Critical knowledge as dangerous and liberatory: Response to ‘The rise and fall of academic community psychology in Palestine and the way forward’ by Ibrahim Makkawi

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In Ibrahim Makkawi’s (2017) account of the community psychology programme at Birzeit University, and the wider Palestinian context and experience, a powerful set of examples emerge of the impact and consequences of Western/globalised regimes of truth and practice. Makkawi examines the consequences of a colonising psychology in the Palestinian context, and makes visible the undermining of decolonising practices in psychology by Western, global technologies of control (see Hook, 2004).

Western, formal forms of education reproduce colonising, dominating regimes of control. Positivist, imperial, capitalist ways of knowing and doing are deeply implicated in core assumptions of education, which makes it far more likely that education will maintain the status quo than transform it. In fact, maintaining ideas that education is somehow pure and in the pursuit only of unfettered knowledge potentially conceals those core problematic foundations.

To seek to disrupt and resist forms of power in both the academic discipline of psychology and the higher educational space of universities is an overwhelming task for those community psychologists whose work is directed at such disruption. The challenge of operating within the systems that are both the constructors and promoters of controlling discourses while seeking to dismantle them is, as Makkawi shows, layered with the struggle to resist increasingly dominant neoliberal technologies that present as antagonistic to the core values and principles of community psychologies.

Why is it so difficult in the university and in psychology to teach ideas like those contained in the Birzeit University Community Psychology Programme? One of the fundamental reasons, as we well know, is that education has the potential to be dangerous for those who govern. Education has

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the potential to conscientise and to facilitate the asking of questions, which otherwise go unasked; to unmask previously concealed systems of knowledge and knowledge practices; to engage with the standpoint and subjective experiences of oppression and marginalisation in our societies; and to expose the violence of systems assumed to be innate and natural, such as hierarchy, consumerism, and capitalism. Certainly, in the current higher education climate, Foucault’s words ring true:

Not to be governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them (Foucault, 1978/1997, p. 46).

I am inspired by the extent to which community psychologists such as Ibrahim Makkawi are finding ways to make education dangerous. There are, of course, inevitably adverse consequences to such forms of activism – the university typically acts to discipline in the interest of its liberal, neoliberal, imperial, and colonising agenda: violent responses to peaceful protests; the cancellation and alteration of courses; stricter control of educational spaces; the dismissal of employees; and the expulsion of students.

As much as education appears to have radical potential, formal, institutionalised education has, at its core, always been concerned with the kind of control and conformity that erodes radical possibilities. In the increased world of control that is neoliberalism, the social sciences must be depowered because, rather than the social reductionism to which Makkawi refers, this is where one might learn about oppressive systems and discourses. Philosophy must be stripped and co-opted by a scientific discourse of rationalism, because that is where one might learn to think critically and creatively. In turn, community psychology teaching programmes must be depoliticised because this is where students may learn of psychology’s complicity in social oppression and challenge it. This is indeed very dangerous for that and those which desire to govern us. Nonetheless, Makkawi’s contribution underlines that there remains a desire on the part of many critical community psychologists worldwide to engage in the gruelling but necessary processes of transformation that remain an imperative for community psychology, as well as higher education institutions.

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