



Phenomenology & intersectionality

Using PVEST in youth research for social justice

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ABSTRACT

A concern with social justice values people's stories that tell us about human suffering and human wellbeing and which can lead us to solutions for change that we need to act on. Spencer's phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST, 1995) emerged as a critique of traditional developmental theories that tended to ignore multiple levels of inequality experienced by young people, and encapsulates systems theory, intersectionality and phenomenology. Dysfunctional ecological contexts can be studied by means of intersectionality's foregrounding of multifaceted structures and social locatedness, as it recognises how power dynamics and interwoven systems result in discriminatory outcomes within social constructs such as class, race, and gender. Focusing on phenomenological interpretations and responses, PVEST enhances these insights. Understanding the marginalisation of young people necessitates looking into their personal interpretation of what happens to and around them, how they cope with challenges that are often stemming from experiences of interwoven systems of

oppression. The resulting knowledge could better inform the design of services that speak to young people on the margins, support that they can find relevant and effective as they navigate society and the world more confidently and securely.

KEYWORDS

Intersectionality, phenomenology, ecological systems theory, young people, marginalisation, PVEST

INTRODUCTION

The concept of agency, albeit fundamental for understanding social action and change, remains ambiguous and disputable (Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2016; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Fuchs, 2001; Loyal & Barnes, 2001), perhaps largely due to general assumptions that hold systems or structural factors to sway outcomes in human life (Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2016). In this paper I shall argue that intersecting personal factors resulting in multiple experiences of disadvantage by groups of young people need to be given due attention in discourses surrounding them. This is not to view them as powerless victims deserving of pity however. The concern here is to do justice to young people living within structures of disadvantage, in full acknowledgement and appreciation of their agency. This means that we depart from a stance that respects the capacity of young people to act on their environment as human beings, notwithstanding the impact of systems and structures on their lives.

DEFICIT DISCOURSES

In empirical research and cultural depictions, young people are often seen through deterministic deficit and at-risk lenses, particularly if they come from marginalised groups. Such discourses deal with the risks and struggles that certain young people have to deal with, reductively holding systems of oppression as fuelling outcomes that society considers dysfunctional and anti-social (Hilliard et al., 2014).

One such system of oppression could be observed in the educational institution, which uses classificatory labels that serve the orderly running of the bureaucracy, but which may cause long-term harm to the students they refer to. The 'NEET' label, referring to young people who are disengaged from education, employment and training for a period of time that may be short, intermittent or extending over longer periods is one such label that is used in statistical analyses worldwide. A significant effect of this classification or label is that of perpetuating the exclusion and stigmatisation of the young people concerned (Brunila et al., 2020; Matos et al., 2019; Juberg & Skjefstad, 2019; Thompson, 2011; MacDonald, 2011), because it puts the blame on the young people concerned, and links them and their families to notions of deficit and dysfunction. This is a dynamic that allows no space for considering the socially constructed roots of their oppression, and helps consolidate a kind of moral panic, similar to those outlined in the work of Cohen (1973) that depict 'NEET' young people as parasites (Giret et al., 2020; Robson 2008; Young, 2007).

Several factors intersect in the formation of identity, some or all of which may serve to put the individuals concerned at a disadvantage to more privileged others in society, impacting their lived experiences of transitions into adulthood, and in the long term. To label and intervene upon them in educational settings as a 'problem' or as 'high risk', would impose further marginalising depictions on them, a process whereby their intersections are rendered invisible, and their coping responses and their worldview de-valued and obscured (Santos & VanDaalen, 2016).

INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectional theory emerged from a history of feminist writers (Anzaldúa, 1987; hooks, 1981, 1984, 1989; Lorde, 1984; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983) who articulated their experiences of pain, survival, and resistance as women of colour in their resistance to oppression and fight for social change. Intersectionality is thus a valuable lens to help sensitise us to the complexity of the human condition that renders futile one-dimensional perspectives of social phenomena.

The intersectional perspective acknowledges and addresses the exclusionary dynamics of power and domination at work in the lives of people living with disadvantage on various levels. To look at phenomena through an intersectional lens thus translates into being aware of their multi-dimensionality, and into appreciating the layered experiences of being human. This implicates personal biography and identity – combinations of personal qualities in one human being, such as those of ethnicity, gender, physical and mental health, and immigration status, for example (Kuran et al, 2020). Tierney (2019) explains that a conglomeration of such factors impinge on the degree to which an individual or a group of people may be considered vulnerable:

"[...] people are not born vulnerable, they are made vulnerable. [...] different axes of inequality combine and interact to form systems of oppression – [...]" (2019, p. 127–128).

This intersectional understanding of vulnerability helps shed light on the challenges implicated in targeted intervention when prevailing assumptions about people's lives are reductive and therefore misleading (Kuran et al., 2020).

These challenges are reflected in Acker (2006), for whom the elusivity of oppressive systems, together with intersectional invisibility make it difficult to conduct research from an intersectional approach. Such focused studies are necessary to erode oppressive regimes in action that are replicated and perpetrated via "interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations" (p. 443).

An intersectionality approach in studies about young people calls for researchers to observe how structures and norms shape the thoughts of young people and their views of the world. For example, a young lesbian woman living with a disability and coming from a deprived socio-economic background may go through social exclusion, bear the consequences of stereotypes, and encounter barriers that are created by her layered or multi-dimensional being in the world. All of this, in turn is contained in wider structures of power and privilege within society which also impact her lived experiences. Social classifications are formed within hierarchical and unequal social structures, while the different parts of oneself combine to form a distinctive experience of those same social powers and structures (Verez & Beale Spencer, 2018; Bonilla-Silva, 1997).

When leaders and researchers acknowledge how deeply young people are affected by structures and norms, and how these impact their emotional state and their views of the world, then they can better understand their decisions as legitimate personal agency, even though this might conflict with the adult or sanctioned conception of what constitutes right and wrong. Personal agency relates to active seeking of and following what resonates with oneself: an "active process of choosing the appropriate institutional involvements, organisational memberships, and interpersonal relationships" (Shanahan 2000, p.675). Changes occurring in the young person's ecosystem, such as novel possibilities and/or unpredictable impediments or obstacles, shape and limit their prospects (Tomanović, 2019; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). Different contexts also define or facilitate particular agency at specific points during the young person's biography, such as being new to secondary school, after leaving school prematurely, or when experiencing unemployment. In such instances the shifting structures challenge young people to act accordingly, discovering their agency (Jeffrey, 2012; Tomanović, 2019).

In educational settings, young people's agency is acknowledged in so far as it satisfies the established official criteria (Fusco et al, 2013); they are expected to be 'entrepreneurs', and to know where they want to go with their life from within the pre-prepared moulds devised by the authorities, to forge a 'career', for example (Hodgson & Spours, 2020; Smyth et al., 2014). But there is where permission or expectancy to exercise agency stops. If they opt to reject what is on offer for any reason, leaving school early, and taking time out to consider what resonates with them, for example, they are promptly diagnosed as being 'at risk', among other labels foisted upon them (Stea et al., 2019; Liszka & Walawender, 2018; Andersson et al., 2018).

Intersectionality focuses on convergent systems, while the phenomenological lens afforded by PVEST zones in on the young person's upbringing and their own interpretation of all that they are experiencing in their lifeworld (Heidegger, 1988; Neubauer et al, 2019).

PHENOMENOLOGY

The foundations of phenomenology were laid down by Edmund Husserl in 1900-01, and was later advanced by Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others. Phenomenological research is distinguished by the fact that it delves into the origins of phenomena, departing from people's lifeworld and focusing on the mundanity of everyday life (van Manen, 2016). People may have various lifeworlds, such as their home, their group of friends, the school or university, their place of work, the sport-centre, and so on. Each lifeworld has its own rules and rituals, and the young person's lived experience of each will vary accordingly. Phenomenological inquiry is aimed at investigating these lived experiences of participants' lifeworlds, and towards this end, phenomenological researchers adopt a non-judgemental, open stance to carefully make sense of the experiences of the research participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The different human contexts – or lifeworlds - that characterise our lives are conceptualised as 'ecological systems' in the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979).

ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

The ecological systems framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) positions the individual within a number of spheres of influence, and is predominantly applied to study the effect on people of the different contexts that they have to deal with or navigate in these spheres, as well as human behaviour in the different environments (Egan & Perry, 2001; Phinney, 1992). As may be said of all behaviourist theories, the ecological systems framework turns a blind eye to power dynamics and inequalities at the intersections of domains, ecosystems, and social positioning (Cole, 2009; Ghavami et al., 2016). The identity of a given young person could encapsulate the experiences of disadvantage, domestic abuse, being gender non-binary, and disability, for example. Statistical models may often include the effects of relationships, but may lack the insights afforded by the intersectional lens that seeks to do justice to effects of individual biographies and lived experience (Sanderson, 2020).

As they grow up, young people develop their own notion of life and living, and despite being a product of their family or ecosystem, within that same ecosystem there will be elements that resonate with the young person's imagination more than others, and this causes new meanings to infiltrate the mind, new desires that could catalyse a process of moving away from the environment of origin and related expectations (Bakketeig et al., 2020; Carabelli & Lyon, 2016). In such a scenario young people are seen as active subjects, capable of intentional action and self-expression (Coffey & Farrugia, 2014). I share the view of Tomanović (2018), for whom agency is the "capacity to act intentionally, emerging between structures and aspirations as the result of a process based on reflection, compromise, negotiation and resourcefulness" (p. 357).

Structures do not determine who we become or who we are for the simple reason that they are made by and feed from the world itself - a world which is continually in flux. Systems and structures are part of the world; they cannot be monolithic, but rather they are made up by a mosaic of what is existent in the world, and then there is the all - pervasive media which enable the explosion of colour and creation in the world to be accessed from our very fingertips. Because life is organic, we cannot help encountering all that is 'other' and relate to it. Humans have agency, maybe limited according to one's current access to resources, but agency nonetheless it is, and it develops over time (Kallinen & Häikiö, 2021; Dawson, 2012). Agency may be triggered by particularly sensitive instances or episodes (Thomson et al., 2002), which can involve family, or particular areas in personal life, such as issues related to health, education, work, emotional relationships, friendships, and so on (Tomanovic, 2018). As Davies (2010, p.67) succinctly puts it:

“Agency ... lies in the capacity to critically examine thought, and to generate new thought, using not just intellect but also imagination and the senses. It is enabled, ... by a heightened capacity to listen to the other and to participate in and generate events with others that are capable of dismantling the inevitabilities of dominant, oppressive thoughts and practices.”

The benefits of intersectionality, phenomenology, and ecological systems theory for youth research are combined in Spencer's phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST), which I shall address in the following sections.

SPENCER'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL VARIANT OF ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY (PVEST)

PVEST is a theory of human development that combines the intersectional theory and ecological systems theory by foregrounding the importance of people's own perceptions: “PVEST is an identity-focused cultural ecological perspective, which suggests significant and unavoidable plasticity” (Velez & Beale Spencer, 2018, p.79). It departs from the hypothesis that vulnerability is part of the human condition and posits that temporal and context-specific processes of identity formation are constantly interrelating with the structures and systems implicated in one's lifeworld. Identity unfolds throughout the life trajectory, but is of particular sensitivity in adolescence, with the accelerated physical, sexual, emotional and intellectual developmental changes and the confusion that these cause, including self-consciousness and angst. The life course focus of PVEST can contribute valuable insights into changes occurring during the life course both within Bronfenbrenner's enclosed spaces and between them, thus emphasising the person's meaning-making accompanying identity development, reactions and outcomes (Spencer, 1995, 2006, 2008).

PVEST holds that far from being pre-determined by structures, people's lives are lived and navigated through by means of coping mechanisms implicating structures as well as personal interpretations and response. PVEST has been applied to research in systems of inequality faced by marginalised youth, such as racial minority children (Hope & Beale Spencer, 2017), same-sex attracted (SSA) students (Ullman, 2014), and African-American youth (Lee, Spencer & Harpalani, 2003).

The PVEST framework can be used to explore and investigate what it means to be a teenager dropping out of school early, and/or becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training), for example. It can help us understand how and why implacable realities can combine to push people one way or another, and shed light on young people's agency and resistance, as well as their lived experiences of personal hardship, adversity, and disadvantage.

COMBINED BENEFITS OF PVEST AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Hegemonies related to ethnicity, sexualities and socio-economic status are associated with inequality of resource distribution, as in access to support services that can make a crucial difference to how young people cope in both everyday life and challenging situations. Coping processes include how the young person acts within their unique social position, which in turn is impacted by insidious dominant forces of oppression that are rooted in history (Velez & Beale Spencer, 2018). For this reason a phenomenological approach complements the benefits of intersectional theory in studying identity, because it sheds light onto the ways by which young people make meaning and relate to the myriad environments they find themselves in, both within society, and in the world.

CONCLUSION

Intersectionality highlights the complexity and power in structures within which young people live. It does this by focusing on the genesis of power and its impacts on the lifeworld of young people. PVEST can use intersectionality and simultaneously become enhanced by it, because it facilitates a more nuanced understanding of marginality (or marginalities) experienced by the young person navigating the world.

A qualitative focus in youth research is particularly helpful because young people are going through adolescence - a particularly delicate and confusing period of personal growth, implicating conflicting feelings about relationships to self and others, society, life, their identity/ies, among other factors (Erikson, 1968; Syed & Azmitia, 2009). Support must be attentive to young people in such a way as to recognise their complexity and agency, rather than view them according to a deficit model, as helpless but 'guilty' victims of the structures that they are caught up in. The ideal of social justice compels us to strive for change, which can be better implemented if and when we understand better the nature of intersecting sources of discrimination and disadvantage. This emphasizes the necessity of schools, communities, families, and other social actors surrounding young people to become sensitised to the intricacies and insidiousness of different forms of marginalization affecting them, as well as to their lived experiences of these environments.

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