The Politics of Normalcy: intersectionality and the construction of difference in Christian-Jewish relations

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The Study

This study examines the dynamics of a discourse on representations of race and religion within a group of black Fundamentalist school children. The children express a constructed knowledge of Jewish people as dark and other while defining Christians - including themselves - as white and normal. The researcher, Moshe Re’em, an Israeli Jew, had previously conducted a larger study of multiple groups of non-Jewish students and their visit to a Jewish museum in Chicago. He had been interested in students’ perceptions and attitudes towards Jewish people and how the visit impacted their attitudes. One of the groups he studied was fifth-grade black Pentacostal students from Calvary Gospel Day School (CGDS) in suburban Chicago, the subjects of this article.

Re’em uses discourse analysis as a method to discuss the peculiar concept of normalcy that he finds within the school. He is interested in how their racial
identities are ignored in fostering overriding identities as Christians. He presents his case that there are political actions at work within the school’s ideology, classroom materials, and teacher attitudes that form and establish this inverted model in contradictory ways.

**Data Collection Methods**

Re’em used a constructivist research paradigm to conduct his research. He conducted interviews with students and their teacher, he was allowed informal observations and he examined classroom textbooks. He interviewed the students a week before and after the students' field trip to the Jewish museum. Of the sixteen students in this particular class, twelve volunteered to be interviewed and had signed parental consent forms. He conducted interviews with groups of two or more students to allow for a greater comfort level since his observation period was limited.

**Data Analysis/Framework**

Re’em used a process of open and then, focused, coding to analyze his data. Themes that emerged from the interviews, review of classroom materials and field observations were organized into overarching themes. He then expanded on the salient themes, ideas, codes and data through the development of integrative memos. These memos provided the framework for him to analyze what he believed to be these black students’ cultural model of a Jewish person and their own cultural identities.

**Ethical Issues**

Moshe Re’em is pretty forthcoming in addressing and confronting his “baggage” that he brings to this study. He confronts how academic discourse also contains political actions that marginalizes or “otherizes” particular groups. He cites Christian
fundamentalism’s aim of converting Jews to become believers in Christ. Re’em identifies with Alan Peshkin’s description of Pastor Muller’s attempt to convert him in the Bethany study. He subjectively acknowledges his concerns, fears and even paranoia that were at play in his study and attitude toward his subjects.

Re’em’s fears were confirmed to a degree in two instances when CGDS would not grant his request to observe classroom instruction and when some of the interview subjects’ parents requested that an adult school employee be present at his interviews with the fifth-graders. Re’em questioned whether the fact that he was a Jewish academic contributed to an “outsider” status. The teacher, Sally Walker, explained that there was a general stranger anxiety and safety concern at the school. I believe that her explanation regarding the interviews was satisfactory, especially given the current vigilance about safety and violence in schools. However, regarding classroom observation, I think that Re’em should have been explored further. His declaration “How my imagined “otherness” was constituted by the adult Christian community continues to be unresolved”, is vague and a bit weak in my opinion.

Findings/Conclusions

The repeated remarks “You don’t look Jewish. You look normal to me!” encapsulate what Re’em experienced, questioned and explored. It turned out that these black students expected him to be dark-skinned like the classmate from India. Curiously, they conceptualized India as being closer to the Middle East “where Jews and Arabs live”, than Africa where most of them have a cultural heritage, but is ignored in their CGDS curriculum.

As opposed to studying them objectively, the researcher’s involvement with the students- his own personal characteristics- were the catalysts to bring the students’ conceptual models to light. I found this very interesting and unplanned situation extremely important to the findings. It also makes me reflect on the other readings of qualitative research we have undertaken this quarter. Has there ever been an instance
of the researcher’s identity and appearance to be so impactful to the research? I think that Re’em would have uncovered these attitudes even if he weren’t Jewish: I don’t believe that his identity tainted the research effort. I believe that his name and the way he looks just catalyzed his efforts—the youngsters had an immediate reaction to him that fed right into the topic that he was researching.

Through an examination of their textbooks, Re’em discovered several instances of contradictory images of Jews—as G-d’s chosen people on one hand and as sinning, non-believers on the other one. There was a consistent theme of reinforcing Christian chauvinism that was imparted to the students while complete ignoring their racial identity. The teacher, who was white, as was the whole staff of the school, argued one of the school’s missions was to encourage the development of a “colorblind” society. The school’s politics of normalcy manages to somehow have students identify with the Eurocentric Christian culture, ignoring other aspects of their identity that could compete with the school’s ideology and in Re’em’s mind, potentially threaten the white hegemonic power structure within the school.

The most interesting question I think Re’em raises for further study is what is the role of parents within this community. Several of the children he interviewed had parents who were prominent black clergy. How is the children’s school knowledge mediated by counter-positional ways when they are outside school? How do they deal with this intersectionality of group identities when they are in the real world?

Comments

I found this article to be a very interesting example of qualitative research even if the amount of time the researcher spent with the subjects wasn’t lengthy (we’re not given specifics). Re’em tackles some really big and sensitive issues—including race, religion and political power structures—but has a very compelling story to tell in a rather personal way. And, he himself manages to get right in the middle of the story. Unfortunately, the reader doesn’t get to know any of the subjects well. However, I
think he does an admirable job of blending findings from interviews through direct quotes, textbook examples and his own personal thoughts and confessions to construct a thought-provoking slice of this contemporary school life.