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# **A Critical Ethnography of Adult Learning In the Context of a Social Movement Group**

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***Abstract.** This ethnography studied the learning among members of two groups in a toxic waste struggle with the EPA. The socio-political context, along with the members' class, race and gender, significantly affected the members' learning of technical and emancipatory knowledge.*

*Social movements play a crucial role in contemporary society because they shape values, beliefs, legislation and institutions, in progressive and conservative directions. They interest adult educators because these movements are such important actors in society and because significant learning can occur among their members.*

*Recently, several studies have documented that people who participate in movement groups can learn a tremendous amount (Boggs, 1986; Foley, 1991; Kastner, 1993; McKnight, 1995; Schmitt-Boshnick, 1995; Scott, 1992). Participants learn information and skills and they often change their values, beliefs, attitudes and their sense of self-identity.*

*Although this research has documented the types of learning that occur, very little research has focused on how dynamics such as class, race and gender and the specific context of a social movement group shape this learning among participants. The studies which have addressed this are limited in scope (Martin, 1988), or focus on organizations which are not social movement groups (Walters, 1989). Within the social movement literature, little attention has been paid to the ways that class, race and gender affect movement dynamics and tactics (Taylor, 1996; Graham and Hogan, 1990).*

*This critical ethnography describes learning among participants in one grass-roots struggle around toxic and radioactive waste issues. It shows how the socio-political context and the context of class, gender and race/ethnicity shape participants' learning.*

## *Methodology*

*The study uses a critical framework for analysis, focusing on the relationship between learning and power and the complex ways in which power is exercised. The study incorporates insights from poststructuralists and postmodernists who emphasize struggles over identities, meaning, language and discourse. Attention to these processes expands the analysis of sites of power and offers insights into important ways learning occurs.*

*Data for the study was collected through participant observation of twice-weekly group meetings and most other group events for eight months, observation of neighborhood organization meetings, interviews with group members and past members, interviews with members of the neighborhood group that initiated the struggle, and content analysis of written documents. Analysis follows Carspecken (1996), moving from this data through dialogical data collection/analysis. Further analysis then relates interactions within the group and with other actors to larger social structures. The study describes participants' learning and assesses how that learning is affected by these contextual and systemic factors.*

### *Description of findings.*

*The research site is in a large US city, where a Superfund site is contaminated with radioactive and toxic wastes. The EPA and the state public health department initially recommended excavating the contaminated soil and moving it to an approved storage facility. However, the corporation that owns the site protested and the EPA decided in 1992 that on-site stabilization was an acceptable remedy. Neighbors who live as close as one block from the site organized through their neighborhood association to protest the decision and participated in legal action along with the city to force removal. Their group size diminished when they were not successful. More recently another group formed in an adjacent neighborhood.*

*This paper addresses two aspects of context that are especially salient for group members' learning. First it addresses the socio-political context in which a government agency and a corporation have the power to make decisions regarding the site with minimal community input. Secondly, it addresses the class, race and gender make-up of the two groups that affects their choices of strategy. These two areas will be described and then the learning among group members will be described. Some of the links between context and learning will be explored in the following section.*

*Social movement group context. The government and the corporation exercise their power through three means: legal structures, the prevailing political/economic climate which affects the balance of business profits and environmental concerns, and the highly technical nature of toxic/radioactive waste disputes. As a result, the EPA and the corporation have much more power than the residents.*

*In this case, the EPA has won several court decisions which give it power to make rulings that supersede city ordinances prohibiting disposal of radioactive waste within city limits. Regulations do require the EPA to consider community input in making decisions about Superfund site remedies. However, community input is in the third of three tiers of factors. As a result, the community has little say in what remedy is selected. The EPA and the state Department of Public Health held a public hearing on the original proposal to remove the soil. Residents spoke overwhelmingly in favor of removal. When the EPA changed the remedy to on-site stabilization, they did not hold another public hearing, in spite of residents' requests for another hearing if there was any change in the proposed remedy.*

The second way in which the power imbalance manifests itself is through the prevailing climate in which the government seeks to balance profits for business with environmental protection. At the federal and state levels, this governmental need to balance accumulation and legitimation has favored accumulation in recent years, with accompanying disdain for environmental activists and especially lower-class community groups (Sanjour, 1997; Masterson-Allen and Brown, 1990). In contrast, the city where the site is located has a different balance of needs. So it can align itself with residents, but its power in the case is quite limited.

At this site, this culture of support for business and disdain for residents has been manifested in several ways. These include EPA's selection of a remedy that is cheaper for the corporate owner but has higher health risks for the neighborhood, EPA's refusal to hold a second public hearing, EPA's sending lower-level officials with no decision-making power to community meetings, and the project manager's "cheek to jowl" relationship with company officials. The state department of health has refused to put signs on the site warning of the danger of radioactivity, although residents have been demanding this for more than three years. The department has also refused to conduct an epidemiological study in the area even though residents point to a 50 percent higher cancer rate in this neighborhood.

The city is in a different position because they will benefit from the local or regional businesses who are more likely to prosper if there is no radioactive and toxic dump in one of the city's neighborhoods. The dump site is currently bringing down local property values and reducing tax revenues. So this different balance means the mayor can speak out strongly on behalf of the residents and challenge the EPA in court. However, the power the city wields in this case is minimal in comparison to that of the EPA, as shown by the court cases described above.

The third way in which the community remains relatively powerless is due to the highly technical and ambiguous nature of toxic and radioactive waste debates (Masterson-Allen and Brown, 1990). The community does not have the same access to technical resources and expertise as the EPA, so they can not conduct their own epidemiological or contamination studies and they are hampered in understanding reports about the site. Even if the residents had the resources for their own studies, the EPA controls data collection at the site as well as access to results, and has refused to release information requested by the community and other federal agencies. In addition, the community is not able to prove risks from the site because "safe" exposure to low-level radioactivity is disputed even in the scientific community. This lack of agreement among scientists makes it very difficult for a community group to prove in court that the remedy is too risky, even if that is their perception.

Class, race and gender as they affect strategy. The original neighborhood group was mostly women, who were lower-class and of mixed-race and ethnicity. The newer group is almost all middle-class, white men. The different make-up of the two groups affects what strategies they perceive as viable.

The women primarily used protest tactics and worked with their city councilman, a lawyer, to support the city's legal action against the on-site plan. They staged several protests at the site, local thoroughfares and the governor's mansion and they garnered substantial media coverage. When these "in your face" approaches did not succeed, the group delved more deeply into the

technical questions of the site to be able to prove the riskiness of the EPA's proposed remedy. Even today they do not perceive that they can gather any financial resources from their community to support their struggle.

In contrast, the newer group's main strategy has been to approach the CEO of the corporation that owns the site to work out a win-win solution directly with him. They have also tried to build a council of mentors made up of powerful people such as the mayor, congressional representatives, major stockholders, etc., who could advise the CEO about the wisdom of removing the soil. In order to do this, their first major activity as a group was to raise a significant sum of money. They approached the CEO twice and solicited support from the proposed council members through meetings and letters. Since the CEO has rejected their offers to meet, they are studying the technical aspects of the site and considering some of the same approaches the women used. Although they have talked about building community support, they have done little in this area and their membership has diminished to about five people.

What people learned. Residents of both neighborhoods have learned many things, some of which are beyond the scope of this paper. Here we will address two types of learning, following Habermas' (1971) distinction of three types of knowledge. Habermas found people have a technical interest in controlling the world around them, a practical interest in understanding meaning, and an emancipatory interest in freeing themselves from domination. This study found residents learned a tremendous amount of technical knowledge and the skills for carrying out their strategies. The second major type of learning is the emancipatory knowledge through which residents became aware of unequal relations of power and of different types of power.

Residents of the two neighborhoods have learned significant amounts of technical information, especially about radioactivity, toxic wastes, Superfund regulations, etc. However, members of each group have also learned different things as a result of pursuing different strategies. For example, the women had to learn how to organize protests and get media attention when their primary strategy was protest. Later they had to learn how to create or find forums in which they could challenge the remedy from the technical standpoint. On the other hand, the men in the newer group did not have to learn new skills in order to do the networking with the council of mentors and the CEO or to do the fund-raising because these were skills they already had from their business experience. If they begin to use other strategies they may need to learn the skills to carry these out.

In pursuing their emancipatory interest in freeing themselves from the domination of the EPA, both groups have learned about the unequal relations of power and about the different types of power that can be wielded. Before they entered the struggle, members of both groups believed that the EPA and the state Department of Public Health were carrying out their mandate to protect the environment and public health. Now they do not trust the agencies and see them as corrupt. Residents discovered that the corporation has more power with the EPA than they do because the corporation was able to convince the EPA to choose a less expensive remedy that poses greater health risks for the community. One member said, "If there isn't a conspiracy going on, at least there is collusion." He described a system "that doesn't care about the people at the bottom, not about you or you or me."

Throughout the struggle, residents have learned about different types of power and who wields them. For example, they have experienced the power of the technical experts to control discussion about health risks and the power of the corporation and the EPA to win legal battles. Although their popular power has not been successful in stopping the remedy, some of the members of the original group have become very proud of their neighborhood and find power in knowing they are doing the right thing. The government's disdain has made them more proud of themselves and their willingness to defend their rights.

### Discussion

Clearly context has affected the learning by members of these two groups. This occurred as the groups discovered their relatively powerless position vis a vis the EPA and the corporation. It also occurred as the context of class, race and gender affected what strategies each group perceived as viable.

The socio-political context affects the balance of power in a struggle such as this by influencing legislation and the way states balance their needs for accumulation and legitimation. In this struggle, a judge determined that federal laws took precedence over local ordinances and gave greater power to the EPA. In the current climate, federal and state government were also able to provide greater support for corporate interests (accumulation) than for residents' interests (legitimation).

The context for this struggle also includes the highly technical nature of the issue. This gives greater power to the EPA and the state department because they control access to the technical information and they have greater resources for utilizing this information to support their position.

When residents were confronted with this situation, they learned about the power the corporation holds and how the federal and state governments support corporate interests. They became aware of their relative powerlessness and sought other forms of power through which they might achieve their goal of removing hazardous materials from their neighborhood. This has resulted in their learning significant emancipatory knowledge, even though they have not yet found a form of power they can use to stop the remedy.

In addition, the context of class, gender and race affected learning because they affected what strategies each neighborhood group perceived as viable and what the groups had to learn to carry out their strategies.

Residents of the original neighborhood worked through the EPA's public hearing channels because they perceived that the EPA had the power to make decisions. When the EPA changed the remedy on them, they relied on the city's legal strategy because they did not have the resources (nor did they perceive they could get them) to approach the corporation directly. They also used protest tactics, seeking to build their power with numbers and public outcry. When this

failed, they turned to the technical realm, seeking power in technical expertise. Each change of strategy required learning new skills and information.

The newer group learned different things because they believed they could approach the corporate CEO directly and use a bridge of powerful people to support their efforts. Now that the strategy of meeting with the CEO failed and they have been unable to get support from politicians and other proposed mentors, they are looking at other strategies, such as building up their base of community support and exploring how to argue against the remedy on technical grounds.

Graham and Hogan (1990) found that this perception of access to decision-makers is grounded in the reality that poorer people had less access to politicians than upper middle-class citizens. As a result, poorer people tend to use public political tactics such as mass-mobilizations and petition campaigns which are less effective in influencing officials. Lichterman (1995) also found strategy differences between white and minority environmental groups.

In this case, the women in the original group did not have access to decision-makers at the EPA once the first public hearing was held and the remedy was changed. They did not perceive they had access to the corporate decision-makers either. So they began to use protest tactics. In contrast, the men in the newer group perceived that they had access to the corporate CEO and powerful politicians who would work on their behalf. They also perceived there was money in the community that they could raise for their effort. This perception clearly influenced their choice of strategy, and therefore what they learned in carrying out this strategy.

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#### Implications for theory and further research

Adult learning theory has been criticized for being too individualistic. Even Mezirow's (1991) theory of perspective transformation, which describes the kind of emancipatory learning that occurred in these groups, only addresses context through the specific disorienting dilemma. In this case the dilemma of a toxic and radioactive waste dump in their neighborhood was essential for learning. But there was additional influence through the interaction of the group with the government agencies in a larger socio-political context and through the class, gender and racial make-up of the groups.

The findings of this study provide clear evidence that various aspects of context affected learning of technical and emancipatory knowledge in these groups. Although the high level of technical knowledge may be unique to toxic and radioactive waste disputes, studies of other groups (cited at beginning of paper) have shown that their members also learned technical knowledge. Being placed in a relatively powerless position led group members to learn emancipatory knowledge about various forms of power and how this power can be intertwined in systems. Residents were forced to learn about other kinds of power they could wield.

This study demonstrates the important contribution that further research can make to developing more comprehensive adult learning theory that incorporates contextual factors. For example,

future research can address questions such as: how does the position of relative powerlessness lead to learning emancipatory knowledge in other groups? When does it lead to resignation rather than empowerment? How do the socio-political context and class, race and gender dynamics affect learning in other types of social movement groups? Although this group learned much about power, they still haven't put together enough power to stop the remedy. Further research can also explore what sort of knowledge contributes to the success of social movement groups and how members come to learn this useful knowledge.

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