**PUNISHMENT DISCOURSES IN EVERYDAY LIFE**

Punishment discourses are everywhere. I define these as discourses which threaten (*do this or else*), use instrumental reason (*if you want x, then you must do y),* demand (*you are expected to*) or actually announce penalties. On one level, these hardly qualify as discourses, since they signify power and appropriation rather than communication based upon freedom and equality. They instantly create a dichotomy between the rule-maker and the “other” who is ruled and punished. The limits, terms and scope of the ‘discourse’ have already been set and defined as necessary: a leap that seeks to mask both its historical contingency, according to Foucault, and our power to resist identification (Foucault, 2002). Nietzsche goes so far as to expose punishment discourses as merely “signs indicating that a will to power has mastered something less powerful than itself and impressed the meaning of a function upon it in accordance with its own interests” (Nietzsche, 1996, p58).

The exposure of contingency could facilitate the possibility of change and transformation. Yet there is something about everyday punishment discourses which often incurs acceptance and resignation rather than critique and resistance. One possible reason might be because they are used by people who seen as ‘only doing their jobs’: bureaucrats, law-enforcers, politicians, employers, managers, reporters – those responsible for organising our thoughts and behaviours, apparently for our own good. We seldom reflect upon the dangers of justifying behaviour on the basis of necessity alone, which could ultimately lead from the ‘jobsworth’ to a dimly-sensed role in the Holocaust, as described by Zygmunt Bauman (p133, 1990). In today’s performativity-led economy, the majority of criticism focuses upon inefficiency and poor productivity rather than upon peaked-cap interventions which are over-zealous, strict or bossy. Any instincts of resistance to authoritarianism are thus diluted.

Violent language saturates everyday life, to the extent where we hardly recognise it as such. In a seemingly innocuous newspaper article about football, we learn that a team has been “thrashed” then “laid into” by its managers. Public services face “cuts” and “cutbacks”; budgets are “slashed”. Governments deal out “blows” and “crackdowns”. Employers write job descriptions in which they “expect” employees to “hit the ground running” and meet “strict deadlines”. Teachers in particular, must meet “targets”, a word derived from archery, or ‘KPI’, which stands for ‘Key Performance Indicators’. At a more insidious level, members of society are penalised for “non-compliance” and even our online details must be sent by clicking on the word “Submit”.

These terms not only carry violent and disciplinarian connotations but also involve reification, abstraction and constructions of ‘necessity’. Under this terminology, human beings possess no intrinsic value that might protect them from these disrespectful verbal assaults. Employees must ‘perform’ like engines or circus animals. Health service “cuts” are mentioned as if they are a remote abstraction rather than the physical removal of specific life-saving treatments. Under the guise of discipline, the shifts in power heralded by these terms are widely accepted as a ‘necessity’. If a government announced that it was going to take away the medicine from an individual cancer sufferer, there might be an outcry, but when it is just part of the ‘general cuts’, the public simply accept exactly the same consequences with merely a sigh of resignation. This type of language has been especially favoured by the political right and neo-liberal ideologies of performativity and economisation which seek to eliminate the ‘unproductive’ or ‘non-viable’, creating the fear-conditioned “precariat”(Moore & Robinson, 2015, p2776). But it is also used by authoritarian powers seeking to exert control, suppress resistance or undermine the survival strategies of the most vulnerable.

To give some examples from English newspapers: we have ‘crackdowns’ on benefit cheats, failing schools ‘whipped into shape’ and illegal immigrants ‘targeted’. Many of these words are apolitical and appeal to a widely-accepted miserable way of working, recognised by Freud and developed by Marcuse as the “Reality Principle”(Marcuse, 1987, p12-13). Countless office workers say they must “crack on”, barely noticing that is an association with a ‘crack on the head’ which causes us to furrow our brow. We all work to “deadlines” for example, even though this word secretes an implicit threat of death for crossing a given timeline. Even non-violent resistance can involve ‘strikes’ and ‘clashes’. Traffic violations can lead to culprits being ‘slapped with a fine’. The manager of a football team ‘lays into’ the players when they perform badly.

How does this rhetoric manage to permeate our consciousness so successfully? Why are our defences against this kind of language so weak? There is even a certain thirst for the violent verbs which shock or excite us into buying tabloid newspapers, following competitions or matches and computer games. How does violent language manage to influence our behaviour? It is my contention that the punishment discourses of everyday life impact especially upon those of us who have experienced corporal punishment. These power-laden discourses are able to inspire resistance, however, as much as they can incur submission.

My most recent research in Nepal has involved interviewing several corporal punishment survivors. An advantage of my auto/biographical methodology is that my participants and myself have been able to link our recent and present struggles to past experiences. We have each described difficulties that we have faced in risk-taking, challenging authority and pursuing ambitions: impeded at every turn by discourses which have seemed frightening and have brought back memories of the physical punishments experienced in childhood. Eerily, my participants have often actually repeated the disempowering words that could have been said to them as children.

Mukunda, a 34 year old from Devchuli, described various business ambitions that had never come to fruition. He had hoped to buy some land then open a school. Later, he planned to open a computer shop. Instead, he was held back by irrational fears. Mukunda feared that said he “did not have enough knowledge” (despite being the first person in his village to gain a Master’s degree). He was scared that his business “might make a big loss” – yet found himself bitterly regretting his indecision when friends of his opened successful computer shops and the land that he had viewed multiplied in value. Mukunda had even turned down a possible role as a community leader, saying:

I worried I might not be able to full fill people expectations. I feel that if I fail to fulfil my promises to the people, they will have negative feelings towards me. I am always afraid of that. Up till now society thinks I’m a good person but if I ever become a leader, then become unsuccessful, their opinion of me might change.

Where have these self-imposed restrictions come from? Mukunda traced them back to corporal punishment at school. Mukunda described two effects in particular. Firstly, a lack of creativity and innovation:

All the while the teacher was using punishment in the classroom, we didn’t try anything new. In fact, I never thought about new ideas. I just studied what the teacher told us to and how could any new ideas come from there? I did not have any new ideas at all.

Secondly, he voiced a fear that change or risk-taking could lead to punishment:

They made us follow them dogmatically. They always insisted that students listen to them and copy them precisely. If someone tried to do (anything) different, then they would be beaten severely.

This ‘NO’ to change, reinforced by years of beatings and witnessing beatings, carries its echo into adult life. Mukunda does not describe the voices which led him to suppress his ideas and ambitions, so we do not know whether they were implanted by others around him, or from himself, or both. But it is easy to envisage how, for somebody with his background, dire warnings against change - from whatever source – could have an instant impact. How could he bear the pressure of “targets” or his businesses “crashing”?

For my 26 year old female participant, Preeti, corporal punishment led to confusion:

I did exercise number 3 instead of number 2 or number 4. I just got confused. Then I got beaten. Sometimes I used to ask my friends…When the teachers saw that they used to bang our heads together.

She also described “forgetting everything that she had just learnt” once she saw the teacher enter the classroom. In later life, this temporary amnesia was repeated. Preeti explained how she tends to “forget what I believe and think” and abandon any of her own ideas as soon as her in-laws give her “instructions”.

Corporal punishment also affected her appetite and sleep, especially after one teacher began using a stick with thorns in it, from the Sisau tree. Preeti said:

Sometimes the beatings used to be quite a lot and my body could not bear it. I would have a fever and hotness in my body. I didn’t want any food on that day…..I used to dream that the teacher was beating me after not memorizing the text and other very frightening dreams…Some nights I used to wake up suddenly, shouting.

To this day, Preeti remains afraid that she might “get punished” if she disobeys her in-laws and when her powerlessness makes her “upset”, she is unable to eat. Again, she does not describe the discourses around her literally but it is clear that they are not encouraging dissent and debate, only obedience and conformity. Preeti said that she dreaded arguments and would do anything to avoid conflict – to the extent of leaving her teaching job. Preeti’s housework, farm-work and shop-work “deadlines” were so intense that she appeared baffled when I asked her about leisure time:

Time for myself’? I’m not sure what you mean. I can’t study. Once I wake up at 5, I am so worried about getting all my chores done in time. Every hour has its task or things go wrong.

This pressure was not countered by any alternative voice telling her to take it easy. Preeti’s fears must be understood in the context of rural Nepal. We often do not have the choice to postpone jobs until tomorrow: our survival depends on a strict timetable and tasks such as feeding and milking the buffalo are unavoidable. Nevertheless, I had the impression that Preeti, like so many women in Nepal, was over-worked by oppressive voices emanating from both her conscience and her family.

Krishna, a 23 year old farmer from Pratinagar, had experienced the most severe corporal punishment, recalling how:

They used to thrash us, hang us upside down…walk through the play-ground on our knees; there would be blood while doing that. They used to torture us a lot…They beat us with nettles and with a long, bamboo stick.

Schooling described being beaten “in every class, nearly every day” and finally, in front of the whole school following allegations that he had a girlfriend at the age of 16. The beatings were accompanied by constant criticism, beginning with unfair attacks on his ability to master Nepali (Magyar was his first language). Verbal and physical attacks from authority figures also occurred once he left school for a job in India:

I cried at the beginning as we had to wash up so fast and work such long hours compared to my life in Nepal. If we made any mistake, our bosses would beat us. They would swear at us with terrible words insulting our parents, saying that we worked too slowly.

Krishna then repeated as fact the words that his bosses might have said to him:

It was boring work but India was full of unemployed young men waiting to fill our job and I had no qualifications to get anything better.

As time went on, he began to over-react to oppressive language. Even now, Krishna admitted, with a revealing mixture of tenses:

If someone says something against me or tries to boss me about over something I get very angry and wanted to fight with them. It became my habit.

Krishna described both his schooling and an attempted job as too difficult “brain-wise”, echoing the teachers who once labelled him as a weak student. For somebody with Krishna’s experiences of violent punishment, discourses of gentle encouragement be essential to his survival, but these never came. His experiences of work abroad involved both verbal and physical abuse, leaving him so damaged that he would spring up in a rage at the slightest criticism.

My own experiences of violence have been masked to an extent by my academic persona. Yet I too, struggle with what is almost a psychological allergy to punishment discourses. Perfectly reasonable demands for work to be ‘submitted’ within ‘deadlines’ fill me with sickening fears. Threats of ‘or else’ seem to make me do the opposite and my creative ideas only seem to flow when I am in a peaceful atmosphere – such as the dead of night - free from pressure and punishment associations. Sometimes in public I stammer and forget what I was going to say, just as I used to in front of my most violent teachers.

These difficulties, experienced by individuals already struggling to overcome violent memories from the past, are exacerbated by punishment discourses in everyday life. Yet there are many reasons why these are seen as necessary. Disciplining the workforce, increasing productivity, preventing idleness, corruption or inefficiency; many of us even try to frighten ourselves into a task (such as academic writing) which might require tremendous self-control. What can be done when polite requests are ignored? Moreover, punishment discourses are not necessarily chosen but often due to pressure from those above in the chain of command. An under-manager might berate and threaten her staff as she herself fears punishment for her team not meeting certain targets. Punitive language does not always indicate a metaphysically narrow focus; it might be due to temporary states of anxiety or feeling pressurised. It may even be seen as a duty for a greater good. In Nepal, I remember using punitive discourses to prevent struggling pupils from having to drop down a class. This language is not unique to capitalism: many Communist regimes have had demanding productivity targets, such as Stalin’s Five Year Plans. The punitive discourses of capitalism however are especially skilful at infiltrating consciousness through careful marketing. A threat of punishment is concealed within sales angles which suggest – ‘Can you afford NOT to buy this?’ and consumers fear the terrible consequences that might ensue for not buying an item, which could be anything from a burglar alarm to a face cream. Neo-liberal concerns about competitiveness, viability and comparative quality have intensified the pressure upon companies to ensure that the productivity of each individual is squeezed to its maximum. There are also sado-masochistic elements in the public’s passion for punitive headlines and bombastic rhetoric, currently seen in conflicting reactions to the Trump phenomenon.

Despite our saturation with punitive discourses, we may return to Foucault to understand that their domination of our consciousness is not necessary and eternal but instead, historical and temporary. Alternative styles of discourse, representing more egalitarian power structures, have already been developed in a wide range of settings. Progressive teaching techniques use encouraging words such as “That is an interesting idea” rather than “You’re wrong”. Modern policing involves entering into a dialogue rather than making threats. Sub-cultures such as Rastafarianism and hippy culture have long championed discourses of tolerance and gentleness over punitive language, with words such as “Cool” used to signify open-heartedness, open-mindedness, acceptance and approval. Traditional etiquette, in many languages, also contains a phraseology which expresses sensitivity and sympathy rather than condemnation. Where it does offer correction, the politest language is tentative, respectful and minimalist. Although in England, power-relations remain unchanged by polite language (indeed, the courtesy and noblesse oblige of the upper classes has been part of their survival strategy), at least human beings emerge from such encounters feeling less reified and more respected. Other areas of tolerance include mystical traditions, which stress love rather than punishment and working-class idioms intended to reduce blame and fear, such as “Don’t worry about it mate” and “We all make mistakes”.

For Krishna, working as a washing up assistant in India, the manner in which he was addressed by his bosses could have made all the difference to his career and prevented his over-determined and self-destructive reaction to any criticism, which he associated with physical abuse. Punishment discourses also affect motivation. Preeti described how she would study in order to memorise rather than understand and out of sheer fear rather from any excitement or joy of studying. Finally, Mukunda felt unable to start a business or become a community leader because of performativity anxieties. Instead of being motivated by dedication or love or compassion for his community, his mind was tortured by worries about how he would perform and how this would affect his social image.

How do we, as educators, overturn the domination of punitive discourses? We should start with ourselves and try to make our discourses less threatening and frightening. This means recognising how punitive language in the classroom can limit learning by creating an alienated and alienating ‘other’. Even so-called positive discipline, such as the awarding of stars, emerges from a punitive context (Kohn, 1999). A parallel may be made with competitive reality shows: contestants are degraded by the very fact that performances are judged and appraised by people holding up numbers. In education, as in the arts, how much more useful and fruitful are *specific* adjectives, engaged with *specific* aspects of an individual’s work.

In every setting, punishment discourses can be transformed through changes in bureaucracy. Managers are seen to be managing properly if they provide a barrage of paperwork, containing quality control assessment forms, consumer feedback forms and Key Performance Indicators. The choices, however, on such forms are usually limited by their reliance upon numbers. Every week, for example, I have to rate my Tesco delivery driver on a scale of 1 to 5. How can I ‘sum up’ another human being in this way? A bureaucratic system that recognised the uniqueness of individuals and situations would be far more helpful. Grading itself contains punitive aspects which can be nonsensical, for example, in the way that Reception level children in Nepalese schools are condemned to streams, marked by numbers and letters, which withhold full approval for the majority of students.

Punishment discourses can also be challenged by increasing our awareness to violent adjectives and metaphors. Our sensitivity to racism has led to changes in language: we no longer talk about ‘blackening’ somebody’s character, for example. Similarly, we should reflect upon our use of words like thrash, cane, hit, and smash to describe everyday events, from sport to the economy. Are we right, for example, to embrace superhero cults that lead to the intrinsically violent word POW being used to decorate a pair of pants. The violence of words like ‘cuts’ can be beneficial as accurate reflections of the pain and suffering caused by the removal of funding for vulnerable people. Where ‘cuts’ become accepted as a general necessity, however, we appear to be desensitised to the suffering involved. To ban these violent words would also involve a degree of cruelty and violate the right to freedom of speech: would we really want to prosecute the pensioner for saying his football team got ‘thrashed’? Unless we set our “thinking against itself”, to use Adorno’s term, (Adorno, 1973, p365) and admit the inadequacy of our conceptualisation then we also become punishers. Nevertheless, reflecting upon a word’s potential associations might help us to develop an aversion for normalised violent words and understand why Adorno links conceptual condemnation to literal extermination (Ibid, p362).

The removal of punitive discourses emanating from performativity ideologies is more difficult, since it challenges practises which feature frequently within economisation and management strategies, deemed necessary for businesses to prove their efficiency and accountability to share-holders. Unions have worked to defend employees from the worst punitive discourses (Union NSW, 2013) but an increasing number of companies are replacing traditional reprimands with sinister forms of silent surveillance, including even embedding workers with microchips as part of their auto-quantification (Moore & Robinson, 2015, p2779). Such disciplinary strategies are no less aggressive and considerably more intrusive than the shouting and beatings of the past. These wide-ranging examples show how punishment discourses are not merely an issue for the philosopher of education, but for the whole of human society. For my participants and myself, their prevalence has meant being alert to their incapacitating effects upon every area of our lives.

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