

Wise women in community: building on everyday radical feminism for social change

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Introduction

This paper looks at the hidden discourse of women which takes place in the private sphere away from the public eye, and explores the self-articulated knowledge of women in their particular community and the political content of such a discourse. The women in this study were able to bring their personal everyday experiences of oppression and social inequality into discussion through questioning wider power structures, particularly vivid where the structures of gender and class intersect. Once they were encouraged to ask questions about the way things are in their own lives and their community they started to reflect on women's position within society at large and it immediately became apparent that women have different views on power, and on feminist perspectives depending on their social standing and access to resources and needs.

So this paper brings new questions to what might be considered old problems. It asks these new questions by highlighting how women today talk about power behind the backs of the powerful in order to make changes in their lives. This has been academically held as a feminist deconstruction of gender but this paper differs in that it provides the critical perspective of working-class women on feminist thinking who do not so much deconstruct their gender as construct collectivity, sociability and dignity. The paper highlights how women share common threads of solidarity when it comes to calling on their own wisdom (living knowledge) and how this solidarity is steeped in the early feminist arguments of the older women in their lives. You will see contradictions in these early feminist arguments because often women's work and women's roles in their communities meant different things when viewed through the eyes of class. For many working-class women who spent long days doing physical labour, feminism was another strain of thinking from the public sphere to which they did not contribute. Instead they had their own everyday version of "women's work", life and struggle.

The article draws from working class community education with the "Wise Women community group" who participated in critical pedagogical learning and weaves their narratives throughout.

Voices past and present

The good thing about doing an ethnographic study in a working-class neighbourhood, and being a working-class woman myself, is that you really have a head start in the research inquiry when it comes to understanding peoples oppression, and in this case, the realities of working-class life. The real

advantage here is the researcher does not so much have to depend on Weber's method of "Verstehen"¹ to understand people's particular experiences and perspectives, like placing one's self in the shoes of those being researched, but rather the researcher can immediately connect with common-held perspectives and experiences, ways of life and the realities of life as it is spoken about behind closed doors. The common perspectives I refer to here are held by working-class women who engage in a hidden political discourse which extends to many public issues but yet remains hidden and shared only with other womenfolk because they can freely express their opinions among each other without further oppression for doing so. Fundamental to this political discourse is living everyday practice of feminism rather than institutionalised feminism. I remember in the 70s my own mother's view that she considered women to be no more than slaves, particularly when they got married:

Remember you're nobody, you're just a slave to the man you marry.

She would warn me about falling for the traps set out by those in power by saying things like,

Don't fall for that thinking, like when you hear them say "marriage is no bed of roses it has to be something that is worked on together". Well, there is no such thing. It's a myth, the man has the power, there is no negotiating.

My mother would draw from her own experiences and put them forward as giving advice and words of warning about how I had a choice to be my own person, have my own career, and not be pressured into things like she was. She would often talk about the pressures that were on her to marry at a certain age, and have children while she was still considered to be young enough to have them. For my mother, you couldn't be a feminist and a good wife at the same time and indeed when this type of thinking is situated historically in the 1970s this statement sums up the difficulties of identity for Irish women during a particular rapid phase of social change. Indeed Marxist explanations of the origins of women's oppression throw light on the development of class society, founded upon the family, private property, and the state. According to Engels, "with the rise of private property, monogamous marriage and the patriarchal family new social forces came into play both in society at large and in the family setup. Thus women, once governesses of society, were degraded under class formations to become the governess of a man's children and his chief housemaid" (Reed 1970)

Friends of my mothers were not always in agreement with feminist thinking and, as a young girl, I was often caught in the crossfire of talk on gender issues. For example, whilst most of the women would agree that once born into the world a female, then the social positioning bestowed upon them was in

¹ Max Weber (1949) introduced interpretive understanding (*Verstehen*) into sociology where it has come to mean a systematic interpretive process in which an outside observer of a culture (such as an anthropologist or sociologist) relates to an indigenous people or sub-cultural group on their own terms and from their own point-of-view, rather than interpreting them in terms of his or her own culture.

subordination to men and what followed were diverse views and changing beliefs on what they considered feminist thinking to be:

Feminism, it's all about women's lib, it's "fancy stuff", there's more to be worrying about than who's doing the cooking or doing the washing up.

Although such mutterings often gave way to raised voices and women leaving my mother's house abruptly, what was considered important to them and what these arguments were facilitating was to find ways to deal with other oppressions they were also experiencing in their lives, such as surviving and managing poverty and learning how to remain justifiably proud when having to depend on social welfare. These women would talk about being the stronger of the species when it came to problem-solving crises (particularly food, clothing, medicine and cures, as well as keeping an eye on each other's children when something had to be done) in the family and community and would consult with women "only" for advice on those matters. (My mother always said my aunt, her sister, could open a cupboard and it would be bare and she'd still be able to make a dinner for her family – 7 of them!)

Second wave feminism often assumed a universal female identity and over-emphasized the experiences of upper-middle-class white women (Walker 1995) In fact, working-class women have been known to dismiss feminism because they felt their oppression was brought about by more than the structure of gender and they have blamed feminist thinking for leaving class inequality out of the framework of power and subordination. On the other hand, some working-class women considered feminism to be only for rich middle class women and often gave rebellious responses when asked if they considered themselves feminists,

It's not for us, it's the wisest of women who don't say what they do, and they just do what they do, with what they know.

However, although views varied among the women and they differed in their beliefs around feminist thinking, what was apparent was how the women readily talked among themselves and relied on each other's advice in combating inequalities. This dialogue took place mostly in the privacy of the women's homes around kitchen tables with numerous pots of tea at the ready, hidden from the public eye and consisted of sharing and encouraging a thinking that was outside the box (so to speak). Once the women grew in confidence and got used to discussing personal issues with each other they began to articulate that which stretched beyond their own personal experiences into more critical discussions on wider public issues.

Threads of solidarity

Radical feminism today places more emphasis on the strengths of women and, in particular, women's ways of coping and connecting with each other. The value is placed on how women rely on their own inner qualities, their wisdom, and shared experiences in combating oppression (Daly 1978) particularly when

it comes to mothering and being a mother. Speaking from the Wise Women community group, the women felt that working-class mothers, and single mothers, were placed top of the list for scrutinising, and blamed for being bad parents having a bad effect on society. In our society the mother in general is seen as the mastermind in contributing to the social order at the micro level. Thus, the women felt that everything to do with bringing up children hinges on the role of the mother irrespective of how social structures can restrict their and their children's opportunities.

Of course there are many varying situations in women's lives and in their mothering roles, where hardship is made all the more harrowing by not being able to speak out because of fear of public scrutiny and the opinion of parental failure or blame that women expect to have bestowed on them by knowledge groups (teachers, GPs, etc) when problems appear with their children (Lawler 2000)

We are used as scapegoats! And if we do look for help, with say money problems, or with the kids in school, those in power are quick to blame situations on our lack of skills and offer us parenting courses. It nearly always turns out that you come away asking where I went wrong. And "I must be a bad person and mother".

Such issues as these came up a lot in the Wise Women group sessions. And although there was a variance in experiences from women who had attended parenting class, inherent in the women's views we can see class expectations and judgement of class position. Here oppression takes the form of a working-class mother believing that she does not have the qualities inherent to parent her child properly and needs to be educated about how she should do this. In the wise women group, the women were able to question such oppression because they understood the nature of this class expectation. They spoke about their shared beliefs in not being able to speak out, other than among themselves, about circumstances or problem issues that arose in the family and in their caring roles. The women took on the role of "we'll fix it ourselves" and supported each other with this type of strategy.

Where else can you really talk about how it is? Like we share things that really tell us what the hell we are up against, for example, when I began work last year as an assistant in administration in the local school. I was registered as auxiliary staff, we thought it was a fancy word and one of us looked it up in the dictionary and its definition is "female slave." So it's things like this we share in private, it's stuff we know and tell each other about.

Talking about power, behind the backs of the powerful

The women spoke about how talking among each other and sharing their experiences was helpful because it meant using their "better wits" as they put it. This allowed for their own living knowledge to be shared in relation to inequalities in their lives and in this opening up they could see that their experiences of oppression was a collective experience linked to wider social structures. Paradoxically, being able to collectively perceive actual power

relations gave them a sense of empowerment and a hope for changing things rather than feeling they were being blamed for the social inequalities they were experiencing.

The women explained that in organising and facilitating programmes such as parenting courses for example there needed to be a recognition given to what they had come to call "reality politics". Some women made specific comments which help understand what was meant by this:

It's the mother that knows best about what we have decided to call a "politics of reality" because it holds at its core the understanding that we women do not bring up our kids in a cupboard, but instead we're living in poverty most of the time, living with unemployment and the knowing that there will be none to gain in the near future, and that our kids' chances of opportunities and achievement are hindered due to these issues and more which are never mentioned by politicians. This means we know well we have to work all the harder in breaking down the barriers because if it's left to existing powers, run mostly by men, it will never happen.

The reason this paper came about was because I wanted to put across my findings on what I have termed women's hidden political discourse. It is not an explicit discourse of politics; it is not about feminist or class activism. It is a discourse of managing, which according to the Wise Women is essentially political; it is inherently about gender and class issues. I guess in a way I'm trying to make sense of, or rather take a fresh look at, the familiar. By this I mean the kind of critical discourse women engage in within the home away from the public eye and which is a discourse I have come to know having been around, and learning from, this talk since my own childhood. As a working-class woman doing highly reflexive ethnographic and pedagogical research I have tried to look at this hidden discourse in an "out of" familiar light in order to understand it more clearly and relate it to a wider audience.

In conclusion then, this paper asserts that working-class women in particular, who are situated as powerless within the general patriarchal system, operate a hidden discourse behind the backs of their oppressors. A good explanation of this way of surviving oppressive power can be found in studies by Scott (e.g. 1990) and what he has termed "hidden transcripts" or a critique of power that is spoken behind the backs of the dominant. The key aspect in relation to this here is the attention I have given in this paper to the critique of power as told by the Wise Women group themselves. And that the hidden transcript is not just idle talk but a way of re-instating agency, by sharing opinions, and trying to make sense of both mine and other women's lives in understanding where our lives connect with existing power structures. This is what makes wise women's talk political. It is a way of sharing personal life experiences and everyday struggles, and relating them to wider social and political issues. C. Wright Mills (1959) recognised this as bringing personal troubles out into public debates. So it is timely now, more than ever, to include women's voice in left politics in Ireland so that women's living knowledge might be sought to contribute to more public and political dispute concerning women's oppression and how we might transform that oppression.

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