

# Exercises of Power: Applying Foucault's Conceptions of Power to Mazahua and Inuit Enculturation Events

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## Introduction

According to Leitch (2001:1615), Michel Foucault's controversial and often criticized work has become a central feature of today's intellectual landscape, and his writings have had a profound effect on many writers. Foucault, best known for his critical studies of social institutions, became the leader of post-modernism during the second half of the twentieth century. As a result, his seminal work on power and the relationships between power, knowledge, and discourse deeply influenced many social science theorists. As Foucault (2003:519) points out, the exercise of power, with its specificity, its techniques, and its tactics, was not a subject of study prior to his work. Although particular instances of the exercise of power, for example in the Soviet socialist state or in Western capitalist production, were often at the center of political and intellectual discussion, Foucault maintains that the mechanics of power themselves were never analyzed.

Power, according to Foucault, is ultimately located at the individual level. In keeping with this view, Foucault's theories regarding power relations, power technologies, and the exercise of power have been used to inform many approaches to the study of human interactions. For example, Hindess (1996:97) uses Foucault's conceptions of power to explore questions of sovereignty and legitimacy as they relate to political power, the state, and the subject. Leitch (2001:1616), meanwhile, outlines several ways in which Foucault's treatment of power and the individual, including his exploration of the role of the author within historical discourse and his discussion of the individualizing effect of power within modern Western societies, has challenged many fundamental assumptions within literary and cultural studies. However, because Foucault tends to focus his

attention on power relations that exist within Western society, it is unclear whether or not his theories can be relevantly applied to cultures with different societal structures. Therefore, the following discussion of the enculturation of children into the Mazahua and Inuit cultures is an attempt to gauge the relevance of three prominent Foucauldian concepts to non-Western societies, including: 'acting upon action', 'pastoral power', and the use of 'power technologies' (Foucault 1984:422-7).

### Defining Foucault's Conception of Power

In order to effectively apply Foucault's concepts of 'acting upon action', 'pastoral power', and the use of 'power technologies', it is important to first define certain key concepts. Foucault (1984:424-5) conceives of 'power relations' as existing between individuals or groups whose actions influence the outcomes of each other's actions. A relationship of power is defined as a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on individuals or groups, but instead acts upon their behaviours (427). In addition, Foucault conceives of the power relation as a 'structure of actions' that influence the actions of those who are free, which suggests that power can only be exercised over those who are in a position to choose, and that the exercised power aims to affect what their choices will be (Hindess 1996:100). In other words, power relations cannot exist unless both parties are capable of action (Foucault 1984:427)

The definition of 'government' is another key concept addressed in Foucault's discussions of power. While he acknowledges current definitions of this term, Foucault (1984:428) points out that in the 16th century 'government' did not solely refer to political structures and the management of states, but instead designated the way in which the conduct of individuals, or groups of individuals, might be directed, such as the government of children, souls, communities, families, and the sick. He goes on to suggest that while 'government' covered legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjugation, it also included modes of action that were "destined to act upon the possible field of action of others" (428). Hindess (1996:105) contributes to the discussion of government by pointing out Foucault's contention that, in spite of the different specific objectives and fields to which the term is applied, there is continuity between the government of oneself, the government of a household, and the government of a state or community. In other words, the successful 'government' of others depends on the capacity of those in power to self-govern, and for the governed to regulate their own behaviour. Therefore, as Hindess (106) points out, 'government' is the process of regulating one's own conduct as well as that of others and thus aims to affect behaviour indirectly by acting on the manner in which individuals self-regulate. As such, Hindess (107) believes that

'government,' in this sense, is something that one would expect to find in most, if not all, human societies.

Defining Foucault's concept of the 'subject' is also an important precursor to the application of Foucauldian power discourses. Foucault (1984:417) contends that there are three modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects: (1) modes of inquiry, such as linguistics, economics, and biology, which treat the subject as an object of study; (2) "dividing practices" in which the subject is either divided inside him or herself or divided from others, such as delineations between sane and insane, good and bad, and healthy and sick; and (3) ways in which human beings turn themselves into subjects, such as when they recognize themselves as subjects of sexuality. Foucault (420) further claims that the term 'subject' has two meanings: being under the domination of someone else through control and dependence, or tied to one's own identity by conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings, according to Foucault, suggest a form of power which "subjugates and makes subject to." In other words, the term 'subject' is intended to convey a deeper meaning than the term 'individual' since the subject, as both the perpetrator and the recipient of action and objectification, is at the core of all power relations.

Finally, in order to fully contextualize the following discussion of power and enculturation, it is important to understand Foucault's conception of the 'exercise of power.' As Foucault (426) states, the exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners, individual or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others. He goes on to point out that power exists only when it is put into action, and is therefore not a function of consent but of the power relationship in which it exists. As Hindess (1996:101) proposes, Foucault's insistence that the exercise of power requires a degree of freedom on the part of its subjects suggests that its effective exercise need not imply the removal of liberty, and that where there is no possibility of resistance there can be no relations of power. Therefore, the exercise of power can only occur through power relations in which the subject has the freedom to govern and be governed through acting upon actions.

### **Acting upon Action: The Enculturation of Mazahua Children**

The notion of 'acting upon action' appears frequently within Foucault's discussions of power. This particular exercise of power incites, seduces, and makes easier or more difficult, while in extreme cases constrains or forbids absolutely, yet it can only act upon a subject or subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action (Foucault 1984:427). Foucault (429) relates this concept to human interaction in general by stating that power relations are deeply rooted in the social nexus, and that a societal setting allows action upon other

actions to be both possible and ongoing. This point is especially obvious in the 'separate-but-together' interaction between mothers and children in Mazahua society.

Using her experiences with the Mazahua people of Mexico, Paradise (1994:160) explores a concept that she calls 'separate-but-together,' which she identifies as a characteristic quality of the interaction between a Mazahua mother and her children. Paradise (159) describes the Mazahua as a group of Middle American people, many of whom follow a pattern of temporary migration from their villages in the state of Mexico to the centre of Mexico City, where they spend many months of each year within or near the immense Merced market. Paradise describes the market as a bustling environment in which the Mazahua seem confident and comfortable, which differs from their less secure manner displayed in other urban environments. Within the market, Mazahua women sell various kinds of produce in groups made up of one or two women and several children. No matter what the age of her offspring, when a Mazahua mother and her children are together in these groups they are each involved in his or her own separate activity at the same time. Paradise points out that this 'separate-but-together' manner of interacting allows mothers to care for children while working within the marketplace in ways that minimize interference and restraint, allowing children to be cared for without being "watched" or "tended." In fact, Paradise claims that even babies can be counted on to cooperate and to coordinate their activities with those of their caregivers. Although the Mazahua culture is structured differently than the Western cultures generally explored in Foucault's works, these interactions, and the power relations driving them, can be explained by applying Foucault's 'acting upon action' concept.

In describing the experiences of Mazahua mothers and children, Paradise (162) draws attention to common enculturation events in which Mazahua children learn to master activities important to their society by remaining in close contact with the adults and other children who are themselves performing these activities. Paradise suggests that activities such as caregiving and marketplace interaction are a normal part of everyday life, and stresses that learning is well integrated with the daily world that children share with adults. In other words, the actions performed by parents and other children in their interactions within the specifications of their society both directly and indirectly guide the behaviour of younger children by influencing the younger children's actions. Paradise further explains that Mazahua children take part in these activities by cooperating in ways that appear to preclude domination, control, or forceful restraint, which she attributes to a form of enculturation rooted in nonverbal social experience. However, as Foucault's concept of 'acting upon action' suggests, the children learn to govern their own behaviour as a result of the influence of others' actions. For example, while a Mazahua mother will usually hold her child while performing

other tasks, she does not provide entertainment for the child (160). Therefore, the mother's actions act upon the child's behaviour in a way that forces the child to learn to entertain him or herself and to develop the self-reliance and autonomy necessary to be successful within Mazahua society. As Paradise (163) suggests, by learning to govern their behaviour in a 'separate-but-together' environment, Mazahua children also learn about self-reliance, responsibility, and respect, while at the same time developing culturally appropriate attitudes towards cooperation and activity coordination. This entire process is defined through the 'acting upon action' that occurs during their everyday interaction with members of their society.

### Pastoral Power: The Enculturation of Inuit Children

Similar to Foucault's 'acting upon action' concept of power is his treatment of what he calls 'pastoral power'. In his discussions of how power relates to the subject, Foucault (1984:422) suggests that pastoral power was prominently associated with ecclesiastical institutions until the eighteenth century, at which time it began to lose its vitality in a religious sense. He goes on to suggest that, although pastoral power faded in the ecclesiastical domain, its sudden incorporation into the whole social body allowed it to find support within a multitude of secular institutions (423). In light of this history, Foucault (422) suggests that pastoral power was originally aimed at assuring individual salvation in the next world by looking after each individual within a community during his entire life, but over time this objective shifted its focus to ensuring individual salvation in this world in terms of health, well-being, security, and protection against accidents. Hindess (1996:118) also points out that, similar to 'acting upon action', Foucault defines pastoral power as ultimately aimed at promoting the well-being of its subjects by means of detailed and comprehensive regulation of their behaviour. Foucault drew on his familiarity with Western tradition and history when developing his concept of pastoral power, most notably in his claim that pastoral power is a technique that originated in Christian institutions and was subsequently integrated into new political shapes in the modern Western state (Foucault 1984:421). Nevertheless, the concept of pastoral power can also be applied to human interactions in non-Western settings, such as the traditional enculturation practices used during Inuit child-rearing.

According to Stairs (quoted in Briggs 1998:27), a central idea in Inuit education is *isumaqsayuq*, which translates as 'cause thought'. Using this method, adults stimulate children to think by presenting them with emotionally powerful problems that cannot be ignored. Briggs explains that one common way to stimulate thought is to ask a question that is potentially dangerous to the child. This dramatizes the consequences of various answers, thereby creating or raising

issues that the child will perceive to be of great importance to his or her life. For example, a child exhibiting jealousy and resentment towards a new sibling may be asked whether they love or wish to kill the baby sibling (29). Depending on the answer, the child will be asked more questions in order to force him or her to examine his or her feelings and to consider the consequences of his or her choices. According to Briggs (26-7), these emotionally charged dramas form an important part of the socialization of Inuit children. Although an outsider may perceive the Inuit lifestyle to be simple and safe in comparison to an immense and complexly structured society, Briggs argues that an adult Inuit would perceive his or her world as full of hidden dangers. Therefore, socialization and enculturation of Inuit children is partly a matter of making children sensitive to these dangers, with dramas acting as an important mechanism that creates, focuses, and maintains a sense of danger in social life. As with Foucault's concept of pastoral power, the 'salvation' of the individual is accomplished by influencing his or her behaviour.

Foucault's concept of pastoral power becomes even more evident as one examines the specific techniques used by the Inuit to ensure that their children are properly enculturated into their society. For example, the emotionally charged dramas used to educate children are usually, if not always, sharply focused on one child at a time (Briggs 1998:30), which relates to Foucault's description of pastoral power as individualizing (1984:422). In an example of the mechanics of pastoral power, these dramas often occur in sequences, one spontaneously leading into the next, in which an adult asks a question; the child makes a certain response, trying to solve the problem posed; and the adult responds by dramatizing the consequences of the child's attempted solution or by asking new questions, which makes the child think about what the repercussions might be (Briggs 1998:30). As Foucault (1984:422) points out, in order for pastoral power to be exercised, knowledge of a person's mind, soul, and innermost secrets is essential. In keeping with this point, using the questioning process to force Inuit children to analyze the potential consequences of their actions does not simply create a "detailed and comprehensive regulation" (Hindess 1996:118) of their behaviour. It also offers each child a means of achieving "salvation in this world in terms of health, well-being, security, and protection against accidents" (Foucault 1984:422) by allowing adults to gain an intimate knowledge of the child's conscience in order to better direct his or her conduct towards appropriate behaviour. This process results in what Hindess (1996:123) describes as the 'pastoral' use of confession, self-examination, and guidance of conduct. These can be seen as instruments of government that work in part through the formation of individuals who can normally be relied upon to impose an appropriate rule on their own behaviour. Through the pastoral guidance of Inuit adults, Inuit children learn to regulate their own behaviour and understand themselves as efficacious

actors helping to create the plot of their own lives (Briggs 1998:46). This equips them to navigate the harsh and often unforgiving climate in which their society exists.

### Power Technologies: Preparing Inuit and Mazahua Children for Adulthood

Power technologies used to prepare both Inuit and Mazahua children for adulthood will provide a final example of the relevance of Foucault's power concepts to non-Western cultures. According to Foucault (1984:426), power technologies come into play in ensuring apprenticeship and the acquisition of aptitudes, or types of behaviour, that are developed by means of a whole ensemble of regulated communications, including lessons, questions and answers, orders, exhortations, coded signs of obedience, and differentiated markings of the “value” of each person and of his or her level of knowledge. Power technologies are also the building blocks of a series of processes that may be employed to ensure apprenticeship and the acquisition of aptitudes or types of behaviour, including enclosure, surveillance, reward and punishment, and the pyramidal hierarchy. In both the Inuit and the Mazahua cultures, regulated communications and power processes are most apparent as they relate to Foucault's concept of one power technology in particular: discipline.

According to Foucault (1977:138), “discipline increases the forces of the body in economic terms of utility while diminishing these same forces in political terms of obedience.” In other words, as the actions of the individual become more disciplined, he or she becomes more productive. Hindess (1996:113) summarizes that discipline is a power exercised over one or more individuals in order to provide them with particular skills and attributes, develop their capacity for self-control, promote their ability to act in concert, render them amenable to instruction, or mould their characters in other ways. He further points out that, in Foucault's view, “discipline is a productive power par excellence: it aims not only to constrain those over whom it is exercised, but also to enhance and make use of their capacities” (1996:113). This last point is particularly evident in Inuit adults' use of dramatizations in the instruction and enculturation of their children.

Because the dramas presented by Inuit adults to their children enact the plots of everyday life and are presented in emotionally forceful ways, the children are encouraged to create thoughts, feelings, and motives that support culturally appropriate plots (Briggs 1992:46). While the children's behaviours are expected to conform to the norms of their society, they are encouraged to do so by exploring and questioning their own actions and intents, as well as the actions and intents of those around them. For example, Briggs (30-2) describes an interaction between Chubby Maata, a three-year-old Inuit girl, and her aunt, in which the aunt

uses various verbal and physical techniques to try to persuade Chubby Maata to agree to live with her. While adoption is common and acceptable in Inuit society, it is considered inappropriate for a child to wish to be adopted (48). Therefore, this particular dramatization creates a dilemma for Chubby Maata, forcing her to examine her aunt's intentions as well as her own feelings towards her aunt's offer, while simultaneously attempting to work out a culturally appropriate response to her aunt's enticing but potentially dangerous request. In terms of power technologies, this dramatization teaches Chubby Maata to use self-discipline to constrain her actions and emotions, which in turn encourages the development of valuable problem solving skills that will prepare her to be a productive member of her society upon reaching adulthood.

In another example of Foucault's concept of discipline as a power technology, Paradise describes a fifth-and-sixth-grade classroom of Mazahua children (1994:166), in which the organization of activities corresponds to the 'separate-but-together' way of interacting. This example demonstrates the means by which discipline promotes a capacity for self-control and the ability to act in concert. Within this classroom, Paradise describes students who are collectively involved in almost all classroom activities even though no leader emerges to direct, correct, or monitor the work of others in the group. The children's behaviours and attitudes reveal that they are accustomed to being dealt with as competent social beings capable of independent activity and worthy of the corresponding respect, which is a reflection of the ways in which they were prepared for adulthood by their parents and other adults. Because these children have been enculturated into their society through 'separate-but-together' interaction, they have developed a level of self discipline that allows them to act productively and in concert with their peers without the need for an external regulating body. As Foucault would point out, discipline, like governance through self-regulation, emerges from within the subjects rather than being imposed from without.

## Conclusion

According to Foucault (2003:523-4), the analysis of relations of power must necessarily extend beyond the limits of the state: first of all because the state, for all the omnipotence of its apparatuses, is unable to occupy the whole field of actual power relations, and secondly because the state can only operate on the basis of other, already existing power relations. Consequently, although relationships of power are often conceived in relation to overarching political structures, especially within Western societies, the true locus of power lies within interactions between individuals and groups of individuals. Although Foucault's power discourses are generally applied to Western culture, it has been

demonstrated that his concepts of 'acting upon action,' 'pastoral power,' and the use of 'power technologies' can also be applied to interactions within non-Western cultures, such as everyday childrearing and enculturation practices found within Mazahua and Inuit societies. These examples also reveal a whole series of power networks that exist at the level of family, kinship, knowledge, and technology, (Foucault 2003:523-4), which demonstrates that power cannot be viewed solely in terms of domination and repression, or supremacy and subjugation. It is Foucault's contention that power and power relations should be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body, rather than as a negative influence whose function is to repress and dominate the populace (521). This is demonstrated in the fact that the power relations underlying the enculturation of Mazahua and Inuit children are intended to guide the children safely towards adulthood, a positive goal that benefits their societies. As Foucault states (521), by defining the effects of power in terms such as repression, one adopts a purely juridical conception of power, in which power is taken above all as carrying the force of prohibition. He goes on to suggest that if power were never anything but repression, if it never did anything but say no, it would be unlikely that anyone would ever be brought to obey it. What makes power accepted, according to Foucault, is the fact that it does not only weigh on the individual as a prohibitive force, but instead traverses and produces, induces pleasure, forms knowledge, and produces discourse. In both Western and non-Western societies, this appears to be the case.

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