The Problem with Big Service: Neoliberal ideologies in everyday institutional talk

Initiated by U.S. President Reagan and Prime Minister Thatcher and later propagated by U.S. Presidents Clinton, G.W. Bush, and Obama, neo-liberal approaches to social and human services have been characterized by decentralization, privatization, standards reform, routinized practices, individual responsibility, increased accountability, and an approach to poverty that constructs the poor in moral terms, with top-down, paternalistic solutions. This model has been widely critiqued on global (Chomsky, 1999) and national (Ritzer, 2000, 2007; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011) levels, as well as in disciplinary fields such as education (Apple, 1999; McNeil, 2000; Olson, 2007) and social work (Kirkpatrick, 2006). Few studies conduct cross-institutional comparisons of neoliberal ideology, one exception is Maynard-Moody and Musheno’s (2003) study, which examined educators, police officers, and counselors, asking practitioners to tell stories about their uses of discretion. These studies, however, do not examine the interactions themselves but stories about them. Moreover, Maynard-Moody and Musheno argue that the challenges practitioners face in managing accountability are rarely found in the stories of their practitioners, a point I take issue with in this paper.

In recent years, applied linguists have turned their attention to the relationship between neoliberalism and language. While Fairclough (2000, 2006) addresses neoliberalism, he conflates it with the terms like globalization and capitalism, thereby under-theorizing neoliberal ideology (Holborrow, 2012). Block, Gray, and Holborrow (2012), drawing on Bourdieu (2005), Vološinov (1929), Phillipson (2008) and Pennycook (2007), define and expand on the relationship between neoliberalism and language. Most research conducted in these areas, however, focuses on language policy and practice and not on institutional discourses spoken in situ.

This paper, therefore, examines the ways in which neoliberal discourses, particularly those addressing responsibility and accountability, surface in three diverse institutional contexts: educational, social work, and policing. Using Conversation and Discourse Analyses, this paper describes how these discourses surface in everyday conversation between practitioners and clients, be they a professor and his students, social workers and her clients, or police officers and the drivers he pulls over. The paper concludes with a discussion and critique of “Big Service”, a term I have coined to describe the corporate take-over of service institutions that moralizes and punishes the poor and narrows opportunities for practitioners-cum-bureaucrats who want to help.

Saturday, February 13, 2016
11 AM - 12 PM
Borough of Manhattan Community College
Room: Richard Harris Terrace (in lobby of main college entrance)
199 Chambers Street New York, NY 10007
Note: All attendees will be asked to show some form of ID in order to enter the college.

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