

The Teacher's Bind

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In his essay, Ted Klein asks the question “when is teaching caring good?” He answers: when the type of caring that is taught “is specifically inclusive of and oriented to changing realities of domination and subordination.” He calls this liberatory caring. Klein contrasts liberatory caring with paternalistic caring, which is not good. The difference between liberatory and paternalistic caring lies in the way they address (or do not address) issues of domination. Whereas liberatory caring *directly* tackles these issues and the carer’s complicity in them, in paternalistic caring, although genuine caring is present, the carer makes no effort “to address her own privilege or the subordination of others.” In effect, paternalistic caring “helps maintain domination and subordination.” Klein tells us that in teaching caring it is critical to teach liberatory caring and to teach students to resist paternalistic caring.

I want to explore an issue and raise some questions. I am interested in examining cases in which teachers promote liberatory caring through actions that themselves can be seen as examples of paternalistic caring. I also want to raise questions about the ability and wisdom of focusing on caring, which is essentially an interpersonal approach to morality, to address issues that are highly structural.

AN ISSUE: WHEN CAN TEACHING LIBERATORY CARING BE PATERNALISTIC?

Klein clarifies his distinction between the two types of caring with a case of sexual harassment. In it, a teacher instructs a boy to care for a girl by helping her find a way to resist the actions of a sexual harasser instead of protecting her directly. I began to think about the “object” of this liberatory caring, the girl. Is teaching the boy to care in this way necessarily good when we look at it from the girl’s point of view?

An example of my own will help illustrate. I lived in a primarily low-income Hispanic neighborhood on the East Coast for years. When I entered the bodega on my street corner, the group of men who socialized there would do things to draw my attention to their sexual stares. I considered this a minor sort of harassment. But I was in the minority on this point. Most women who passed that corner did not seem to perceive it this way; they seemed pleased by the male attention. I doubt that these women considered it harmful.

Imagine the children of these men and women in *my* classroom. Imagine a situation where this sort of “harassment” is present in my eyes, but not in those of the “victim.” Can I, as a teacher who perceives a situation to be harmful, be attentive to and respectful of the students’ understandings of what constitutes subordination and still teach the boys liberatory caring? If I teach the boys to help the girls resist, I categorically determine the attention as a harm. As Judith Jordan tells us “There is difference and there is power. And who holds the power shall decide the meaning of difference.”¹ Clearly, I hold the power. I determine the harm.

Take a related case: What about a female high school student whose religious beliefs and family organization are such that she is taught to choose subordination in her relationships with males? Remember, teaching caring is good when it is oriented to *changing* the realities of domination and subordination. It is good in these situations when it teaches the girls and the boys to resist. But if I teach the students in these examples to resist, then on another dimension — not the dimension of gender, but that of values — I am fortifying a different structure of domination. I am enforcing my pattern of values. I am modeling paternalistic caring while teaching liberatory caring. On the other hand, if I discuss with the girls and the boys how I see the situation and the options that they have but *respect* their right to see the behavior as harmless, my actions can be seen as paternalistic in that they support the structures of domination on the gender dimension. What am I as a teacher to do? Klein's paradigm puts me into a bind. And Elizabeth Ellsworth tells us that this is not unusual. She explains that in some cases "our efforts to put discourses of critical pedagogy into practice [can lead] us to reproduce relations of domination in our classroom...and [have] themselves become vehicles of repression."² This, I think, can happen in Klein's paradigm given that it is taken for granted that the teacher is responsible for classifying behavior as harmful in cases of differing beliefs and opinions.

There is another way in which teaching the boy to help the girl resist may be seen as misguided or paternalistic. Sexual harassment is prevalent in schools. A study by the American Association of University Women of eighth to eleventh grade boys and girls revealed that 85% of the girls and 75% of the boys reported that they were often sexually harassed.³ Every woman knows that there are some battles that you fight and others that you do not. Every ethnic minority knows that there are some battles that you fight and others that you ignore. Every homosexual knows that there are some battles that you fight and others that you leave alone. It is hard to flourish when your world is a battleground of resistance. The question is, in teaching liberatory caring who gets to decide when and where resistance is the best course of action? In the example, it is not the girl. It is the teacher and the boy. Keep in mind that the goal of good liberatory caring is to *change* the structures of domination and subordination. If the girl and I decide together that resistance is not in her best interest, we might ignore the harassment. But this, according to Klein's distinction, means that my caring is misguided and paternalistic. Yet if I pursue the liberatory course, and act to change the realities of domination, in essence choosing for the girl what battles to fight, I may not only be behaving paternalistically, I may harm the girl. Again, as a teacher I find myself in a bind.

These issues arise from two assumptions that Klein seems to make about liberatory caring. One assumption is that harm is easily identified, agreed upon, and known to all who see it. The other is that the teacher necessarily knows what is best or beneficial for her students. These assumptions are interrelated in ways that challenge the distinction between teaching liberatory caring and paternalistic caring, and challenge the "goodness" ascribed to each. Klein's account of when teaching caring is good does not take into account the complexity of moral issues that arise from diversity and the power inherent in relationships between teachers and students.

RAISING SOME QUESTIONS

Domination and subordination are not simply interpersonal issues; they are highly structural. Caring is an interpersonal approach to morality. The example of sexual harassment highlights this distinction. Can caring effectively address these types of structural issues? Although sexual harassment occurs in the public domain, it is consistently treated as a private matter. Caring, because it is interpersonal treats it in a similarly private manner. When girls and boys are sexually harassed in schools, a variety of organizational protections and educational efforts should be elicited. However, the structures of schooling themselves can be seen to perpetuate the sorts of domination and subordination Klein worries about. Should we expect interpersonal caring to be effective in the context of these structures? Treating the issue as private may cloak the very structures that need to be addressed. Robin Patrick Clair argues that the sort of privatizing caring provides has the effect of perpetuating and organizing public confusion and silence about sexual harassment.⁴ In focusing on caring to alter the structures of domination in these types of cases, might we also contribute to this silencing?

I see the distinction between liberatory and paternalistic caring as useful in the sense that it points us to some aims for caring. But in its current formulation, one in which lines are strictly drawn around the goodness of one form or another without consideration of the complexity and contextuality of morality, it is not flexible enough. The hard distinctions over-determine the arguments and ignore structural issues of domination and subordination.

1. June Jordan, "Just Inside the Door: Toward a Manifest New Destiny," *The Progressive* 56, no. 2 (1992): 18.

2. Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," in *The Education Feminism Reader*, ed. Lynda Stone (New York: Routledge, 1994), 301.

3. American Association of University Women, *Hostile Hallways* (Washington, DC:AAUW, 1993).

4. Robin Patrick Clair, *Organizing Silence: A World of Possibilities* (Albany:State University of New York Press, 1998).