, and classroom demeanor as tools to help create an engaged learning experience and hopefully minimize the potential harm the material can have, especially to survivors of violence.

Some of the most important steps I take towards creating a safe classroom are explicitly written on the course syllabus, which is a document I review with the class very carefully on the first day. For example, my course syllabus for “Gender, Violence and Society,” carefully outlines all of the topics that the class will cover, provides contact numbers for local agencies (e.g., the local rape crisis center) and campus services (e.g. the Counseling Center) that they may wish to contact, and specifically warns students to take special consideration about their wish to remain enrolled:

It is essential that students understand that aspects of this course may be emotionally difficult. Learning about violence IS very challenging. Furthermore, it is statistically probable that some of you may relate to aspects of the material on a personal level. I do not advise this course for any student who is at a point where therapy would be a better alternative. While I am available in my office hours to lend a supportive ear, I am not a trained therapist. If you feel as though aspects of this course may be emotionally difficult, please be sure you have a support system to which you can turn (friends, therapist, etc.)

I have found it especially necessary to stress that I am not a trained therapist, despite my willingness to listen and provide support. Students often come to my office to share personal experiences that they may not feel comfortable sharing in class, and while I am a good listener, it is important that they know visiting me in office hours is not the same as a counseling session with a trained therapist. This is not only for their benefit, but also mine. As I will discuss at further length shortly, I find that I am sometimes at a loss as to what to say in response to a student’s disclosure, and I have to remind myself that it isn’t my responsibility to counsel.

Additionally, my syllabus provides some guidelines on creating a safe classroom, including:

Never ask another student if s/he has been a victim or is a survivor. It is up to individual students to decide whether or not to discuss their own victimization/survival experiences in class.

Should a student wish to share personal experiences, those experiences *stay within the confines of this classroom*. Much like what happens in Las Vegas, what is shared in here, stays in here.

To make sure that personal experiences are kept within the classroom and that the classroom remains a cohesive community, I do not allow students to bring guests to class. To encourage a sense of community within the classroom, I also stress courtesy, sensitivity, and “respecting one another by accepting different viewpoints, life choices and experiences without making judgments about them or their behavior.” By making it very clear on the first day of class what the course will cover, that a safe classroom is expected, and that the material may be difficult, I have established clear ground rules and given students a sense of what they can expect from the course. I have also given students the opportunity to reconsider their enrollment, should they not be comfortable with the material or class expectations.

As discussed previously, experiential teaching methods can be very useful in classes that deal with sensitive subjects. As such, I have journal assignments in all of my courses, which enables students to make personal connections to the academic literature. I ask students to write on the topic of that week (e.g., dating violence) and apply assigned readings and class concepts into their writing. I also make it clear that their journal entries are held in the strictest confidence, and that their grades are based solely on their applications of course material. I do not specifically ask students to share experiences of violence, though they may choose to do so (and many do). This allows students the opportunity to discuss how violence has impacted their lives without *forcing* them to. Additionally, I read each journal entry carefully, and often write lengthy responses. Sometimes in my responses to a student’s traumatic experience, I provide contact information for outside services and agencies. Most often my responses include thanking them for their honesty, assuring them they are not at fault, encouraging them to move forward and heal, and congratulating them on their strength.

In addition to the journals, in my Gender, Violence & Society course, I have students pick a book from a couple of suggested titles, and choose a creative way in which to respond to that book to share with the class. For example, last semester, students choose from either *Dragonslippers* by Rosalind Penfold (2005) which is a graphic novel about the author’s experience in an abusive relationship, or *Lucky* by Alice Sebold (1999) which tells of the author’s experience with rape in college. Students responded to the books with poetry, paintings or collages, letters to the author who survived the violence or to the perpetrator that committed it, and some told personal stories that mirrored many of the details outlined in the books. The days in which the projects are shared with the class are

always very powerful. The project allows students to personally engage with the book material at whatever level they are most comfortable. It is important to note that if students are not comfortable sharing their project, I offer to present their project anonymously.

While the syllabus and the classroom assignments are useful techniques towards creating a safe environment, one of the most important strategies I utilize in the classroom when dealing with gender violence is simply my demeanor. hooks argues that “engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students” and that “any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That *empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable* while encouraging students to take risks” (emphasis mine 1994:21). From hooks’ perspective, we cannot empower our students, we cannot ask our students to fully engage with the material, if instructors refuse to be vulnerable themselves. This is at odds with a more traditional notion of teaching that says instructors need to engage in a certain type of “emotional labor” that keeps their personal lives and emotions out of the classroom. However, by refusing to let our guards down in the classroom, instructors create a power imbalance that makes discussing issues like gender violence abstract and impersonal. How can we expect our students to make personal connections to the material and embrace their sociological imaginations, if we refuse to do the same? In their discussion of managing emotions in the college classroom, Alison Roberts and Keri Iyall Smith argue that “it is important for instructors to model behaviors they wish to see in their students, especially in promoting risk taking and a value of learning” (2002:297). With this in mind, I embrace my own vulnerability in the classroom. I tell personal stories that I feel comfortable sharing, and I have no problem crying in front of my classes. The reality is, documentaries about violence, personal traumatic stories shared by my students, and even some of my very own lectures make me sad. I see no reason to hide my distress. This is an upsetting topic, and to act otherwise would not only be disingenuous, but it would further marginalize and trivialize topics that are already given so little cultural attention.

I’ve found that taking an engaged pedagogical approach does alleviate some of my concerns about discussing difficult material and merely sending students on their way. I actively strive for a safe classroom with clear expectations, I encourage students to share their experiences without forcing them to do so, and my classroom demeanor is honest and hopefully conveys to students that gender violence is appalling. Ultimately, I feel empowered as an instructor when I see students make important connections with and to the material, and when they think critically about social change and their own sense of personal empowerment. However, there is always room for improvement, and I have found that I need to make some changes to protect my own emotional well-being.

LOOKING FORWARD

Over the course of my teaching career, I have had female students share their experiences, either out-loud in class, in a class assignment, or in my office, with: sexual harassment, stranger rape, acquaintance rape, rape by a family member, gang rape, physical violence at the hand of a partner, physical violence at the hand of a parent, and stalking. Some have shed tears, admitted to engaging in risky coping behaviors, and expressed interest in suicide. I would be lying if I said these stories and admissions did not have a huge impact on me. In fact, there have been many days after hearing or reading such a disclosure where instead of feeling “empowered by the process” as hooks would encourage, I feel weighed down by the immensity of my students’ experiences, pain, and suffering. While I recognize that teaching is a service-oriented occupation that requires emotional labor (Hochschild 1983; Roberts & Smith 2002), the reality is, I am not trained to be a counselor – very few college instructors are. While I can provide students with a patient and understanding ear, a list of local agencies that may help, and declarations of encouragement and support, I’m often unsure if I am helping the student sufficiently. I am also quite certain that I am not doing a good job of protecting my own emotional well-being. It is, of course, essential that we teach about gender violence if we are to have any hope of eradicating it. However, at the end of the day, class discussions about statistics and definitions, about theories of social control and patriarchy, do not erase the personal tragedies of so many of my students. It is this knowledge that makes the topic difficult for me as an instructor, added to my existing concern that the classroom material may be exacerbating their pain.

Anyone who engages empathically with traumatized children or adults is at risk of internalizing the trauma themselves; this is a condition referred to as secondary traumatic stress (Perry 2003). Secondary traumatic stress is a common concern for those who are in the emergency services professions like police officers and fire fighters, in addition to mental health and child protective service professionals. However, empathetic teachers may also run a risk of absorbing a portion of their student’s trauma, and consequently suffer from emotional and/or physical distress. In a qualitative study of teachers’ perspectives on providing support to elementary school children after trauma, Eva Alisic found that many reflected uncertainty about providing optimal support to their students (2012). For example, several “struggled with their role” and “wondered at what point their tasks as a teacher ended and at what point those of a social worker or psychologist started” (54). Teachers also expressed feeling a lack of competence in how to handle and talk about the trauma with the student, and uncertainty as to when a referral to a mental health professional was needed. Additionally, many indicated that they suffered from the emotional burden of working with traumatized

children, and that it was difficult not to “take the problems home” (56) or be reminded of their own experiences of trauma.

While Alisic’s study focused on teachers of school-aged students, it seems likely that many college instructors, myself included, have similar uncertainties and reactions to their student’s trauma. The question becomes how to best address these issues and create a safe classroom for everyone involved. Grauerholz and Copenhaver recognized that few instructors are adequately prepared to deal with a student’s emotional responses to the material. They recommend instructors have crisis intervention training and rape counseling experience, not to suggest that instructors take on the role of counselor, but that this type of training could be “useful for immediate response for a student in distress...(and) can help to ensure that we do not overstep boundaries” (1994:326). Training of this nature would help instructors who teach about gender violence not only feel more confident in their actions and responses, but also help them to be able to recognize a student who is in distress and in need of professional assistance. I have not been through such training in well over a decade, and I believe the training would help me feel more sure of my responses and erase some of my doubt and concern I have about how I respond to the traumatic stories of my students.

There is a risk for teachers who teach about sensitive topics, and who hear traumatic stories, to develop symptoms of secondary trauma or feel emotionally drained and “burned-out.” Additionally, there is reason for female instructors to be especially cautious of secondary trauma or emotional burn-out, as female professors are more likely to engage in emotional labor both in and outside of the classroom (Bellas 1999). Luckily, there are a variety of self-care strategies for combating secondary trauma, including taking good care of one-self both physically and psychologically, and balancing work and play (Perry 2003). In looking forward, I believe I need to follow my own advice as stated in my course syllabus, “If you feel as though aspects of this course may be emotionally difficult, please be sure you have a support system to which you can turn (friends, therapist, etc.)” and cultivate a relationship with a therapist or other trusted individual to help process my emotions.

In the end, teaching about a sensitive subject like gender violence requires a great deal of careful planning and sensitivity. The burden is placed on instructors to develop teaching methods that encourage engagement, without minimizing or ignoring the impact the material may have on survivors of violence. It requires creating a safe classroom that helps students recognize that personal experiences with gender violence are a symptom of the larger social structure. Instructors also have to remember not to forget themselves in this process. There is potential for the difficult subject matter to impact instructors as well, and thus they need to work to take care of themselves in order to remain not

only effective in the classroom, but also be physically and psychologically healthy.

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