Social Justice Education and U.S. Military Adult Learners

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Abstract

Abstract: This paper examines the Veteran or active duty military adult learner in higher education through the lens of microaggressions, intersectionality, and social justice education. We conclude by discussing how this conceptual framework fosters our approach of social justice education and implications for practice.

Keywords: veteran, active duty military, adult learner, intersectionality, microaggressions

The field of adult education has promoted the need for better understanding of diverse and often underserved adult learners in higher education through social justice education. Literature has focused on ensuring that under-represented, perhaps misunderstood, student populations have a voice (Mcleod, 2011; Morales, 2014). However, the voice of the military affiliated learner in adult education literature remains largely neglected, despite the dramatic expansion of these students since the passage of the Post 9/ll GI Bill. While numerous authors (Gilard & Gulielmetta, 2011; McCaslin, et al,, 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2009; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007) have addressed the varied challenges military learners experience in transitioning into higher education (i.e. adjusting to school after deployment, shifting role requirements and identity from military to civilian, relating to non-veterans), few have examined to what degree faculty, staff, and nonveteran students understand this adult learner student population and how their behavior may contribute to the alienation of these military students. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine literature the Veteran or active duty military adult learner in higher education through the lens of microaggressions, intersectionality, and social justice education. We conclude by discussing how this conceptual framework fosters our approach of social justice education and implications for practice.

Conceptual Approach

Gilard and Guglielmetta (2011) suggest that veterans experience implicit and explicit marginalization that impedes academic progress by disrupting the student veteran's engagement within and outside the classroom. This marginalization may begin with a lack of understanding by higher education administrators who are less likely than those of earlier generations to have personally experienced military or wartime service (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009). McBain (2013) on the other hand suggests rifts stemming from the Vietnam War, "are a part of the cultural substrate underlying present-day military/higher education interactions" (p. 5). Military connected learners may be faced with negative stereotypes when they return to higher education and confront inappropriate and insensitive questioning, which may be described as microaggressions (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007.) McCaslin, et.al (2014) state "unchecked stereotyping or anti-military sentiment can breed mistrust between student Veterans and civilian faculty, staff and students, resulting in disengagement in the campus community and limiting of social interactions to Veteran or military Service members only" (p.194). In addition, the diversity of military connected adult

learners within intersectionality of identities is important to identity and areas of marginalization are critical for those involved in social justice education to understand deeply. Therefore, microaggressions, intersectionality, and social justice education inform a framework for inquiry.

Microaggressions

Microaggressions (Gomez, Khurshid, Freitag, & Lachuk, 2011; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Sue et al., 2007) literature informs a conceptual framework to explore ways in which military adult learners are "othered", marginalized, romanticized, or dehumanized. Microaggressions are often subtle visual or verbal communications or actions, which communicate a message of socially subscribed status or stereotypes (Sue et al., 2007). Many civilians have very little contact with military personnel as family or friends; therefore, they may rely on popular media, such as television or movies, to inform their worldview of a military learner. Comments from fellow co-workers or adult learners such as: "Ha! I could never join the military! I could never follow orders!" insinuate military adult learners possess a lower level of intelligence and lack of critical thinking skills.

This othering behavior contributes to how the military learner is situated within formal and nonformal learning environments, including organizational and work settings. Intersectionality (McCall, 2005), or multiple identities and societal perceptions and positioning of these identities, plays a role within this othering and microaggressions. In a 2013 television news clip showing a female in a wheelchair, a reporter stated over the image, "You wouldn't know it by looking at her, but she is a veteran herself, having served five years active duty" (Fox6 News, 2013). Civilian student or faculty inappropriate questioning of battle experiences, such as "Did you ever shoot someone?" can create a hostile environment for learning and working.

Deconstructing these statements and questions is essential in order for educators and learners to understand prior socialization and intersectionality with regard to how they view military learners. Romanticizing and demonizing military students contribute to the dehumanization of the military learner (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007) who may be "one-storied" from images of the hero and from images of violence. These microaggressions contribute to a marginalization of military learners within a multitude of learning environments.

Intersectionality

The intersectionality literature documents the difficulty of studying a group from one analytical category (Crenshaw, 1991; Hancock, 2007; McCall, 2005). Intersectionality work highlights groups at the intersection of two or more identities who often are left out of analysis or politics, aiming to make visible the multiple positioning and power relations that are central to a person's life. Military identities and power structures intersect with other identities (social class, gender, race, ethnicity) and multiple dimensions of social life. According to Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007), "Thinking broadly about the intersection of individual and group identity(ies) is complicated by the ways in which identities are co-constructed and assigned meaning within oppressive systems" (p. 8).

For activity duty military and Veterans, military affiliation influences where they live, where they shop, where their children attend school, and who is in their social circle, informing a way of looking at themselves in the world. Military culture emphasizes masculine values, geographic and social distance from the civilian daily context, and hierarchical control (Keets, 2010). Social identity is shaped by years of armed conflict, multiple deployments, and military

structure. Many military-affiliated students discuss the difference in life experiences from their civilian peers in their drive to complete tasks (assignments). They may find the civilian world lax and lazy (Jones, 2013).

While the masculine and hierarchical military culture may commonly shape those within the military-affiliated group, this student population is not homogeneous and, therefore, multiple identities intersect within this culture. Gender plays a role in how one identifies with the military culture; race also plays a significant role in power and privilege. Proportionally, the military is a male and white dominated environment. In 2013, the active duty military force consisted of 15% women and 85% men and one-third of the active duty personnel identify with a minority race (DoD, 2013). In addition, class is seen in the levels of power and privilege between those who are enlisted military members and officers and power and privilege is further distributed by branch within the military (i.e. infantry, ordinance, signal corps, medial corps). The foundation of intersectionality is that we cannot reduce identity to one social group (military-affiliated). Collins (1990) discusses how identities are based on social group membership interaction which create qualitatively different experiences and development. A black female veteran from enlisted ranks will have a different military identity than a white male veteran from officer corps. However, most research lumps them together under the category of military service members.

Social Justice Education

Each of us has worked with and taught military adult learners in diverse settings. Therefore, we are cultural outsiders with instructor lenses, which we constantly adjust by learning from our learners and in reciprocity challenge them also to see the world from multiple perspectives.
The goal of social justice education is to enable people to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in the institutions and the communities in which they are a part (Bell, 2007, p. 2).
As we understand this goal, it is our role as adult educators to help learners examine their culture including values and beliefs, unpack that culture, and understand the systems in which they reside. This examination includes helping non-military learners examine microaggressions they have committed against military adult learners as well as helping military students name that oppression. In addition, this social justice education involves helping military adult learners explore the intersectionality that is present within the military as well as wider society. The insinuated incompatibility of the identities of "mother" and "soldier" is something that we have found our female students battle against in wider society. In addition, we ask military students to process an unpacking of issues of rank, branch, combat versus non-combat roles in intersectionality with sex, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. These exercises of interrupting personal thought processes that may be microaggressive to others or self-harmful are important actions within social justice education.

Discussion

Examining marginalized groups is not new to social theory and social justice education; however, the Veteran and active duty military adult learner have not been a part of the adult education conversation related to intersectionality and microaggressions, perhaps due to the perception of this group as part of the dominant society. Adult educators working with military

learners can play a significant role in informing work in the education community. Through fostering an understanding of military learners through a social justice education lens, we can expand the social justice education conversation into unexplored realms in addition to serving as allies of our learners.

Microaggressions and intersectionality research focuses on those who are ignored or marginalized. In examining military students through these lenses, the social justice education conversation and understanding can be cultivated in a heterogeneous (military and civilian) and homogeneous (all military) classroom. For example, through the framework we have described, we have learned that the complexity of the environment in classrooms needs to be navigated sensitively based on the course composition (e.g. military/civilian ration, enlisted/officer ratio). The intricate power relations present impact how we establish an inclusive environment for all learners. In addition, we as adult education professors, have no direct military experience, which is a limitation teaching in a military homogeneous classroom. In a heterogeneous classroom with civilians and military students, the conversation is further expanded to understand the marginalization and microaggressions each community commits to the other. This power is even more intricate within the military where there are tiers of cultures from the officer to enlisted to military spouses. In addition, there are differences between ranks, area of service (combat vs support), and active duty vs national guard vs reserves. Incivility may transpire at any of these intersections. All spaces where microaggressions occur must be exposed in order to draw parallels between the complex privileged systems and the separation that these privileged systems creates.

Through being open to multiple ways of learning and cultural backgrounds as well as being transparent as possible about our own cultural biases, we have found that we have earned acceptance from many military students. A reciprocity of learning is created from establishing a trusting environment. We also learn and unlearn in reciprocity with our military students. As with all realms of social justice education, instructors and students need to be challenged to examine where their privilege lies and how none are tied to a single dimension of identity. It is the faculty member's role to frame how the learning is facilitated in an area that is often unrecognized. Our experience teaching military learners has broadened our view of intersectionality and the complexity of our multiple privileged and less privileged identities.

Implications

The implications of this conceptual approach of the military adult learner community highlight the complexity of privilege and marginalization. The important element is to view the intersection and interdependence of the approach rather than making it an additive one.

With civilian and military learners in a classroom, we have exposed how the portrayal of military in the media and social media continues to stereotype the military image. Further research exploring civilian and military adult learner engagement around social justice education within a formal classroom could develop our understanding of how better to facilitate an inclusive learning environment. This beginning point with two major groups and identities could then be studied through theoretical frameworks of microaggressions and expose the complexity of identities through intersectionality.

We as adult educators need to continue to learn better ways to support military learners in homogeneous and heterogeneous groups and facilitate thoughtful appreciation. Examining higher education policy through the lens of intersectionality could provide further examination into the specific policies that create inequality experienced by social groups taking into consideration the

interaction of race, gender, class, ability, and age. Examining policy through one identity (military students) does not address the complexity of the discrimination.

Social justice education includes a call to action. The call to action is a commitment to change society and in this case perhaps adult and higher education, military communities, and civilian perspectives. As adult educator allies for military adult learners, we have influence in challenging systems of privilege, microaggressions, and marginalization.

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