Reflections on social work in practice: Perceptions of how being from a higher caste affects social work among the lower (Dalit) caste people of Nepal – my experience and lessons learned

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ABSTRACT

This essay reflects on my community work in a rural village located approximately 70 km from Kathmandu in Nepal. As a social worker, my task was to help integrate people from the Dalit (lower) caste in their local community. The assignment proved to be a challenge, not only because I lacked practical knowledge but also because I belonged to a different caste group, the so-called Brahmin, i.e. the upper caste. In this essay, I discuss how the fact that I am from an upper caste affected my work. The essay attempts to bring forth the problems that I encountered, particularly the critical incidents, and my critical reflections on being a social worker.

Key words: Dalit, empowerment, sensitise

INTRODUCTION

Healy (2005) draws on anti-oppressive practice in order to build an understanding of the client's need and the appropriate social work responses to these needs. The essence of the anti-oppressive approach is that it requires social workers to recognise multiple forms of oppression and social division shaping practice relationships (ibid.:179). The theory emphasises the origin of service user's problems and attempts to focus on these problems in practice by recognising the personal, cultural and structural dimensions of oppression. To a large extent, my work corresponds with the ideas presented in the anti-oppressive approach. Nepalese society functions according to a rigid caste system. Four major castes have been "fixed" using two basic social characteristics: people who are "touchable" and "untouchable". The social function of being "untouchable" refers to caste, work and descent-based discrimination with people who are known as "Dalits". Dalits are relegated to do caste-based work such as black/goldsmith, tailor, shoemaker and street cleaner - all of which are considered to represent a low social status.

Although the interim constitution of Nepal 2007 and other regulations prohibit any form of discrimination on the basis of race, caste, sex and religion, Dalits are still discriminated against in all important spheres of religious and cultural life (DWO, 2010). They are not allowed to practice Hindu rituals, norms and values in the same manner as other castes. Among other things, Dalits are denied entry into the houses of higher castes, in addition to temples, hotels/ restaurants, teashops, food factories, dairy farms and milk collection centers. The prohibition against entering into Hindu temples has prevented the Dalits from participating in religious events inside the temples, and they must be content with worshipping outside the temple building. Dalit women entering temples are often humiliated by the temple priests as well as by higher-caste people. A Dalit who drinks tea in a teashop has to wash his or her cup so as to avoid physical abuse, including being beaten. Dalits have suffered from a number of atrocities such as beatings, mental torture, rape, the break-up of inter-caste marriages, false allegations, etc. Higher-caste people do not hesitate to beat Dalit women in public if they are found to break the norms and values of the Hindu tradition (DWO, 2010).

For many years, governmental, non-governmental and international non-governmental organizations have been working to promote social inclusion of the Dalits caste people into society. The Dalit Welfare Organisation (DWO) is one such organisation engaged in this field. As a university graduate, I had the opportunity to work as a social worker with the DWO, and was exposed to quite a bit of interesting field experience during this work period. This essay therefore presents the personal experiences I faced during my field visit to a rural village located approximately 70 km from Kathmandu. The DWO's objective was to empower the Dalit people and to raise their awareness of their rights in order to combat caste-based discrimination and untouchability issues. I was thrilled to work in this particular field, as I was a young and enthusiastic university graduate. I was given the task of helping the Dalits

integrate into the local community, which was divided into a number of castes and social hierarchies.

The assignment proved quite challenging since I lacked practical knowledge and belonged to a different caste group, the so-called Brahmin, i.e. the upper caste in the social hierarchy. I did not have much access to people from other caste groups, particularly the lower castes; I could rather put it this way - I had never been close enough to them to get to know their lifestyle or their culture. Being from an upper caste, I had always had the privilege of going to the best schools, getting the opportunity to study abroad and having a life of comfort, with all the modern conveniences that entails. From what I have read and understood, this was certainly not the life of a young Dalit.

The following subsections address the critical incidents that pertain to how being from an upper caste affected my work. The critical incident model involves providing reflections on the problems by analysing personal experiences and by conceptualising knowledge gained through practice (Payne and Askeland, 2008; Lognwe, 2010). Adhering to this view, I have strived to highlight the problems that I encountered during my work and discuss how I performed as a social worker, along with my critical reflections on being a social worker.

What is in a cup of tea?

I was appointed as a social worker in the Dalit Welfare Organisation (DWO). Thus, my role was to help, advocate, empower and raise awareness about issues related to discrimination towards the Dalit people and efforts to enhance their social inclusion. This particular task was given to me because I was young, from a higher caste, proactive, open-minded and a university graduate from abroad. The DWO had previously used people from a lower caste to advocate and sensitise the community without success, which could have been another reason for me being assigned to this task. While visiting the village, I heard the villagers tell several stories about the daily hardships the Dalits faced such as poverty, lack of sanitation, denial of entry (to temples, shops and restaurants), early childhood marriage, and a lack of education - just to name a few. Similarly, while meeting and hearing their stories, it was clear that Dalit women were extremely exposed to discrimination in comparison to their male counterparts. These women were highly vulnerable in regard to serious health issues, sex trafficking and domestic violence, and suffered from social, political and economic powerlessness.

It took approximately four hours to drive to the village, and from there I had to walk 30 minutes uphill to meet the community leader who was the one and only activist representing the Dalit community. I had so many questions in my mind as a young social worker representing an upper caste, and wondered whether they would like me and take me seriously. Prior to going to the village and even on the way to the village, I contemplated on the theoretical approaches that could help me understand the Dalits in their own environment. I was inclined towards using anti-oppressive theory, as this is based on the assumption that social workers must recognise various multiple forms of oppression which involve unequal power across social divisions and acknowledge them as harmful (Healy, 2005). I was confident that this approach would help me understand the numerous socio-economic discriminations that the Dalits encounter on a daily basis.

It was 10 in the morning on a hot sunny Monday, and I was dressed in a simple pair of jeans and t-shirt with my hair tied up high, holding a bag in my arm. I saw the community leader sitting under the tree surrounded by a group of people. As I moved closer to him, I noticed that he had a strange look on his face. I introduced myself, the organisation I belonged to and the task I was assigned to carry out. In fact, I was trying to explain to him what my role would be as a social worker, reflecting heavily on the theoretical knowledge gained through my studies.

I noticed from the very outset that he tried to ignore me. For example, when I was introducing myself he turned away from me and puffed on a cigarette. This was a highly awkward movement for me, as I felt humiliated. Continuing the conversation he finally answered by stating, and I quote in Nepalese, "*tapai jasto manche kati aye aye, khahi hami lai kehi ramro bhayena*". By this he meant that there had been many social workers like me visiting their village, but the people had never benefitted from it. Yet again, he stopped and turned his back towards me and started talking to the people around him. After a while he turned to me again, and started asking about my plans. I expressed my interest in meeting a few of the Dalit families to help obtain a more in-depth perspective of the real situation in which they were living. He promised me that he would show me around and agreed to be my guide.

While walking around the village, we visited one family. The wife was washing dishes outside her house, while her husband was smoking as he made a pair of shoes. He was a professional shoemaker - one of the caste-based occupations of a Dalit. The community leader, Ram Biswokarma (the name has been changed to protect his anonymity), introduced me to the family, who invited me into their house. I had never experienced such a moment before. As a member of a Brahmin family, I had never been inside the house of lower caste people, as the cultural norm in Nepal is that Brahmin people are not supposed to enter the house of an untouchable. However, I accepted their invitation, considering this an opportunity to understand the reality of their situation. At the same time, I was scared about how they would react when they found out that I was from the upper caste. As I entered the house, the first thing I noticed was that it was not in good condition. Water was dripping from the ceiling and the mud floor had several cracks.

My initial observation of this Dalit family corresponds to a large extent with the idea of anti-oppressive practice. The latter attempts to draws insight from a specific practice context by providing an understanding of service user's needs and identifying the appropriate work to respond to them (Healy, 2005). To be more precise, this observation of the Dalit family helped me to better understand the situation of the Dalits, particularly their daily hardship, including the struggle to provide a decent meal for the entire family each day. Moreover, this observation was also important in realising the need for facilitating service users' critical consciousness of the causes of the problems. As I sat down on a piece of rug the wife, whose name was Maya, said in Nepalese, *Tapai chiya piyunu hunchu*", which in English means "*Would you like a cup of tea*?" This was another critical incident that I had never experienced before, so I had to give it a little thought since I was not expecting to encounter such a situation. I had two thoughts in my mind, one for and one against the proposal. Firstly, not drinking tea would be against my moral values, as I would be discriminating against them by refusing. Nevertheless, I was very concerned about what her reaction would be when she found out which caste I belonged to. I convinced myself that it would be best if I accepted the offer and therefore decided to drink the tea.

My fears materialised when she started asking questions such as: "What is my name?", "What is my last name?", "What does my father do?" and so on. I did not want to disclose my personal information, but I could not think of any way to avoid her questions. When I told her my last name, she was speechless, as in Nepal your last name often represents the caste you belong to. As a result, it was obvious that she knew that I was a Brahmin woman. The situation instantly changed, making it more uncomfortable for both me and them. Her eyes turned towards Ram, and she hurriedly grasped the cup from my hand and put it aside.

In this incident, I could sense an internal conflict in terms of the manner in which they perceived me, which led me to draw on the theory of social construction of the ethical self (Burkitt, 2008). The underlying idea of this theory is that the accepted values and standards of behaviour that have a social history concerning a particular group can conflict with other

groups that have different values and beliefs about what constitutes a good society and what it is to be a good person. From this view, although I tried to behave in a polite manner by accepting a cup of tea from Maya, this was not perceived as a good deed by my Dalit hosts. The reason for this is because they had never had a visitor from a higher caste in their home, and never even had the slightest thought that this could possibly occur. Consequently, the incident turned out to be an inappropriate action from their perspective.

As stated by Harre and Shotter (2008), a human being in a particular society can become a moral self by being interpreted or called on by others to tap into an awareness of themselves as autonomous and responsible beings. This also demands holding people accountable for their actions and provides answers for what we have done in terms of that which all other members of other cultures would regard as reasonable (Harre and Shotter in Burkitt, 2008). In fact, my actions of entering their house and accepting a cup of tea was unreasonable in that particular community, and did not seem an appropriate thing to do. I felt that my actions were not accountable to the family. I should have introduced myself in the first conversation I had with them, and been more open as to who I was and which caste I belonged to.

However, my actions can also be seen from another perspective in a more supportive way. The philosopher Kant introduced a principle which emphasises that people should be treated not as things and as a means to an end, but as persons with inalienable rights and duties (Burkitt, 2008). In view of this principle, my actions also led to special consequences such as me being judged and my motives being questioned as to whether I was actually there to empowering them or just humiliate them even more. Even so, my motives were solely guided by the moral values I was brought up with during my childhood and my moral obligations toward society.

I further attempted to convince them that I was working in the organisation with the Dalits and that my role was to raise awareness, be an advocate regarding caste-based discrimination and work towards an increased social inclusion. I explained that I was there to help and empower them to raise their voices against the oppression they encountered in their daily lives. It took quite a while to convince Maya that I was there for the right reasons, though she finally understood the purpose of my visit and opened up to me again. She then went on to tell me her story and that she was embarrassed about being a Dalit.

A tap water incident

On one particular morning Maya woke up early and decided to fill her bucket at the nearest public drinking water source before her neighbours woke up, even though she knew that the Brahmins are usually the first people to fill their buckets early in the morning. Public drinking water is said to be polluted when touched by Dalits, and this is one of the main public places where the practice regarding the untouchables is clearly visible. They are supposed to leave and stand far away when the non-Dalits fetch their water. Dalits are not allowed to touch tap water or the well, and they normally get non-Dalits to fetch their water for them. While filling her bucket with water, she saw a group of women coming towards her.

The women were from a higher caste, and as they saw Maya filling her water bucket before them, they sprang over to her and started shouting at her. Maya tried to apologise, but no one would listen to her. One of the ladies dragged her by her hair and some started beating her. She was beaten into unconsciousness, and the only thing she remembered after that was waking up in a hospital bed. She was told by her husband that their neighbour's wife saw Maya lying unconscious in the street and hurriedly brought her to the hospital. She had scars all over her body and her face was swollen. She stayed in the hospital for several days recovering from her pain, and has never again gone to fetch water early in the morning.

She further explained to me how critical her economic situation was. Her husband, Bal Bahadur Sarki, barely carved out a living for himself and his family and they lived a hand-to- mouth existence. With three children and Maya to support, Bahadur had no land and no sustainable income, and they were socially unaccepted in the village due to their caste and ethnicity. In order to support his family, Bahadur had to travel a long distance to the nearest village to sell the shoes he made to a wholesaler.

The school incident

Dalit children are usually treated very badly in school by the children from the upper castes. A statement from Maya's 7-year-old son Santosh provides an example: *"I won't go to school – it's enough."* One day Santosh was sitting at the back of his class, as this was the only place he was allowed to sit being that he was a Dalit. It was lunchtime and he had just opened his lunch box. A group of his classmates belonging to the upper castes came up to him and said "show me your lunch box you stupid boy". Santosh hurriedly showed them what he had brought for lunch. They laughed and said "*oh you poor chap, you have just a piece of corn bread to eat*". They grabbed his lunch box and threw it in the rubbish bin, while Santosh sat there crying. However, this was far from the only day he had experienced such incidents.

When Maya had finished narrating these stories, her eyes filled with tears and she gently wiped them as she said "*I can face the discrimination against me, but it is very difficult to see my children suffering.*" She further added "*They deserve a better life.*" These stories made me realize how bad the situation was for Maya and her family as it indeed was for all the Dalits living in that village. One incident in particular that occurred during one of the days of my field visits showed me how badly the Dalits were discriminated against by the so-called Bahun-Chetris, i.e. the upper castes. I was accompanying one of Maya's daughters, a 12-year-old named Sushma, who I asked to join me for lunch in a nearby local restaurant. I went to the counter and ordered two bowls of noodles for both of us and paid in cash. The restaurant owner took the money from my hand and gave me the change. As we sat down outside in the lawn, I asked Sushma if we could have a bottle of cola as well. I gave the money to her and asked her if she could pay for it. This time, the restaurant owner asked her to place the money on the floor and he came from behind the counter to pick up the money from there. He then placed the bottle of cola on the floor along with the change. His actions seem to have been intended to allow him to avoid having to directly touch her. Indeed, this type of behaviour was unusual and unacceptable for me. However, when I expressed my feelings about this act, she answered that it was something she had been regularly facing her entire life.

Sushma's statement seems to be in accordance with the ideas of self-consciousness discussed by Burkitt (2008), who says that the power of self-consciousness represents at least two important things. Firstly, it helps separate one from particular thoughts and feelings by providing the capacity to objectively see social reality. This also implies that self-conscious individuals are aware of the generalised attitude of other groups towards themselves. Next, self-conscious individuals can also generalise the rules, laws and moral standards of society, or at least a section of it, from their earliest years. This means that among other things they are aware of what to do, what is right and wrong and how others might judge them. Pursuing this line of thought, Sushma has been aware of the general attitude of the upper caste towards the lower caste (Dalit) since her childhood. She therefore possessed the ability to anticipate such behaviour, and accepted it as a social reality.

This incident was important for me, as it helped me realise that my initial approach needed to be to sensitised to the Bahun-Chetris, who are the owners of such restaurants and shops, with regard to caste-based discrimination, and to elucidate to them that such behaviour is unacceptable and intolerable. My purpose was also to help women like Maya raise their voices

against the discrimination that women such as herself faced in the tap water incident. Indeed, this task proved to be a challenge for me, as it had to do with the previously established social caste of the Dalits. As mentioned earlier, the Dalits have their own pre-defined self identities in relation to who they are and what they have become.

In fact, the prevailing social caste in Nepal can be seen in parallel to the concept of social class. Burkitt (2008) defines social class on the basis of material constraints that people are born with influencing their lives, e.g. their access to education, social relations, local culture, etc. The Dalits have inherited all such material constraints as a result of being from a lower caste. My main challenge as a community worker was to make them realise that being born into one particular caste should not constrain them gaining access to education and choosing a career different than the occupations they were traditionally born into.

Tesoriero (2010) emphasises the importance of local knowledge in order to more effectively facilitate community development work. The underlying idea is that the community knows best, meaning that the members of the community are the key to achieving insight into the needs, problems, strengths and uniqueness of a particular community. Having acknowledged this fact, I approached Ram about exploring the possibilities of holding an advocacy workshop intended to empower Dalit men, women and children about social issues and their basic human rights and to sensitize non-Dalits, with a view to eliminating caste-based discrimination in their village. As stated by Tesoriero (2010), empowerment has been a central concept in the formulation of social justice and human rights. The empowerment strategy implies that the barriers to people exercising power should be understood, addressed and overcome (ibid.: 241). Within this perspective, education and the consciousness raising of the Dalit people could be envisaged as an empowerment strategy to help increase their power and skills to facilitate change.

At the outset, Ram was extremely skeptical to this idea, though he later agreed to organise one in the local community office. I felt a giddy nervousness in anticipation to the workshop for a number of reasons. This was the first time I had planned/facilitated a workshop with the Dalit community (let alone one with an awareness raising theme), and this was also the first time the local community office had hosted a gathering with participants from both the upper and lower castes. About 40 participants took part from both the higher and lower castes, and I introduced myself as a community worker representing my organisation. I began the workshop by addressing the topics of human rights, advocacy and empowerment, and the more I explained to them about the DWO's overall goals the more attentive the participants became, and they eventually expressed an interest in knowing more about how advocacy worked. During the workshop, I mixed both groups into one platform with the hope that the issues of discrimination would be better addressed. Unfortunately, the degree of distinction was so deep that it would have probably been easier if they had been divided into individual groups, which might have also helped to raise the issue more openly and confidently. For instance, in the group sessions, the upper castes were very active and dominated the discussion. Although the Dalits seemed to be interested, they were hesitant to take part in the discussion and bring forth their arguments in front of the upper caste, which was regarded as the dominant and elite group.

As the workshop progressed I thought I had invited more conflict and confrontation, rather than integrating the two groups. In fact, had I known beforehand what the result would be, I would have organised two workshops, one for the Dalits and one for both the Dalits and non-Dalits. For the purpose of enabling the Dalits, a purely Dalit group would have been more effective than the mixed groups, thereby allowing both groups to gradually integrate and help the Dalits develop the confidence to address their needs. The formation of Dalit support organisations and networks would further help to strengthen the activities of the Dalit groups,

and forward their case for equity and equal access to resources. Moreover, I learned the importance of critical self-awareness, as well as acquiring an understanding of broader social issues surrounding discrimination that could motivate participants to mobilise and take action towards improving their situation.

Indeed, these challenges and learning helped me rethink my identity as a social worker. I now think that I may have been a little overambitious about the entire situation by mixing the groups. In order to work towards empowerment, it seems essential for me to strive towards recognising the Dalit voices, including not only their frustrations and disappointments, but also their strengths.

UNDERSTANDING THE THEORY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS IN PRACTICE

In discussing anti-oppressive theory, Healy (2005) envisaged two influential groups in society whose interests are opposed and irreconcilable. Whereas the privileged groups include people such as social workers with professional status and access to institutional power, the service users, who are relatively powerless and suppressed, represent another group. By dividing these people into two groups, Healy (2005) emphasises social workers raising the consciousness of the service users by helping them see the causes of the problems that lead to an unjust social structure. The underlying idea here is that social divisions shape practice, giving rise to a multiple level of oppression. Hence, social workers are urged to act collectively with a view towards facilitating social change. Such collective actions are regarded as a means of constructing a society free of all forms of oppression and domination (Fay, 1987 in Healy, 2005).

As a social worker, I have been influenced by anti-oppressive theories, and placed a particular emphasis on the structure and origin of service user problems. To be more precise, I had applied the theory in such a way as to understand the situation of the Dalit people, particularly the social discrimination against them, as phenomena of an existing traditionally rooted caste-based system, rather than as being created by the Dalit people themselves. I tried to focus on recognising and seeking support from a broad range of intervention strategies. To illustrate this, I visited the house of a Dalit family to comprehend their real-life situation, and listened to stories of oppression. Similarly, I organised an advocacy workshop by inviting representatives from both groups (Dalit and non-Dalit). The workshop was meant to empower Dalit people, while simultaneously sensitising upper-caste Brahmins.

Moreover, it is also worth mentioning that I had attempted to adhere to the underlying principles of anti-oppressive theory. The first principle, which draws on "critical reflection on the self in practice", underscores the need to maintain an open and critical stance towards the users' practice (Healy, 2005). This principle in fact encouraged me to act in a similar way to the Dalit people. To illustrate this, despite being a Brahmin and believing in certain values, I sat down on the floor and ate cookies and "chiya" (tea) next to them throughout the workshop. My participation in the Dalit community seemed to have been influential in shaping my practical relationships. This relationship had definitely provided me with an insight into the bitter experiences of caste-based discrimination and power differences in practice.

The second principle of "critical assessment of service users' experiences of oppression" emphasises the need to assess personal, cultural and structural processes that shape the service users' problems (Healy, 2005). Having acknowledged this fact, I envisaged the Dalit oppression as a result of the prevailing caste divisions, social order and hierarchies which have been developed on the basis of religious and cultural values. Furthermore, I also recognised that I had to be aware of the way I use language in my relationship with them. Very often, the upper castes use language intended to humiliate them by reflecting the power differences.
Following the third principle of "empowering service users", I endeavoured to empower Dalits

through numerous workshop sessions by elucidating them about the cultural, institutional and personal obstacles controlling their life. This principle implies motivating service users to share their feelings of powerlessness as well as providing them with an understanding of how social and cultural injustices have shaped their experience of oppression (Healy, 2005). The workshop helped me identify the areas of skill development and facilitate opportunities for Dalit people to exercise and gain confidence in their capacities to act against the barriers to empowerment.

The fourth principle, that of "working in partnership", implies including the service users as a partner in the decision-making process (Healy, 2005). Based on this principle, my activities were devoted to raising awareness and helping the Dalit people to gain more control of their own lives. It was important to create a partnership with the Dalit people and give them a voice so that they could express their disappointment and frustrations – which is one of the key factors of empowerment and social change. Despite a number of constraints for partnership resulting from an unequal power relationship, this attempt was important to show respect for both their perspectives and their lived knowledge (Burke and Harrison, 2002 in Healy, 2005). The fifth interventions, which is known as "the minimal intervention", emphasises that social workers should intervene as little as possible, so as to prevent any sort of harm coming to the service users (Healy, 2005). Bearing this view in mind, I attempted to provide services to the Dalit people without intervening in their personal and social plans. To illustrate this, when Maya told me about the tap water incident in which she was physically assaulted by the upper caste females, my intention was not to provoke her about what had happened, but instead to obtain a better picture of the areas in which immediate intervention was required. For that reason, I tried to sensitise the Brahmins during the workshop that the Dalits must have the same right to fill their water bucket in the morning as the Brahims themselves do.

CRITICAL REFLECTION OF MY WORK WITH THE DALIT PEOPLE

The value of *social justice* has been at the centre of my community work with the Dalits. This value implies the adaption of multidimensional analyses that recognise various aspects of the operation to the service users (Healy, 2005). My approach during the work was not to blame them for being Dalit or to make them feel embarrassed, but rather to adapt a multidimensional analysis recognising the personal, cultural and structural phenomena of their oppression. This required me to follow a variety of approaches to understand the phenomenon. I therefore organised the workshops for the Dalits and non-Dalits, visited a few of the Dalits' homes, arranged informal gatherings, invited them for lunch in a local restaurant, and so on.

In doing so, I learned how I could promote effective support to the Dalit people and how important it was to recognise the cultural and structural context they live in. Following up on this anti-oppressive theory, I encountered a number of challenges in my work that forced me to look back at some of its inherent drawbacks. What I realised was that I had neglected their individual psychology along with other prevalent personal factors in the Dalit context, e.g. sexual exploitation and physical atrocities, among other things. In addition, as I tried to follow the principle of minimal intervention, my capacity to act in a high-risk situation had been undermined. This is to say that in the case of Maya, sensitising the upper caste was not enough of an intervention. I also had to work on Maya's fear of not being able to fill up her water bucket.

Using this theory, I realised that the risk associated with the process of empowering the Dalit people could possibly lead to an even wider split between the two castes. Prior to my intervention there already existed a conflict between the two castes, which both had accepted as the way it should or would always be. However, after my work, this magnified their differences and put them up against one another rather than achieving harmony. I was convinced of this as I observed the quietness after the workshop, as I watched the members of both groups leave without exchanging goodbyes and ignoring each other's presence.

Indeed, all this experience I have gained cannot just be seen as a consequence of theoretical implications, as a number of other factors came into play including, but not limited to, my gender, being from an upper caste, my age and my sense of dress. It would be difficult for me to imagine that most of the experience I had during the gatherings with both the Dalit and non-Dalit people would have occurred without the aspect of a gender differentials, i.e. if I was a man. In fact, I experienced a conflict within myself, as I had been unable to give a clear definition of belonging to an upper caste. Thus, identifying my social class had become a complex phenomenon, as I was engaged in many different phases of social status, and also experienced powerlessness and vulnerability associated with my age and gender.

All of these subjectivities affected how I experienced myself and how I was seen by others, as well as the type of power and authority I was able to exercise. I have come to realise that people are not the sole authors of their identities (Burkitt, 2008), meaning that my identity has been constructed differently in that community. For instance, when I changed my role from being in a higher to lower caste, the Dalit people doubted my motives as a social worker and perceived me as an inexperienced girl trying to undermine the fabric of their society. This situation challenged me to reconsider the way I saw myself as a social worker and the way I practice today. The questions that I want to ask of myself include: What are my limitations operating as an upper caste person and to what extent can I play the role of Dalit while preserving my own identity as a Brahmin girl? Why do I consider this to be so important in my practice? How is my identity, including my personal and social self, involved in this situation? How does this influence the incident? I want to understand these questions in order to become more aware of my own assumptions as well as their impact, so as to challenge them in ways that promote a better social work in practice (Pockett and Giles, 2008).

I realised that I had to reconsider how I saw myself as a social worker and recognise the contradictions within my own practice. I could have presented myself solely as a social worker, rather than allowing my caste and social values to influence my practice. What I recognised was that I was implicitly engaged in myself experimenting in order to cope with my situation, as opposed to finding a solution and helping them cope with their problems. Additionally, I found myself involved in elucidating the caste-based discrimination followed for centuries, which was not a new topic of discussion. This put me in the same category as those social workers who had already become intertwined in this process in the past and had no intention of changing the lives of the Dalit people. Despite the fact that I was a young, qualified female from an upper caste, I was unsuccessful in making any significant mark in my practice. Today, this experience has allowed me to obtain a better understanding of existing theory and what actually takes place in practice, thereby encouraging me to explore and develop a greater sense of clarity (Napier, 2006 in Pockett and Giles, 2008).

The word “empowerment”, which was the main theme of the workshop, was confusing in the sense that I used this term to create an awareness of their rights and to give them a voice to fight against discrimination. Nonetheless, I realized that during the workshop and my field visits that the term was understood by the Dalit people in a narrow sense, i.e. to provide them with economic benefits and other monetary support. Indeed, this was a lesson which helped me to understand that my knowledge would be of no value if no one recognised its worth and significance. It can be said that my interpretation of the term empowerment did not correspond to the local knowledge and context, hence making my explanation valueless for the Dalit people.

As a community worker today I have given a priority to understanding the local context, traditions and existing knowledge before disseminating my own ideas. I need to develop the importance of addressing the needs in my practice in a way the service users can benefit

from, rather than attempting to institutionalise them by using my own ideals and values. I also noticed that when I present my ideas, the local service users often first try to translate and edit those ideas based on their knowledge. As a result, they went on understand and present these ideas in a completely different sense and form.

I perceived that the role of gender has been an important factor in affecting the way the situation developed. On reflection, I felt that I would not have been ignored and neglected in the first encounter with Ram if I had been a man and come from a similar caste i.e. the lower caste. As Ram was born and raised in a patriarchal society, it was natural for him to perceive me as inferior compared to his male counterparts. Moreover, I observed in this situation my lack of consideration for who I am as a gendered and embodied person, as well as setting a base for creating such an inattentive and uncomfortable situation. If I had thought of this situation earlier, I would have presented myself in a much more acceptable way to him. I would have asked my male colleague in the office who had visited the village earlier to accompany me and set up a joint meeting among the three of us. This would have developed a professional relationship with Ram early during my visit, thereby avoiding such an awkward situation.

With my gender creating a misconception, I was also young and naïve in regard to comprehending the sensitivity of the Dalits' situation. My dressing and body image must have provided them with a suspicious impression, as it projected me as being focused on gaining experience and experimenting with myself in the new situation, rather than coming to grips with the crux of the Dalits' problem. I realised that if I had worn traditional Nepalese attire closer to what the women in the village wearing, rather than a pair of jeans which is the symbol of a modern city girl, it would have been easier for me to approach them and they would not have been so intimidated by me. My position as a young female social worker in the context of a traditionally rooted male dominated society weakened the boundaries between myself as the social worker and the Dalit people as the service users. I realised there was some shock and disbelief among them with concern to seeing me as a social worker.

This essay is a reflection on me being a representative of the Brahmin caste and my attempt to help the Dalit people, the so-called lower caste, to empower and integrate themselves into a society dominated by the upper caste. In this process, however, my personal beliefs and ideologies, in addition to the status I was born into, simultaneously created significant changes. For example, the two incidents I encountered during my field visits exerted an impact upon my entire conceptual understanding towards social work. When I was asked to enter their home and was offered tea I should have been more open in the sense that I should have told them my details right away, i.e. the caste I belonged to, as this was a very sensitive issue for them.

By entering their home and accepting tea, I was expecting to reflect good and acceptable social values and practices. Although this appeared to be a good thing from my perspective, this behaviour was beyond the comprehension of this suppressed people, and I need to acknowledge that this intersection and overlap between my Brahmin caste and my profession as a social worker - meaning any encounters with the Dalit people –had a significant effect on my practice. I attempted to have multiple identities, though they viewed me solely as a Brahmin woman. I am a young female social worker and an upper caste girl all at the same time. I need to develop ways to integrate my personal heritage, attributes and professional skills in my practice in order to contribute to my work, rather than let all of this create a barrier.

CONCLUDING REMARK

Who am I today as a social worker?

My experience working with Dalit families has profoundly impacted and shaped me as a person in terms of me now being more open about my caste and belief system. The lessons I learned

working with the Dalit people represent a gift in the sense that they have helped me redefine my actions and role as a social worker in helping to make me more honest and rational, i.e. who I am today. Indeed, my approach to working with the Dalit community and other vulnerable and marginalised groups has changed. As a social worker today, I have given priority to getting through to the thoughts, feelings and actions of the service users and eventually arriving at solutions which are appropriate to their contexts. As self-identities keep changing over time and as a result of events, the experience I have gained in working with the Dalit people, as well as my role as a wife and a mother, have profoundly impacted upon my thoughts and actions in my social work practice and professional life. Some events encountered during my field visits, particularly the incident when I was invited to the house of a Dalit family and offered tea, have led to deep changes in my personal beliefs and ideology towards marginalised and vulnerable people. Through these incidents, I have learned that it is of vital importance to be accountable to the service users in order to attain their trust in social work practice. I have come to realise in my practice that I should initiate my process of intervention early on by building trust, which is a key component for such groups. This experience has enabled me to see beyond my caste, culture and educational background, and develop an identity as a social worker who is more responsible, accountable and free from prejudices. Equally as important, I have realised the importance of sharing knowledge and experience through critical reflection.

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