

Intergenerational Solidarity and Economic Inequality in the Labour Movement: A Post-Structural Analysis of Discourse and the Practice of Two-Tier Collective Bargaining



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GENERATION
squeeze

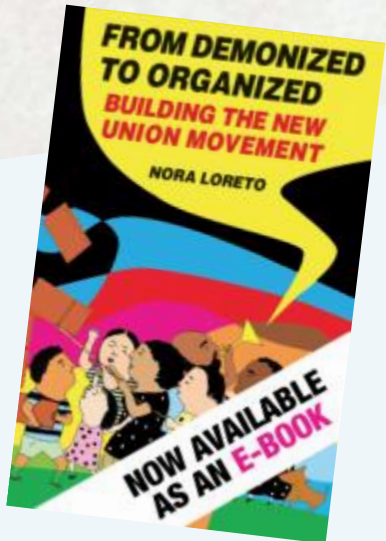
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It always seems impossible until it's done.

-Nelson Mandela

Theoretical Perspective

Post-structural onto-epistemological approach informed by anti-oppressive theory.

Post-structural Theory:

- “all knowledge is contextual, historical, and pentultimately, produced by rather than reflected by language” (Strega, 2005)
- Drawing on Foucault – “at historically specific points, language, power and social institutional practices coalesce to produce particular ways of thinking, understanding, being and doing” (Stega, 2005)
- Central concepts: discourse, subjectivity, and power.

**Source: Leslie Brown & Susan Strega (Eds.). (2005). *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous and Anti-Oppressive Approaches*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars' Press.

- **Discourse** makes visible “the social and ideological ‘work’ that language does in producing, reproducing or transforming social structures, relations and identifies” (Fairclough (1992) cited in Strega, 2005)
- “**Power** depends on our active participation in the discourse offered and regulated by it to maximize its effect and minimize alternative outcomes” (Wang, 1999).
- **Subjectivity** – contextual and relational
 - The interaction between researcher and participants directly influences the knowledge produced

Anti-oppressive Theory

- Explicitly acknowledges that “everything is political” (Baines, 2011).
- A framework for exploring issues of difference, collectivity, and solidarity.
- A critical lens to “link the ‘micro’ experiences of individuals with wider ‘macro’ forces such as those linked to language, culture, institutional practices, and government policies (Carey, 2013).

How does theory translate in my research?

- How is this particular moment of neoliberal restructuring, through the ‘politics of austerity’, taken up in the social construction of young workers and enacted through two-tier collective bargaining?
- Categories and concepts such as young worker and the ‘austerity agenda’ are socially constructed and fluid depending on one’s subject position (Grenier, 2007).
- Discourse is the object of deconstruction, analysis and critique. Language and discourse are conceptualized as tools of power that work to legitimize or delegitimize particular actions and options.

Purpose

- This study aimed to address a gap in the literature by identifying **how language and dominant narratives (about austerity and young workers) are used to produce or resist economic inequality** in local level collective bargaining processes.
- The objective of this study is to **identify, deconstruct, and disrupt the narratives that underpin two-tier collective bargaining and to imagine a discourse of resistance** that has the potential to strengthen working-class solidarity.

Research Questions

- How does discourse produce intergenerational economic inequality through two-tier collective bargaining in Ontario?
 - How are young workers socially constructed within the context of two-tier collective bargaining?
 - How do dominant discourses support or hinder intergenerational solidarity in unions?
 - How is language and discourse used to (de)politicize resistance to two-tier collective bargaining among union organizers?

Methodology

- Qualitative design
- 6 semi-structured interviews with union organizers
 - Convenience and snowball sampling
 - Recruitment criteria: part of the broader public sector, experience with two-tier collective bargaining and organizing young workers, located in the Greater Toronto Area
 - 75 minutes on average
- Self-administered demographic questionnaire
- Key ethical considerations: anonymity and confidentiality

Data Analysis: Uncovering Layers of Discourse

- Each text is decontextualized through the process of coding before a process of recontextualization to identify findings.
- **Coding using Nvivo software**
 - Initial or open coding – broad overarching themes
 - Focused coding – digging deeper, synthesizing specific themes
- **Constant Comparative Method (Boeije, 2002)**
 - 3 types of comparisons: within a single interview, between interviews, between interviews and the literature
 - Memos to record observations

Source: Boeije, H. (2002). A Purposeful Approach to the Constant Comparative Method in the Analysis of Qualitative Interviews. *Quality & Quantity*, 36, 391-409.

Findings: Participant Demographics

- 4 females, 2 males
- Various ages
 - 18–35 years: 1, 36–45 years: 2, 46–55 years: 2, Over 55 years: 1
- 5 identified as White, 1 identified as Black
- Education: all had some form of post-secondary education
- Roles: 3 local or district presidents, 1 negotiator, 1 supports local union executives, 1 focuses on communications and engagement initiatives
- Subsectors: Government (federal, provincial, and municipal levels), a public utility, health care and social services, education

Young Workers

- The category young worker is understood differently across unions – with implications for power and influence.
- The priorities of young workers and other workers are perceived as similar.
- Sense that overall, young workers could be more engaged in the work of unions.
 - Participant quote: “...it’s pale, male, and stale in the labour movement. And it still is to a degree today, because there’s a large portion of representatives of labour still do not reflect the demographics of who they represent”
- Characteristics/stereotypes attributed to young workers may be better understood through structural analysis of the labour market.

Austerity

- Union organizers were critical of the ‘politics of austerity’ and its impact on workers and communities.
 - E.g. rise of part-time, short-term contract work; framing employee benefits as unsustainable; negative construction of public servants as being in opposition to leaner, more responsible government
- Examples of how discourse is internalized by workers
 - Perceived/real ‘fear’ and a sense of vulnerability
 - Discomfort advocating for better working conditions
 - Refusal to ‘ask for money’
- Common strategies to resist austerity:
 - More resources for grassroots organizing, be willing to ‘make noise’ at the bargaining table, make the link between micro and macro impact, more coordinated action within labour movement

Two-Tier Collective Bargaining/Agreements

- Analysis focused on union organizers' talk about resistance to and justification for two-tier work conditions.
- Revealed language and narratives that were contradictory.

Discussion about **resisting** two-tier collective agreements:

- Recognition that two-tier provisions set a dangerous precedent, both locally and for other locals/unions.
- Tendency to focus on collective action and solidarity.
- Effectively mobilizing workers identified as a key element of resistance – including reflecting young workers perspectives in negotiations, recognition of barriers to young workers' participation

Two-Tier Collective Bargaining/Agreements

Discussion which **explained or justified** two-tier provisions:

- Young workers constructed as “not active, and involved, and vocal”, seen as exerting less influence in formal union processes to establish bargaining priorities
- More emphasis on the individual responsibility of workers to advocate.
- Role and pressure union organizers feel to protect current members' interests (at the expense of new workers).
- The impact of two-tier concessions was minimized.

Towards Strengthening Intergenerational Solidarity

- Understand and remove structural barriers to union engagement that exist for diverse groups of young/newer workers, both within and outside of unions.
- Turn a critical gaze inward to explore the role we play in perpetuating stereotypes and narratives about young workers that fragment workers rather than build solidarity and shared visions for an alternative to austerity.
- A renewed commitment to organizing at the local level to reflect the full diversity of union membership in decision-making structures.
- Articulate alternative discourses that are inclusive and grounded in lifting all workers up.

Implications for Social Work Practice

- I hope these findings inspire us to think critically about:
 - How discourse influences our thoughts and behaviours in contradictory ways. For example, how is the austerity discourse enacted in our own workplaces?
 - How discourse impacts our ability to see or enact alternatives to create a more socially just society.
 - How/to what extent the internalization of dominant discourses makes us complicit in oppression. How can we collectivize our struggles as social workers in the spirit of anti-oppressive practice?
 - Divisions between direct practice and social work activism. The macro-micro connection as an important element of self-care.

“PRP Tips”

- Balance your passion with practicality.
- Look for inspiration/resources in unexpected places.
- Use free software to analyze large quantities of data.
- You don't need to reinvent the wheel.
 - Use and acknowledge the work of others
 - Past PRPs – structure, ethics forms