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GOVERNING NURSING THROUGH REFLECTION: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Aim. This paper is a report of a study analysing reflection as discourse and a technology of confession which produces a certain desirable subjectivity within nursing practice.

Background. Reflection and reflective practice are common themes in nursing practices and in the literature on nursing. These practices are often construed as positive and empowering, and more critical analyses of them are needed.

Method. A Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis based on the concepts of governmentality and technologies of the self was conducted. Interview transcripts from 42 managers, supervisors, teachers and participants in an in-service programme to prepare health care assistants to become Licensed Practice Nurses in the elder care sector were analysed.

Findings. Reflection as confession operates as a governing technology within the nursing practice analysed. Programme participants are encouraged to reflect and scrutinize themselves about their work as a way to improve their competencies and practice. Through appraisals, they are invited to reflect about themselves as way to achieve their desires. In this way, active, responsible, problem-solving, self-governing practitioners are constructed.

Conclusion. Through a Foucauldian reading of reflective practices it is possible to illustrate that reflection is not a neutral or apolitical practice. Instead, it is a governing practice that does something, in discursive terms, to nursing subjectivity - something that can create a space for reflection about what reflection discursively does to subjectivity.

Summary statement

What is already know about this topic

- Reflection and reflective practices are common themes in nursing practices
- Literature on reflection and reflective practice in nursing often construe such practices as positive and empowering
- Some literature focuses on issues of power in relation to reflection and nursing, and the work of Foucault has been introduced more extensively during the last decade in research on nursing

What this paper adds

- Reflection operates as a governing technology that shapes an active, responsible, problem-solving, self-governing nursing practitioner.
- Reflection on the individual level is constructed as something desirable that makes it possible to work upon oneself to become a desirable nursing practitioner.
- Reflection is not a neutral or apolitical practice, but is a governing practice that acts, in discursive terms, to produce a desirable nursing subjectivity.

Keywords

Reflection, Discourse analysis, Foucault, governmentality, technologies of the self, nursing, interviews

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades there has been intense discussion and research on reflection, reflective practitioners and reflective practices in the nursing literature (e.g. 2006, Heath 1998, Johns 1999, 2000, Kim 1999, Rolfe *et al.* 2001). For example, Johns (1999) argues that reflective practice is an activity pursued to realise desirable practice, while Kim (1999) argues that the goals of critical reflective inquiry are to “correct and improve the practice through self-reflection and criticism and... [to] generate models of ‘good’ practice (p. 1206). Similarly, Rolfe *et al.* (2001) aim to help readers to improve their practice and to learn by themselves. Other scholars more specifically problematize reflective practices and reflection, such as Burton (2000), who argues that there is still a lack of research which confirms the efficiency of reflective practices, while others set out to assess how effective some reflective practices are (Fowler & Chevannes 1998, Peden-McAlpine *et al.* 2005). Despite differences among these scholars, one dominating idea in these texts is that reflection is something good, which can enhance nursing practice.

Such an idea is problematised by other scholars, who have more specifically addressed issues of power in relation to reflection and nursing (e.g. Gilbert 2001, Rolfe & Gardner 2006, Mantzoukas & Jasper 2004). In particular, the use of a Foucauldian notion of power seems to have increased in research on nursing in the last decade (see Flaming 2006, Gestaldo & Holmes 1999, Holmes & Gestaldo 2002, Traynor 2006).

In this paper, I will follow the line of research that focuses on power in relation to reflection and nursing. Instead of arguing that reflective practices are something good or bad, I will employ a Foucauldian notion of power to analyse how these practices operate as a governing technology. More precisely, I am interested in how power operates within discourse to shape a desirable nursing subjectivity. Such a focus is important as it helps us to understand reflection as a complex concept with multiple elisions and effects in discursive terms, since is not often made visible in narratives on reflection.

BACKGROUND

Over the last few years, there has been a debate on how Foucauldian analyses can be used in relation to reflection. For example, Gilbert (2001) draws on Foucault and governmentality to show how clinical supervision is a practice of surveillance and confession, while Cotton (2001) draws on technologies of the self to illustrate how nurses’ private thoughts have been made visible for identification and control through reflective practices. As a response to Gilbert, Clouder & Sellars (2004) widen the analysis of clinical supervision by discussing resistance and agency within systems of surveillance, while Rolfe and Gardner (2006) draw on technologies of the self when they critique the analyses by Gilbert (2001) and Cotton (2001). According to Rolfe and Gardner (2006), Foucault is not useful in the cases where the focus is on reflection as a cognitive activity (reflection as epistemology) – a situation when a person reflects on their previous experiences as a way to improve their practice. In such a case, the confessor (e.g. teacher, supervisor) does not focus on the person’s self, but on the process of reflection itself. Instead, Rolfe and Gardner argue that Foucault is useful when reflection is analysed as a situation in which one is to learn about oneself (reflection as ontology).

Such interest in the use of Foucault’s work in relation to reflection can also be seen in other practices, for example in research on workplace learning (du Gay 1996, Chappell *et al.* 2003, Elmholdt & Brinkmann 2006) or on lifelong learning (Edwards 2008, Fejes 2005, 2006a, 2006b, Usher & Edwards 2005, Fejes & Nicoll 2008).

In this paper, I will further elaborate on issues of reflection as a governing technology, drawing on a Foucauldian concept of power. Through an extensive interview study of health care assistants, their managers and teachers, I will focus on reflection as discourse and as technology of confession which produces discursive effects in terms of shaping nursing subjectivity. This analysis will complement previous research by illustrating empirically how reflection, although often taken for granted and seen as something good, can be seen as a discursive effect of neo-liberal governmentality where the nursing practitioners are supposed to become active, responsible, problem-solving and self-governing in relation to nursing practices.

Theoretical framework

In this paper, the concepts of governmentality and technologies of the self are used as an analytical framework. The notion of governmentality emerged in Foucault's (2003a) later writings and was developed by other researchers (e.g. Dean 1999, Rose 1999). Here, government is analyzed as something more complex than the government of the nation-state: it involves the government of ourselves, of others and of the state. The focus is not on social, economic and political circumstances that shape thought. Instead, it is on how thoughts (in this case, reflection) operate in the taken-for-granted ways we do things, and on liberal mentalities of governing. Liberalism is not seen as an ideology that can be related to a specific political party, but as a mode of governing or as ideas of how governing should be conducted.

The notion of governmentality is made possible through Foucault's (1980) view of power. There is no subject, such as the nation-state, who has and uses power against someone else. Power is neither a property nor an object. Rather, power is relational. It circulates everywhere. Here, freedom should not be seen as something outside of power relations. Freedom and power require each other. For example, today, in a time of neo-liberal rule (Burchell 1996), people are defined as autonomous and active individuals who seek self-realisation in the name of freedom. Neo-liberalism thus constitutes a particular relationship between government and the governed. The governed are subjects of their own lives who practise freedom as a form of self-governance. It could be said that neo-liberalism promotes a specific form of freedom as a way of integrating the self-conduct of the governed into the practices of government. In such an analysis, subjects are not seen as *a priori* entities with specific characteristics and agency. Instead, in line with Foucault (2003b), the subject is decentred and analyzed as being shaped in specific ways in different historical practices. Thus, instead of studying subjects as agents (*a priori*), the focus is on studying the specific historical practices, the discourses produced by and producing these practices and what subject positions are constituted through them.

Closely related to the idea of governmentality is the concept of technology. Confession was one of the central technologies of the self studied by Foucault, and it is closely related to Christianity and the idea that we all must confess our sins. To be able to disclose one's self (to show the truth about oneself), one had to renounce oneself. One of these techniques was verbalization. Through the human sciences, verbalization has become even more important. It has been inscribed in different practices so as to constitute a new self, without the need to renounce oneself. Confessional practice today is related to what Foucault (2003d) calls pastoral power. Such power emerged with Christianity, and the aim was to secure individual salvation in the next world. Pastoral power cannot be exercised without knowing the souls and innermost secrets of each individual. Thus, pastoral power is salvation-oriented and individualizing - it produces the truth about the individual. However, pastoral power as it has emerged within Christianity has changed its form. The institutionalized form of pastoral

power within the church has lost its vitality, while the function of pastoral power has spread throughout the entire social body. Pastoral power today is focused on salvation in this world in the form of realising one's desires for a good life (Foucault 2003d).

THE STUDY

Aim

The aim of the study was to analyse reflection as discourse and a technology of confession which produces a certain desirable subjectivity within nursing practice.

Methodology

A discourse analysis based on the Foucauldian concepts of technologies of the self and governmentality was conducted using interview transcripts derived from semi-structured interviews. There are many different discourse analysis traditions, ranging from a close focus on language to one on language and interaction and further on to studies of discourse and power (e.g. Nixon & Power 2007, Hui & Stickley 2007). The discourse analysis reported in this paper is related to the last of these kinds of analyses, and I was influenced by Foucault (2003d). My focus is on what it is possible to say, how it can be said and what the discursive effects of such ways of speaking are. More precisely, it is on how discourse (patterns of language) constitutes the desirable nursing subjectivity in terms of governing.

Participants

A convenience sample of participants was recruited from Swedish six nursing homes participating in an in-service training programme aimed at recognizing health care assistants' (HCAs. Equivalent to nursing auxiliaries or nursing aides) prior learning in relation to a certificate programme preparing them to become Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs – second level nurses working under the supervision of a Registered Nurse). One of the central ideas of the programme was to use reflective practices as a means of assessing prior learning. All six participating nursing homes in one municipality were chosen for this study as a way of creating a broader understanding of the programme. All six managers, five of the six supervisors and five teachers were selected for interviews. One third (26) of the programme participants were interviewed, with sampling being based on who was available at the time of the interviews. The sample consisted of a total of 42 people.

Data collection

Data were collected between September 2006 and October 2007 using semi-structured interviews. In total, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted, with the aim being to see how interviewees perceived their participation and work within the programme. Twenty interviews were conducted with only one interviewee, and 10 were conducted with 2-5 interviewees together. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

Ethical considerations

According to Swedish guidelines (and the law on ethical consideration in research with humans), there is no need for an ethics committee to assess a project where interviews are conducted which do not concern sensitive personal information (such as previous crime records), or where there is no aim to influence participants physically or psychologically (SFS 2003:460). I followed the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council, whose guidelines require informed consent and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees, and all data were anonymized.

Data analysis

Drawing on a discourse analysis approach influenced by Foucault, the epistemological starting point is that 'reality' is constituted through discourse, and we can only gain insights into such a construction by analysing texts (either written or spoken text, or an artefact such as a map or painting) (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1983). Therefore, my interviews transcripts were interpreted as texts constituting and constituted by discourse. My interest was not in analysing what the interviewees 'really' meant. Instead, it was on the discursive production of meaning, which constructs and is constructed by ideas about what a desirable nursing practitioner should be and how such subjectivity should be fostered. Accordingly, this paper can be seen as a text making claims about other texts (and thus shaping subjectivity) which can be deconstructed and analysed as discourse.

Rigour

The validity and quality of a discourse analysis is judged on the narrative it represents. If the reader finds the reasoning and arguments presented reasonable, then it is valid. Further, it is for the research community to define what is 'good' and 'bad' through peer review systems, etc. (Howarth 2000). A discourse analysis study 'should be judged in terms of its coherence, clarity, completeness and, above all, capacity to convince' (Dean 1999, p. 10). Further, Dean (1999) argues that to evaluate a discourse analysis, the intelligibility and understanding it creates should be compared with other accounts. Thus, a governmentality analysis is not a subjective relativistic enterprise where 'anything goes'.

FINDINGS

In this section, the discourse analysis is presented. First, the technology of reflection as a confessional practice will be analyzed, followed by an analysis of the desirable LPN who is being fostered. As part of a technology, there are specific techniques operating to shape subjectivity. In the third section, appraisals will be analyzed as such. Based on the theoretical framework, questions guiding the analysis are: What is the 'thing' to be governed and how is governing practised? (Foucault 1983, Dean 1999)

Reflection as a confessional practice in nursing

The texts analysed produce reflection as a desirable activity, which should produce better care work and nursing practice. Reflection is both desirable in groups and by individuals themselves (within groups or by themselves). In groups, reflection is seen as making it possible to discuss and solve problems faced at work. The idea is that people can learn from each other:

I was thinking, that in some way you could – through supervision, through these techniques - through them create those opportunities for the reflection we often lack. With a deeper cultivation of these questions which are problematic – questions that we have here everyday at our nursing home. It is a way of raising the issues...the knowledge which is actually here already. Instead of searching for it outside. (Manager 6)

Here, individual reflection is being contrasted with reflection within a group. Through such reflective practice, the individual is encouraged to contribute with their knowledge – to confess to others. By making one's knowledge visible, one's self is opened up for public scrutiny. The process is constitutive, i.e. subjectivity is shaped through confession. Thus, in this example we have those doing the confession (everyone) and the confessors (everyone). The person doing the confession and the confessor are thus the same people. One confesses to others at the same time as one is the confessor to others.

However, there seems to be no need to have ‘others’ to make a confession. One can be one’s own confessor. Reflection on the individual level is also constructed as something desirable that makes it possible to work upon oneself to become a desirable LPN:

If I have learnt anything since taking this course, (it is) to reflect more about issues. That’s what I learnt. And I think that is good. It is also something one has to learn, to reflect on, every day. To reflect about what one has done. To scrutinize yourself, to ask myself, what good have I done today? And what have I done that could be improved? (Supervisor 3)

This text constructs an idea about reflection as desirable on an individual level. A person should reflect about their daily activities and evaluate what is good and what is bad – to scrutinize themselves. Thus, a confessional practice is constructed where one is both doing the confession and being the confessor of the self. Such narratives are part of several of the interviews. As another supervisor expresses it:

You do a lot based on routine. You never think about why you do something. Instead...everyone else does it that way, therefore I also do it...and here there might be an opportunity to reflect about it, why did I do it that way? Then, if we...yes that’s the ambition to wake! Yes, to awaken. (Supervisor 1)

By reflection you can, according to the text, break with your everyday routine and become a better LPN. Through the process of recognition of prior learning, reflection is created, and participants will be awakened. Here, we can see a linguistic relation to the church, where the church attender is to be awakened as a way to live a good life and to get closer to God. Thus, the same technology seems to be operating in care work as in church (but in another form and with another discursive effect in terms of subjectivity). Through different techniques, the subject is shaped and fostered to become a reflecting, confessing subjectivity that should be awakened and made into a desirable LPN. The political ambition to govern and shape certain subjectivities should coincide with the individual’s desire to be a good LPN.

The responsible problem-solving LPN

As we have seen, through confession a desirable LPN should be fostered. What, then, is a desirable LPN? According to the text, a good LPN is someone who has social competence, with the ability to be empathic, sensitive, communicative and honest. Further, the LPN should be a problem-solver who reflects about how to solve dilemmas. These characteristics can be seen in the following quotation from a local manager:

Yes, it’s important, the social bits are very important really. No matter how good you are at theory and such things, it’s still these social bits...yes, to be empathetic and to listen to people, your colleagues and even those with whom you work. Being sensitive, communicative is also important - communicative is important, in a way – honesty and to raise at an early stage problematic issues and things that don’t work. To be a problem-solver, to be keen on solving problems instead of telling others to do it. Not only to raise the issue, but also have a suggestion about how to solve it. To have some of that kind of thinking, to...yes, not only distancing oneself from the problem, instead say how one thinks. Could we try this or that? Yes, then it generates a lot, new knowledge is generated when testing. (Manager 2)

Here, there is a responsabilisation of the LPN in which they should be focused on solving instead of running away from problems. There needs to be a feeling of solidarity in relation to the older people, colleagues and the nursing home. By expressing such ideas of inclusion in nursing home practice, there is also the exclusionary side in which the undesirable LPN is constructed – the one who does not take responsibility for the common good of the nursing home. The idea of problem-solving is not only related to the care of people, but also to

material things. To be an LPN also means that knowing how to solve material problems such as a broken television, changing a light bulb, etc. As a couple of participants express it:

Not only taking care of people, but also material things. Sometimes you feel like a caretaker. (LPN 1)

You have many occupations. You need to be able to change light bulbs, and even...to make beds, laundry. You need to have...everything. (LPN 9)

A desirable LPN is thus a person who can solve any problem encountered in the workplace, either relational or material. Further, it is stressed that a good LPN also needs to be flexible and adaptable to different older people's needs. When entering the room of one of the residents, an LPN needs to perform in a way that is related to the needs and individuality of that specific person:

And you need to adjust when you go to Agda, then you need to be in a certain way. And to Carls in another way. You need to be able to read a person. That's most important, I believe. (LPN 14)

In the quotation, there are ideas about adaptability and flexibility as regards how to present oneself to others. The good LPN is thus encouraged to work on their self as a way to perform with good quality. Therefore, a delimitation is constructed concerning who is and who is not a good LPN. As the following quotation illustrates, there is a construction of subjectivities suited and not suited for care work. The LPN needs to be a person with the inclination and aptitude for care work. Not everyone has the empathic ability, and it cannot be learned at school. One participant says the following about how one learns to be an LPN:

Partly by going to school, of course. And to have some background and then you also need some aptitude to be able to take care of people too. I don't believe everyone is fit to be able to take care of people. You need to have some, empathy and that kind of thing to be able to, mostly to be able to read a person, how they feel and that sort of thing. And I don't believe everyone can do that. But I don't believe that you can learn that at school either. It has to be there somewhere, built into you. Or, how do you put it? That's what I believe. (LPN 1)

The text constructs the ability for care work as something one has or does not have. A subjectivity is thus constructed which it is impossible to foster in order to become the desirable LPN. This implies that there is a need for selection when recruiting LPNs. Each individual's aptitude for care work needs to be assessed. Those who become LPNs without the appropriate aptitude are thus constructed as the 'other', the one who is not desirable and who is in need of correction.

These narratives also have the discursive effect of a responsabilisation of the LPN. Employees are invited to reflect upon the everyday activities taking place at the nursing home. In such reflection, they are encouraged to develop themselves, and to take greater responsibility in everyday work by contributing to identifying and solving problems. There is a contractual relationship constructed between the employer and the employee in which the employee is offered involvement in activities in the workplace, which earlier might have been the responsibility of managers, or other categories of employees. For example, when HCAs acquire the role of LPN, they are given greater responsibility for tasks previously off-limits to them (for example, to distribute medicine). In such a role, the employee is made responsible for carrying out the specific activities and for their results. In this case, LPNs are invited to take a greater responsibility for defining and solving problems at the nursing home. Such responsabilisation can be seen as an ethos of enterprise (du Gay 2001) and is 'held to be both economically desirable and personally "empowering"' (p. 232).

Constructing the confessing LPN through appraisals

To create the subjectivity of the LPN, certain techniques operate. One of these is appraisal, which is presented in the text as part of the activity of a nursing home. The manager meets employees regularly to discuss their work, how they feel about it and in what areas they would like to develop their competencies. As expressed in an interview with one manager, the individual employee is encouraged to reflect on what they want to become/develop:

And then you can, both of us sit down and review the developmental plan. How do you contribute to the development this year? And then you look at what your goal is, Annika, you might say. And then she has to outline a bit what she finds reasonable to cope with and to do, for her part. It might be that she says, 'I might need a bit more of knowledge about "this"'. And then I ask, 'How do we do it?' And then you write a small plan, how we should carry it out. Can you manage on your own or do you need some help from me as your manager? Or, we discuss it - is it I who should take responsibility for it or should she. She might say, 'No, I can manage on my own'...and the next time we meet we evaluate the results. What did we do, did it go wrong or was the aim set too high? We do a bit of an evaluation. (Manager 2)

In this quotation, there are several techniques operating to make the LPN into a reflecting individual. First, there is the appraisal itself, which focuses on the individual and what they want. Further, the appraisal operates in relation to another technique, the individual development plan. Based on what the employee desires, in a dialogue with the supervisor, a plan is written down about what needs to be developed during the following period of time. Thus, the plan in itself operates as a technique for fostering reflective subjectivities, and it represents ideas about dialogue, individuality, free choice, etc. Through the appraisal and the plan, the self is made visible for scrutiny and assessment by others (and by oneself). Not only is the LPN encouraged to reflect on what they want to develop, but they also need to reflect on whether there is need for specific support or if they can manage on their own. Afterwards, the plan is evaluated with the manager. The focus is on whether the plan has been fulfilled or not, and if not, why. The visibility of desires and the idea that such desires should be evaluated operate to shape a desirable LPN.

Through appraisals and the techniques associated with them, a confessional practice is constructed in which the LPN should confess their inner desires to the manager. Thus, there is the one doing the confession (LPN), and the confessor (manager). By confessing inner desires, there is a knowledge production about the LPN, which is the basis of the operation of power. Based on such knowledge, the manager and employee together plan how, in the best way, the employee can develop their competencies as a way to become a better LPN at the same time as the LPN's own desires are fulfilled. Here, the 'freedom' of the individual LPN encourages them to reflect upon what they want to become. Based on such reflection, a plan can be designed in dialogue with the manager. Thus, the freedom of the individual coincides with the ambition to govern – in Foucauldian terms, (Foucault 2003c) a neo-liberal governmentality in operation, or what Nikolas Rose (1996, 1999) calls advanced liberal rule.

DISCUSSION

Study limitations

Foucault has been criticised for not giving any tools to problematise resistance in relation to the discourse he analyses (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1983). For example, is there a possibility for LPNs in the practice analysed in this paper to resist the technology of reflection? With the tools used in this analysis, it is not possible to answer such questions because they require moving on from a discursive level to look at what 'actually' happens.

To be one's own confessor

I have argued that reflection operates as a governing technology that shapes an active, responsible, problem-solving, self-governing LPN. The empirical example illustrates how confession, which, according to Foucault (2003b, d), emerged in the Christian church, has spread to other practices. In the case studied, confessional practices operate in the nursing homes. There are educational reflective practices and also appraisals and individual reflection during work which are shaped as confession. However, my main argument is that there is no longer any need of another person to whom we make our confession. Instead, we have become the confessors of ourselves. Such an argument can be related to changing contours of governing, where the 'state' no longer governs through institutional legislation. Instead, governing has turned into self-government, through different technologies such as confession (Fejes & Nicoll 2008, Holmes & Gestaldo 2002, Rose 1999). One could say that governing has distanced itself from its operation (Rose 1999) within this neo-liberal governmentality. Thus, in my governmentality analysis, I have focused on what Foucault (1980) calls the micro-physics of power at the extreme point of its exercise and have related this to how power operates to govern individuals.

Through my discourse analysis, I have made visible how thought (reflection) operates in the taken-for-granted ways we do things (Dean 1999). Thus, a space for reflection on reflection is made possible, which in itself participates in the construction of the discourse on reflection. Through such space, it is possible to ask questions about what reflection does and does not do in terms of shaping subjectivity on a discursive level. One might also, based on this analysis, want to ask questions about how such constructions and governing processes could be responded to. However, answers to such questions need to be grounded in another kind of normativity than the one used in this paper. What I have produced is a critique by example rather than a foundational critique and prescription often pursued in, for example, critical theory. Critique by example is normative in the sense that it does not prescribe any solution to the result it presents (Owen 1995).

CONCLUSION

A Foucauldian approach has made possible an analysis that shows how practices of reflection, so often spoken of as positive within practices of nursing, are induced by power, which governs and shapes a desirable nursing subjectivity. Such an analysis can be a threatening experience as it points to how power is always present and exercised, even in practices that we commonly regard as practices of freedom. This is one of the major contributions of Foucault to research on nursing as it helps us to see our practices in new and different ways. Rephrased for this study, I have illustrated that reflection is not a neutral or apolitical practice. Instead, it is a governing practice that does something, in discursive terms, to nursing subjectivity.

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