

# Joy, optimism, helplessness and despair: counter-transference in teaching sensitive topics

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# Teaching Sensitive Topics Trilogy:

- 1) Teaching sensitive topics: critical pedagogy in a violent society.
- 2) Being human in inhuman places: teaching sensitive topics in dangerous social worlds.
- 3) Joy, optimism, helplessness and despair: counter-transference in teaching sensitive topics
- Development of new courses on topics of violence and trauma.
- Attempt to innovate curriculum in Psychology, making it contextually relevant for South African students.
- Psychology and Society stream

- First paper focussed on how these courses interact with students existing experience of violence and victimization, and how this creates specific risks and possibilities.

Introduced notion of **transference** – the personal emotional meaning that students bring to the course process based on their own experiences.

Also explored **vicarious trauma** and **containment**.

- Second paper examined problem of trying to create spaces of safety for this work, and the shift from teaching to engaging broader social environment of student life – reducing violence and enhancing student support on campus

# Psychology of sensitive work

- “sensitive” here means materials that can be psychologically traumatic, rather than just controversial.
- This paper examines the this process from the perspective of the lecturer, revisiting the notion of transference, now as counter-transference.
- Focus on distressing material has accumulative negative emotional effects:
- Exposure to traumatic accounts can be more distressing than primary exposure to traumatic incident
- Thus working in this field is inherently risky – this is why it tends to be avoided

# Burnout, compassion fatigue, vicarious traumatisatio

- Overall exhaustion and loss of enjoyment
- Withdrawal of emotional connection: disinvestment and blunting
- Experience of symptoms of psychological trauma:
  - hyperarousal (anxiety, agitation), intrusion (flashbacks, nightmares), constriction (emotional and social withdrawal)
- Pessimistic bias: shift to assumption that the world is pervasively unsafe and people are dangerous.

# Counter-transference

- Used in psychology to describe the therapists feelings, thoughts and reactions to client, especially those idiosyncratic reactions relating to therapist's own unresolved issues. Essentially transference, as applied to therapist.
- How does this relate to teaching?
- Teaching on violence and trauma is predicted to trigger burnout, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma through overexposure to risk and negative emotions.
- Conversely, compassion satisfaction from helping others, and confidence from confronting and mastering risks and anxieties can have positive effects

# Personal experience

- Initially did not experience negative reactions.
- Turning danger and suffering into something that can be understood, leading to effective problem solving and future resolution produced relationship to the course materials and teaching process.
- Positive feedback from students was rewarding.
- Sudden shift occurred when moving out of classroom and into projects ensuring social safety of students: Gender-based Violence Working Group, Safe Campus Project, SARAH.

# Practical interventions

- Based on student feedback and academic analysis, attempt to identify and reduce risks to students while enhancing support for survivors of violence.
- Initially seemed promising: good peer network, positive student engagement, institutional commitment.
- Then change for worse: failure to implement safety review, closure of Gender Studies, removal of support for Safe Campus Project, attack on SARA.H.



# Significant examples

- Gay student attacked in res: approached SARA, Safe Campus Project for help.  
Risk assessment and collaborative support: attempt to ensure safety by removing perpetrators.
- Executive Dean of Students acted to protect perpetrators and expose student to retaliation
- Serial rapist identified on campus. Placed on central SRC, providing access to all residences.
- Executive Dean of Students refused to act against him, asserting that her responsibility was to protect the SRC.

# Negative counter-transference

- Extreme feeling of helplessness, frustration and despair.
- Loss of confidence in institution.
- Loss of confidence in broader social/political transformation.
- Loss of confidence in practical value of work.
- Profound distress at having placed students at greater risk by providing illusion of support.
- Depression, anxiety, chronic illness, loss of joy in work.

# Personal significance

- Personal background of early experiences of fear and helplessness
- Idea of intellectual mastery as an effective solution to these problems.
- Idealization of university as a protected social space, guided by rationality, decency, concern for people, and progressive social values.
- Optimistic belief in knowledge-based solutions to social problems, and real possibility/inevitability of social progress.

# Conclusion

- Challenge to positive beliefs, and invocation of prior negative experiences, triggered precisely the counter-transference reactions predicted in the literature.
- Created vicarious traumatization that undermined personal well-being and effectiveness as a teacher.
- Solutions:
  - confronting personal psychological basis of reactions
  - shifting institutional environment