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Recommended Citation

Collins, Joshua C. and Rocco, Tonette S. (2015). "Stigma, Identity, and Criticality
The Impetus, Function, and Expression of Disclosure," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2015/papers/14>

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Stigma, Identity, and Criticality: The Impetus, Function, and Expression of Disclosure

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Abstract: This paper explores the impetus, function, and expression of disclosure (revealing of guarded personal information) and articulates some key insights regarding what critical adult learning and education can gain from understanding disclosure as a phenomenon, particularly for people with invisible stigmatized identities.

Introduction and Purpose

Disclosure refers to the process of revealing guarded personal information to another person or group of people (Chelune, 1979). This personal information might include stigmatized identity that in the absence of disclosure may remain invisible and unknown. A stigmatized identity according to Goffman (1963) is “an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated” (p. 5). The ‘we’ in his definition refers to society, a society composed of white, middle and upper class people who are Christian, heterosexual, and without disability or blemish and considered ‘normal’. The stigmatized identities described by Goffman include people with disabilities, sexual minorities, the poor and others. The manifestation of their differentness is visible and ‘normal’ people know they are different. Knowing that someone is different is where stigma begins since the knowledge of difference is entwined with judgment. The judgment is negative – the person is less able, immoral (because of status, i.e., sexual minority or sex worker, poverty, or race/ethnicity), and not a contributing citizen. In this paper, we discuss invisible stigma—that is a person whose ‘difference’ may not be immediately discernable. The ‘normal’ person might suspect something but must be told to really know. The types of invisible stigmatized identities include being a sexual minority, having certain physical or mental disabilities, or coming from a lower socioeconomic class, to give a few examples. Because identity and marginalization is unquestionably linked to how adults learn and develop (Freire, 1970), it is crucial to understand adult learning and education where it intersects with invisible stigmatized identity and the process of disclosure.

Research supports the need for additional theoretical and conceptual explorations of disclosure within an adult education framework. Because we know that disclosure can be a cognitive (Pennebaker & Francis, 1996), emotional (Borkovec, Roemer, & Kinyon, 1995), disorienting (Adams, 2011), and confusing (Petronio, Flores, & Hecht, 1997) process, it seems logical to explore why, how, and what adults learn in and from the process of disclosure. This information can be used to influence and dictate future policy and practice in adult learning and education. Individuals may bring invisible stigmatized identities with them to various formal and informal learning sites. Thus, we argue that the exploration of disclosure as a form and location of critical adult learning is crucial to continuing to advance the field through research and practice. Critical adult learning, as we discuss the concept, is defined as those aspects of the adult educational process that “imagine and theorize how the cultures and societies in which we live interact with and influence the ways in which people relate to each other” (Fleming, 2008, p.

50), for the purpose of proposing, creating, and sustaining meaningful change. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore the disclosure of invisible stigmatized identity and the implications of such disclosure for critical adult learning. This paper examines the impetus (nature and pace), function (sought outcome), and expression (degree or extent) of the disclosure of invisible stigmatized identities. In this examination, we aim to uncover aspects of power and privilege as they relate to how adults navigate communication, build relationships, and learn despite obstacles.

The Impetus, Function, and Expression of Disclosure

Disclosure is often associated with information that the discloser expects will be kept confidential—“something truly personal” (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993, p.2). Most interpretations of disclosure theory point to a mutually transformative transaction, meaning that both the discloser and the recipient of the communication benefit in some way from the process. Interpretations also infer that both individual (i.e., the discloser or the recipient) and collective (i.e., both the discloser and the recipient, and perhaps other individuals affected by the disclosure) attitudes toward the subject of the disclosure are directed and re-directed as a result of the communication. Thus, “when people disclose in certain ways, the recipient may be expected, or be forced, to define the nature of the relationship differently” (Derlega et al. 1993, p.15). The relationship and the individuals in the relationship are transformed by the disclosure of guarded information.

The *impetus* of disclosure is primarily dependent upon time, as it defines and supposes the nature and pace of communication between parties. In understanding the impetus of disclosure, we might ask, “What was the underlying reason for either disclosure or nondisclosure and what situation(s) influenced the process?” The concept of time in relationship development assumes that with more time, relationships become more intense and intimate (Derlega et al., 1993). Indeed, time is often among one of the most influential factors in the disclosure process. For example, the first author of this paper knew that he was gay from a young age. However, because his family upbringing was conservative and Christian, he sensed as a teenager and very young adult that coming out (disclosing his sexual orientation) would not be safe choice. He waited to come out to his parents until he was in graduate school, living away from home, and completely financially independent. Thus, the impetus of his disclosure, the nature and pace associated with the process, greatly influenced his experience with not only coming out but also with learning about and dealing with his own gay identity.

Different from the impetus of disclosure, the *function* of disclosure describes the sought or affected outcome of the communication. It should be noted that while a person with an invisible stigmatized identity may seek a certain reaction to disclosure, that is not always what is received. Nondisclosure is exercised presumably for primarily positive reasons like avoiding discrimination or a change in a relationship with another person by remaining silent, but the outcomes are not always positive, either. This can convolute the disclosure process and make it difficult for the discloser to ascertain how others will react to the secret information, no matter how intimate a relationship the discloser may have with the recipient. On the contrary, though one of the major motivations for disclosure is often relationship development (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979), disclosure does not always lead to increased fondness. This depends on the recipient’s perception of the invisible stigmatized identity and the existing relationship with the discloser. By its nature, disclosure can violate what most would likely see as normative expectations in relationships with others, and this can actually lead to decreased fondness. A few

questions arise in considering the function of a disclosure. First, if someone discloses because they have to (i.e., for someone at work or school to understand a situation) or they want to (i.e., just because they feel like it is time), what are they seeking to gain in the disclosure (accommodation, respect, relationship development, etc.)? Second, if someone discloses involuntarily, can the result still be positive—what is the affected disclosure outcome? And last, if someone decides to conceal who they are (exercise nondisclosure), what are some positive motivations for doing so?

Finally, the *expression* of disclosure describes the degree to which disclosure is exercised. It describes the situations in which and people to whom the discloser feels comfortable sharing such guarded personal information. Because identity is “an interactional accomplishment, an identity continually renegotiated via linguistic exchange and social performance” (Cerulo, 1997, p. 387), the development and embodiment of identity is political (Bernstein, 2005). Choices and actions related to the continual expression of disclosure are processed in which many parties may be invested, beyond just the discloser. For this reason, disclosers often feel a sense of responsibility to concern themselves not only with their own thoughts, actions, and reactions in the communication, but also with the thoughts, actions, and reactions of others. This can sometimes limit the situations and contexts in which the disclosure ends up taking (or not taking) place. For example, it is possible for someone with an invisible stigmatized identity to be open about who they are with close friends and to remain silent when in the presence of family or at work. In this way, the juxtaposition of disclosure and nondisclosure can create simultaneous and conflicting realities for the discloser. Thus, it seems appropriate to ask, “How do individuals experience disclosure or nondisclosure as an ongoing reality?”

In higher education students make decisions about when, where, and to whom to disclose. Some disclosures or sharing of personal information are done simply to allow another person to know them. At other times students feel they must disclose or they must stay silent about aspects of their identity that stigmatize them. We will discuss two stigmatized identities that can be invisible until disclosure occurs, disability and sexual minority. A person can become disabled at any point in time (Rocco & Fornes, 2010). Conditions that are considered disabilities can be lifelong but are diagnosed or discovered when they are. For instance, a student might excel in school until graduate school where learning and engaging becomes more difficult than it should be. The student seeks professional help and receives a diagnosis of a learning disability midterm. Or students who enter college with diagnosed disabilities often buy into the dominant discourse that they should grow out of the learning disability or attention deficit disorder and do not seek accommodations until they are in trouble. In order to receive accommodations the student must disclose the diagnosis to the university’s disability services. This office will then notify the instructor or ask the student to inform the instructor that accommodations are required. This seems like a simple process but it is not. Instructors are suspicious of students that disclose midterm questioning their integrity and credibility (Rocco, 1997). In the case of a student disclosing a disability to an instructor the power resides with the instructor. Relationships are not enhanced by a disclosure of disability status in many cases.

Another strong example of disclosure of stigmatized identity is that of sexual minority status. An interesting and important subpopulation is gay men employed in masculinized industries (Collins, 2013) such as oil and gas (Collins & Callahan, 2012) and law enforcement (Collins, 2014). Particularly for gay men working as law enforcement officers, the complexities of the disclosure process are almost always directly related to industry standards of and acceptance for heterosexual privilege, elevated status of expertise as a form of masculinity and value, a sink or swim work

environment, inequitably enforced implicit and/or formal policies, and task-oriented work relationships (Collins, 2014). Together, these factors

uncover and interpret nuances in the experience of being a gay [law enforcement officer] that reveal the possibility these men sometimes choose not to acknowledge, or at least have learned to cope with, a system that continues to marginalize, minimize, and even encourage the silence of their lives and perspectives at work. (p. 185)

Because of this, gay male law enforcement officers face truly unique stressors and risks related to disclosure on the job. Many choose not to ‘come out,’ the impetus of their nondisclosure choices often being that the surrounding environment will not accept them, or that being openly gay will diminish the extent to which they are perceived to be competent officers (Collins, 2014). However, those who do choose to come out often choose to do so because the disclosure functions either as a form of self-expression or relationship development (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979), shifting the dynamics of power and control over communication in their favor (Collins, 2014). But as is the case with many people with invisible, stigmatized identities, for these gay officers the expression of disclosure changes with time and is dependent upon context. For example, some officers report being out only to certain work colleagues, chosen for a specific reason – generally either a close friend (like a field partner) or another gay man or lesbian. One officer in Collins’ (2014) research even said that he was fully ‘out’ at his first job in law enforcement but after a few bad experiences chose not to disclose in future positions. This is consistent with the research of Hudson (2011), who found evidence supporting the assertion that various stigma characteristics and environmental factors interact with invisible stigmatized identities and perceived disclosure consequences to impact the choice of disclosure. In the disclosure process, individuals sought institutional support, supportive others, and to relate with those who they felt had similar experiences. Whether the disclosure process could be controlled and manipulated was especially salient in the decision making process. This demonstrates how an individual’s relationship with disclosure can develop and change over time largely dependent on when, where, and to whom disclosure takes place.

Implications for Critical Adult Learning

Scholars of critical adult learning and education seek to explore privilege, power, and development through praxis, or “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970, p. 36). Privilege can be viewed as an “unearned asset or benefit received by virtue of being born with a particular characteristic or into a particular class” (Rocco and West, 1998, p. 173). Privilege influences disclosure through the interpretation of meanings, labels, and interactions. Power manifests itself as “the control, use, and protection of economic, political, and social resources and the conscious or unconscious use of these resources against others. Power in adult education is seen in terms of identity politics, marginalization, and access to economic, political, and educational resources” (Rocco, 2010, p. 146). Power influences disclosure through the recognition of institutionalized and internalized ideologies. Development influences disclosure through the shaping of behaviors, competencies, skills, and thinking. As noted by Alfred (2002), “Building a more critical adult education means having a clear understanding of the issues and the knowledge base to choose among alternative procedures” (p. 92). These alternative procedures can take place in physical (for example, classroom or workplace), metaphorical (for example, in or out of the closet for gay men and lesbians), and cognitive (for example, the self) spaces. Identifying and enacting these alternatives involves

learning about the context, the symbolic meaning, and the essence of something, someone, someplace, or some time. So, in exploring the implications of disclosure of invisible stigmatized identity for critical adult learning, we propose the following statements. *First*, to understand the impetus, function, and expression of disclosure or nondisclosure for individuals with invisible stigmatized identities, we must understand what situations and people influence the process. *Second*, individuals who have invisible stigmatized identities have experienced the world differently than those who do not have such identities; thus, it is important to consider how the outcomes of disclosure and nondisclosure might affect their learning and development over time. *Third*, an individual's experience with learning is likely to be influenced by instances of forced disclosure, or situations where they had no control over whether or not people knew about their invisible stigmatized identity. *Fourth*, disclosure and nondisclosure are ongoing realities for people with invisible stigmatized identities and these realities are brought into every situation in which learning takes place. The creative responses to these statements may result in development of more tangible alternatives for the practice and scholarship of adult education, from a critical adult learning perspective.

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