

## Dyslexia, my language discourse from a social work perspective

In this piece, I utilise an autoethnographical approach to question my dyslexia, and assessing it in reference to theorisations by Marx (1818-1883), and Goffman (1959). I also deconstruct the concept of my dyslexia in the context of thinking by Foucault (Foucault, 1988) setting this against a current context of vision power and Neo-liberalism. Examining my 'disability' has not been pleasant, because it has revealed to me that I am not 'disabled', but rather systematically oppressed by wider social forces and, that I act as an agent of my own oppression.

A Foucauldian appraisal of dyslexia (Foucault, 1988), returns us to the period of Enlightenment 1685-1815 (Macdonald, 2015). A period which consolidated reasoning, scientific methods and rational thought processes as a referent norm, within society, much later fuelling the fires of mass education, and a national curriculum - pivotal building blocks of capitalism. In consequence, this process entangled educational achievement with success (Mintz and Wyse, 2015). Educational achievement became both conceptualised and based around measurability, results and examinations; this level of surveillance creates a governmentality of education. By this, I mean both limiting and elevating a concept of education that is one of algorithmic patterns of intelligence, which becomes institutionalised, and subject to surveillance. Standardised testing, exam invigilators and core subjects, are practices within this 'educational' process of establishing liberal, consensual, autonomous, rational thinkers, ready for employment (Macdonald, 2015). Such subjects have the illusion of choice over their lives, a way not only to control populations, but also producing mechanisms to control, thought and reasoning, Foucault,(1988) . My assertions that I will illuminate autoethnographically relate to Ergo manufacturing life, to the docile-unthinking-self-blaming diagnosed body of the dyslexic (Morin, 2019) – this is how I felt in 2011.

This historical context gave birth to the concept of dyslexia, thus fellow dyslexics and I are a product of capitalism. I can be viewed as an individual, with “deserving” learning difficulties, once rejected from mainstream education and limited social mobility. Until, being abled to be medically “cured” with educational intervention (Macdonald, 2015), since we have become economically productive and employable. We have developed skills and strategies to become self-regulating subjects, I, for example reframe from typing in front of supervisors. Marxist socioeconomic thinking may suggest, this process gave credence for dyslexic markets to emerge. As now, the dyslexic had been socially transformed to be profitable, in the markets of intervention, special educational needs teachers and resources, I have capitalised upon all of these.

Until recently, I had never thought about dyslexia being a social construction, something assigned to me and a self-prescribed label, once receiving my dyslexic report. I viewed dyslexia as a biological-neurological deficit. I can feel lexic power operating in society, training dyslexics to engage with lexic norms and self-surveillance, over writing skills. The lexic norms of literacy are powerful and act as a panopticism within society (Foucault, 1980, p. 155 cited in Jones, 2004), in which dyslexics, non-lexics and I, perform and maintain this discourse by voluntarily engaging with education, employment and knowledge (Macdonald, 2015). In a sense, I was a passive agent of capitalist education, and to some extent still am.

*My less-able literacy place, my seat at the “red table”.*

Using the work of Goffman (1959), I will explore how I utilised impression management, my agency and personal power as a white, middle- class dyslexic.

*Now even at 6, I was very aware what the “Red” table was a cloak for. It is a symbol for “The Dunce” table.*

Management of my new identity, was very difficult to manage as a young child, leading to reckless behavior in my early teens. I did not want my “Master Status” being that of an underachiever, which led to a conscious lack of social comfort within education. Livingston, Siegel and Ribary (2018) discuss that dyslexics often, “... have been stereotyped as stupid, cheating, lazy or careless before they are given a formal diagnosis” (Denhart, 2008; McNulty 2003; Siegel, 2013, 2016). This resonates with me, *my red table*. My power to act was to engage with more deviant behaviors, in order to gain control, a myriad tactic (Carter and Fuller, 2016) – so, I did not have to attend class and reveal my inadequacies. Research also suggests that I am not alone in this type of response; for example; dyslexics are over represented in the youth justice system (Kirk and Reid, 2001), “38% of the sampled prison population had dyslexic tendencies” (Klein (1998 cited in Macdonald, 2012) and being dyslexic has detrimental affects on life chances (Livingston, Siegel and Ribary, 2018; Macdonald, 2012). Essentially, my white, middle class privileges enabled me, to cling to some social positioning at school. This made my embodied status label of being dyslexic, more manageable. My family was able to pay the £400, for my dyslexia assessment. My private education, equipped me with the tools I needed to be identified, and small class sizes allowed me to engage with my teachers on a more 1-1 basis. These privileges are not universal, but are the ones I carry.

A Foucauldian understanding of my private education, may suggest this privilege was a disciplinary action, an example set to maintain and control to all other schools. In a sense these schools are positioned as a model to other institutions, maintaining “a micro-physics of power” (Chambon, Irving and Epstein, 1999) – giving me an advantage in society as a dyslexic with high social mobility and agency. This facilitated, my ability to “Role Exit” Goffman (1959), – when it came to my deviant behavior. My private school was more forgiving, on the grounds that my family was paying £30,000 in fees, giving me concentrated personal power. A level of agency, that would have not have been available to me if, I were attending a state funded school. This

awareness of my personal power status in society, allowed me to re-socialise, to achieve my new status of an “A” student during my GCSE’s. Available to me was huge levels of cultural capital, which I utilised to achieve this. Without this level of resource, I do not think I would have been able to achieve my new status and, remove my deviant student stigma. The power resources that I possess as “disabled” are not common, 1 in 5 disabled people in the UK are having their rights “violated” (Booth, 2018), I can speculate that many of the service users I will be working with may not have this agency.

This begs questions in relation to how our society values dyslexics and non-lexics along with a consideration of the resources that are being allocated to those in need of support. When it comes to the literacy skills that are so integral to being able to survive in a neoliberal capitalist society, only 3% of the UK, views that being a dyslexic is an asset to an identity (Hill, 2018), which could suggest that a high number of respondents may have sexist tendencies and/or that a high number have internalized a perception of the dyslexic identity as ‘lesser than’.

However, there is a new hope for dyslexics within the digital era. It is perhaps making it easier for us to “pass” or become closer to the elusive referent norm. Research studies have suggested that social media platforms such as Facebook are making it easier for the dyslexic student to fight back against destructive deficit discourses by embracing tactics such as “keeping up to date and meeting deadlines; increased control over learning; developing metacognitive awareness; greater control over literacy process and demands; and being experts and helpers” (Barden, 2014:1). Digital platforms facilitate a dyslexic community and a type of dyslexic identity, which exercises self-control and reliance on others in a virtual capacity. This for me, begs questions around why students are outsourcing help online? Why do these communities not exist as a physical reality? Is it the shame and stigma that dyslexics and other non-lexics feel as discussed earlier or a response to the neo-liberal individualism. Exploring the work of Goffman (1958) and his discussions that life is theatre within the presentation of our self and that we

are wearing masks to make us fit in, allows me to understand this in relation to my own practice. You could say that within the context of my placements my need to play the part of a non-dyslexic or lexic. The placement office is my stage, my part is the lexic and backstage at home I am my hidden self the dyslexic, the student reading, re-reading, talking into her phone for spellings, all rituals that are forbidden when I am on stage. This dramaturgical sociological response raises alarms for me. If I am not being genuine with the service users I work with, how can I build the necessary rapport? Or is it a need to lose apart of ones self to social work to keep in line and “safeguard its reputation” (BASW, PCF 1:5).

This conflict between rejection of labels and acceptance is a difficult. This level of pathologisation in relation to aspects of our post-modern world can open new corridors or either hinders us, both to dyslexics and service users. Pathologising can offer support, funding, give us understanding from others and clarity. But it can raise issues, of destructive labels and we have seen underrepresented groups being targets for racism and stigma within mental health (Phillips and Lauterbach, 2017), within “fatness” (Murray, 2008) and dyslexia seen as a disability not an alternative set of processing skills (Threlkeld, 2015).

*Being dyslexic myself, I how it feels to be labeled with dyslexia. It brings you shame and often frustration. My own mother cried when my report came through whereas I felt a sense of relief.*

My report, allowed me to make sense of my education process and educational disengagement (Macdonald, 2012). Without that report in this Neo-liberal capitalist society, I can say with some conviction that, I would not be studying as a social worker. My report allocated me with agency, in the form of extra time, an exam reader and a private room, the tool kit I need to belong in a lexic society. Does that mean we are now having underfunded dyslexic students, who find themselves without agency and unable to pass as a lexic, unable to afford the report and perhaps, not being able to access

training for well paid roles?

The Neo-liberalisation of my school reports reinforces the dominant hegemonic ideas of individual responsibility, engrained inside education (Cameron and Billington, 2017) in the forms of “self-editing” and the values surrounding what constitutes “achievement”. Evident in my Year 6 school report that stresses; I need to improve my presentational skills and spelling. Having no regard for my ideas, thoughts and creativity in my written work. Begging questions surrounding what our society is educating us for, to spell and maintain the status quo (Collinson, 2012) or to think and understand creatively about what we are learning? I must add, that I am not undermining the importance of standard literacy but, I am simply hypothesising in the case of my school reports, that it appears my teachers did not regard my writing as, a method to exchange and enhance thinking but, a method to monitor my reading and writing skills. In which neo-liberal capitalist depends upon, for skilled workers and “education reflects the organisation of production in capitalist society” (Bilton et al., pp 292-3: 387 cited in (Jones, 2003 pp, 61).

If I analyse my dyslexia from a Marxist viewpoint (1818-1883), (this conflict theory views society having a struggle between two classes) the bourgeoisie (Lexic) served by the state, exploits the proletariat (Dyslexic). Society as we know it, is reproduced by two spheres of influence the infrastructure, which reflects the superstructure. Maintained by a hegemonic lexic ideology, to benefit the bourgeoisie, these come in two forms; repressive state apparatus and ideological state apparatuses (Jones, 2003, 55-80).

Marx’s Literacy Criticism offers, an explanation of my performance during my education. It serves to constantly remind me that, I must remove any alternative explanations for my different literary skills and language ideological discourse, thus I can see the actions of ideological state apparatus. This in turn, creates, a “dominant lexic discourse” (Collinson, 2018), which I must adhere to. Creating a society, that is in fact “Lexist”. Which enforces ideologically based ideas on to dyslexic’s that we are the “other” in relation, to

the referent “Lexic”. That society makes assumptions surrounding how literacy should be orchestrated in society (Collinson, 2012). This can be viewed via a Marxist lens as a narrative truth claim of elitist propaganda.

Language-based discrimination is not an uncommon theme of many disciplines it is seen within social psychology (Ng, 2007), psychology (2011) and gerontology (Gendron et al., 2015). However, I have struggled to find social work journals theorising on this phenomena, yet the discipline of social work must constantly strive to effectively communicate across difference, Narayan, (1988). Ng (2007) raises thoughts, that language holds power and it would be unlikely we would be able to fully appreciate discrimination without looking at the language surrounding it or the language we use ourselves. On my own placements, I have been embarrassed when my supervisors have been watching me type, write notes and attempt to spell names. I am afraid they will perceive me as “less-than”, my student peers. I fear that would be missing my neo-liberal competence based professional domain (PCF 1). Do the reflective accounts we are tasked to complete as social work students, simply serve to present our so-called failings? It may seem bizarre, but I have seen older students treated with more respect and given the slightly more complex tasks on placement, simply because they are older, not because they have more experience or are more capable. These intersectional experiences as a young dyslexic social work student makes me very unwilling to disclose my dyslexia to supervisors, lectures and service users.

*Now, since my involvement on my degree course, it has become known to me, that my sentence structure, grammar and punctuation skills, do not match the theoretical nature of my writing, knowledge and understanding.*

*My university marks pulled down, by Literacy skills or Lexic norms?*

I have been indoctrinated into a false literacy ideological consciousness, set up to benefit the Lexic. Now I must ask, for whom is this elitist form of literacy is really benefiting. I argue, it is set up to create skilled workers who may

perhaps emphasise process over content in a manner that may serve to limit exposure of the lack of humanity afforded to many within a Neo-liberal Capitalist society. In 2012, the Minister of Education Michael Gove changed the GCSE program, awarding 5% of the marks to pupils with good spelling, grammar and punctuation (Helm and McKie, 2012). This was the year I took GCSE's and was formally given my new dyslexic status. This new ruling to GCSE's, affected four of my academic subjects. I was robbed of content marks, because my spelling was not up to scratch. I suggest that this neoliberal lexic discourse is holding presentational and literacy skills, over that of content. Creating avenues, in which I, as a dyslexic social work student may not be valued on the content of my work due to the dominance of lexic norms, and how these relay a perceived 'value. Moreover, lexic students with poorer content may advance me, because their writing more closely matches lexic norms (Macdonald, 2010).

This "Lexic discourse" has been imposed upon me, by every educational institutions that I have participated in. It has provided me with literacy norms and values (Cameron and Billington, 2017), hence creating my discriminated dyslexic body which has become known to me a by, hegemonic set of lexic ideas and beliefs surrounding what is good or in fact bad academic styles of writing (Collinson and Penketh, 2009, 15).

I can argue the case, that Lexism holds power in society, by exploring language conformity and the Gullah. The Gullah language is a mix of West African sentence structures and mainly English vocabulary. The language of the Gullah, has been stigmatized, referenced to as "broken-English" (O'Rourke, 2018) and as a result of the African diaspora (Harris, 2010). It was not until; an African-American linguist academically *legitimised* the language, by referencing its West African roots and semantics (Campbell, 2011). These "Lexic discourses" hold a power-based oppressive nature over languages and how we *legitimise* languages. It allows room for discredited and stigmatised "other" identities such as: dyslexia or the Gullah (Goffman, 1959).



On my own placement working with refugees, I have encountered, racism and Islamophobia. Furthermore, I have also encountered Lexism. I must stress that often Lexism, is not often seen as discrimination. Its often hidden, silent and subliminal, easily missed. Lexism's that I have encountered, have been dismissive attitudes towards other languages, westernised form filling and a discount of skills, because "good" English is a "must" on job applications. I, as a social worker now acknowledge, this blatant form of Lexism in our society; the constant emphasis of "good English" resonates with me as a dyslexic. I understand how it feels unable to meet the lexic norms, which serve to both reduce my personal power and that of service users within these systems. Once again, adding more oppression to the most marginalised communities that are often under resourced and represented (Philip & Reisch, 2015). Social justice is a social work value (BASW, 2014), social workers must advocate an inclusive language discourse, this could lead to the enhancement of niche communities, create less social exclusion and boost life chances (Riddell, 2009). The social construction of language based norms is evident on the basis, that Italian, is the most forgiving language for dyslexics (Hoyles and Hoyles, 2010) and a bilingual study evidenced, that you may be dyslexic in one language but not in another (Smythe and Everatt, 2004). On that basis, the social construction of dyslexia means, I am more able to pass as a valued member of a capitalist society in Italy, then in the UK, as I would be closer to the literacy norms of that society.

In just 824 days, I will become, a "Qualified social worker" working amongst everyday Lexisms and service users. Will I remember writing this account of my experiences, when working with people that do not fit a capitalist archetype of 'educated' and perhaps, have poor reading, literacy skills and may not be able to speak the same language as me. My positional power, of becoming a social worker must not be used, to make service users fit in to my forms, tick my agencies boxes or assume that they can read my language. I must be a social worker that fits, to their needs and requirements. Of course, being a social worker holds huge power implications, for the service users and

I, when working together. I cannot ignore or undermined that but, I must not hide or discount the good that power can sometimes do, which for me is to create new discourses, which enables service users to not only shift power but also become emancipated from discrimination (Tew, 2006), including sexism. This legitimate positional power given to me by the state, must be used to enhance the needs of service users, otherwise I fear that power within social work would ultimately lend itself to “western norms... of dominance” over the service users (Tew, 2006 cited in Bundy-Fazioli, Quijano and Bubar, 2013).

The Equality Act (2010), reinforces that dyslexia is a protected characteristic in which Universities have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for dyslexic students however, still I am 11% less likely to leave with a 2:1 or above than a Lexic with the same IQ (Byrne, 2018). Just recently, India’s Prime Minister Modi, went public with allegations that his dyslexic rival, was someone of low intelligence (Pandey, 2019), the stigma associated with being dyslexic is very real. I know this because I rarely disclose it to people. When I do, I am met with comments like *“You would never guess”, “Are you sure?” and my personal favorite, the sympathetic head tilt.* I cannot imagine, what it must be like to manage multiple identities, which hold oppression. I as a social worker, have an obligation to uncover and promote the interests of oppressed individuals and communities, this includes people who are affected by sexism’s.

The way dyslexic students are made to approach mainstream education, clawing for funding. Is a similar path that social workers and students are made to walk in practice within the narrow single standards guided by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2019). Dyslexic’s and social workers alike are made to jump through hoops of single assessments to prove their inadequacies and adequacies. The pinched set of entry and grade requirements does not differ to the dyslexia assessments of writing times, spelling graphs and puzzles. Maybe if we expand our vision of academia for dyslexics and non-lexics; additionally the requirements for who gets to be a

social worker, we will shall have a more diverse and current set of people with new skills and wider experiences. I would hope this would create a social workers not judged by the grade they leave with or how fast they can get into local authority but, a unique opportunity to develop social work as a profession for contrasting backgrounds, education levels and history.

Dyslexia is not a myth, but in a Neo-liberal Capitalist society is certainly a neurological disablement. I have learnt that dyslexia is also not a truth, but a powerful language discourse, operating silently within society. I hope by the time my son is playing his role in educational intuitions, dyslexic, non-lexic and lexics are playing on a more equal playing field, or at least equity driven. Social workers must work with these hidden inequalities in mind and practice in a way that does not oppress but, challenges everyday elitisms.

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