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# Postmodern Morality in Adult Education: A Cross-Cultural Study

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**Abstract:** *Drawing on the recent work of Zygmunt Bauman, this paper explores the evolution of new moral sensibilities in postmodernity. It then reports on research that seeks to understand the meaning and implications of postmodern morality for adult educators in Nova Scotia, Canada and Kingston, Jamaica.*

While the recent contributions of adult education theorists (Bagnall, 1999; Plumb, 1999; Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997) have begun to reveal the implications of contemporary social and cultural transformations for adult education, we are still some way from sufficiently understanding the consequences of these transformations for the theories and practices of our field. While all of us are aware of the rapid emergence of information technologies and the vast economic, social and cultural changes being produced by globalization, we are only beginning to come to terms with what it means to be adult educators in postmodern times. This is particularly true of the ways postmodernity is impacting our moral sensibilities as adult educators (Bagnall, 1995). As a social and cultural practice, adult education has always been tightly entwined with ethical and moral thought and action. If, as social theorist Zygmunt Bauman (1995; 1998a; 1998b) insists, a central feature of postmodernity is the growing prevalence of new moral sensibilities, it is deeply important for adult educators to pay particular attention to the ways these new sensibilities are flowing into and transforming our thoughts and actions.

My interest in examining the implications of postmodernity for the moral sensibilities of adult educators was piqued, initially, by my encounter with Bauman's deeply considered exploration of postmodern morality. As an adult education theorist interested in social and cultural theory, I really value the insights of great thinkers like Bauman. His ruminations offer me new ways to understand and interpret the social and cultural processes of adult education. So, part of what I wish to do in this paper is to share what I have been inspired to think by this important theorist.

As much as I value "bookish" theory, I have been plagued lately with the nagging feeling that

many of my theoretical ideas are rather free floating – a bit disconnected from the "real" world in which I live and work. Certainly, I do not mean by this that I think my theoretical ideas require empirical validation or grounding. I am very aware of the well-considered arguments that question the whole premise of grounding theory in objective, scientific experimentation and observation (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Rather, my concern is that I have not given enough time or energy to exploring the different transformative possibilities opened by theoretical discourse. So, rather than "just theorizing" about postmodern morality, I have engaged in a research enterprise in which I have enjoined two groups of adult educators, one in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and the other in Kingston, Jamaica, to understand the ways our postmodern sensibilities are evolving in postmodernity. I wish, in what follows, to share some of what I have learned from these conversations.

## **From Purveyors of Goods to Sensation Gatherers: Morality in Consumer Society**

For a decade, Zygmunt Bauman has stood out as a preeminent theorist of postmodernity. At the center of his formulations has been his deep concern for the ways contemporary social and cultural transformations are influencing our evolving moral sensibilities. Most important of these changes, in Bauman's mind, is the shift from producer society to consumer society. While it is true that people produce and consume in all societies, it is appropriate, Bauman argues, to identify industrial modern society as "producer society" because of the way it shaped its members to play a role in production. As Bauman (1998a) relates, "the reason for calling that older type of modern society a 'producer society' was that it engaged its members *primarily* as producers" (p. 24). In postmodernity (Bauman uses this

term interchangeably with “late-modernity”), there is a very different emphasis on what role people are groomed to play. Postmodern society primarily shapes its members to play their role as consumers, not producers. While the difference is a shift in emphasis (both roles continue to exist), this shift has great importance. As Bauman argues, “the differences are so deep and ubiquitous that they fully justify speaking of our society as a society of a separate and distinct kind – a consumer society” (p. 24).

For Bauman, one of the most important and distinctive differences between producer society and consumer society are the ways in which people are equipped to meet the challenges of their social identity. Modern productive forces utilized a strategy of centralization and regimentation to assert control over nature and humanity (Bauman, 1995). Laborers had to be shaped to fit into the regimented life contexts of the workplace. Drawing on Foucault, Bauman identifies the space and time of the modern Panopticon as the primary means producer society shaped its members to assume their regimented roles. The Panopticon, a centralized system of social surveillance that ensured the homogeneity and regularization of thought and action, was the common feature of a host of modern inventions as diverse as clocks, schools, factories and prisons. As I have argued in another context, many of adult education’s tried and true institutions and technologies (instructional objectives, competency-based education systems) clearly exhibit the mark of the Panopticon (Plumb, 1999).

The modern emphasis on production, ultimately, Bauman concludes, shapes the ways its members see and relate to each other. The pre-given tasks of production, the environment of regimentation, the emphasis on prediction and control all impact the moral sensibilities of people. To achieve efficient ends, people need to be able to rely on smooth-running and unproblematic systems of action coordination. Panoptical institutions therefore legislate tightly constraining and unquestioned procedures that enable people to “handle” each other as they would objects. Other people are viewed as a “chance for action,” as a way to get things done. Producer’s engagement with the Other is calculating and instrumental. In sum, Bauman (1995) offers the following:

The Other of the producer . . . is defined beforehand by the end to be reached and the means to reach it. Assigning to such an Other any other significance would detract from the resilience with which the end is pursued and the precision with which the end and the means are matched. (p. 124)

Nowadays, panoptical institutions are much in disrepute. While many postmodern theorists assume that the reason for this is the growing power of people to see through and critically devalue homogenizing institutions and narratives, Bauman contends it is much more likely that, largely due to cybernetic technology, the panopticon simply is no longer required for production. For one thing, Contemporary global capitalism now draws on a vast and intricate information system to coordinate the diverse mechanisms (including people’s labor) of production. As I have argued in another context, “technologies of speed permit [global enterprises] instantly to control the actions of laborers . . . without regard for distance” (Plumb, 1999, p. 141). This transformation of the capacities of capitalism rests at the root of the shift in emphasis to consumption. People are no longer as valued for their contribution to production. Now, their real social value lies in their capacities to consume.

Ideal consumers are very different identities than ideal producers. Whereas, the main strategy for grooming producers was to legislate a regularized, predictable and well-ordered panoptical space and time, the strategy for producing the ideal consumer is to maximize the volatility of desire. Rather than a governed and suppressed identity, consumer society needs people ungoverned and unrepressed. The principle social role of people is not to handle the world but to *taste* it. The effort ceases to be to get people to conform to pre-given norms. Rather, the individual is “freed” to create a unique and ever changing “consumer self.” Bauman suggests that this shift in identify from the purveyor of goods to sensation gatherer profoundly impacts our deepest moral sensibilities.

This is most easily seen if we consider the shift in attitude towards the other that manifests in consumer society. In producer society, the other is viewed as a means to a productive end. In consumer society, the other appears as a potential source of pleasure. While the purveyor of goods must sustain his or her engagement with the other to accomplish

a task, the sensation gatherer only engages while the pleasure lasts. Bauman summarizes the moral outlook of the sensation gatherer as follows:

The Other of the consumer is the pool of sensations; its relevance – and thus its treatment – is defined and redefined in the course of the encounter by the quality of experience received or hoped to be received. Assigning to such an Other any other significance would diminish the concentration, weaken the stimulation and eventually dilute the experience itself. (1995, p.124)

It is important, Bauman cautions, not to leap to quickly to dismiss the moral potential of consumer society. In comparison to the purveyor of goods, the sensation gatherer possesses qualities that might form a reasonable basis for responsible morality. For instance, while the impulse in producer society is to change the wayward Other to fit given characteristics (this, I believe, has been the impulse of adult education throughout most of its history), the sensation gatherer might proceed very differently. Rather than trying to make the Other fit with the given, the sensation gatherer would more likely prize, value and perhaps even encourage what is unique in the Other. Difference, heterogeneity and variation all join to engender the rich environment in which the sensation gatherer can consume. Many people previously oppressed by the strictures of producer society recognize, enjoy and celebrate their sudden value in consumer society. For many others, though, consumerism ends up a vapid, lonely and self-indulgent existence. Even worse, for the new poor, those dispossessed of the resources needed to gather the commodified pleasures of postmodern society, life ends up a prison of denial and deprivation. While rich sensation gatherers travel the world in search of new and exotic experiences, the new poor “travel surreptitiously, often illegally, sometimes paying more for the crowded stowage of a stinking unseaworthy boat than others pay for business-class gilded luxuries – and are frowned upon, and, if unlucky, arrested and promptly deported, when they arrive” (Bauman, 1998b, p. 88)

It is in this new consumer world shaping these new moral sensibilities that adult educators must now ply their trade. Only recently have we begun to appreciate the ways producer society has limited

our vision of the role and purpose of our field. Only now are we beginning to sense the profound ways our moral sensibilities are transformed by the emergence and consolidation of consumer society.

### **Exploring the Moral Sensibilities of Adult Educators**

A person's orientation to research is informed by the ontological assumptions she or he makes about the form and nature of reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As you may have surmised already, my view of the form and nature of reality is not the view of “legitimate scientific inquiry,” that reality exists as an objective and apprehendable collection of elements, things, structures and systems. Rather, my more “dialectical” view is that reality is comprised of dynamic and interconnected processes and flows of which I, as researcher, am an ineluctable part (Harvey, 1996). In the specific case of my research, I do not think the moral sensibilities of adult educators are an “object” of study that I can objectively observe, describe or explain. Rather, I view these moral sensibilities as emergent and historically configured flows of human potential that are in the process of becoming. My hope has been that, in consort with other adult educators, I might achieve a clearer shared understanding of these processes and find ways to foster their potential. In this, I find myself much closer in spirit to what Murray Bookchin (1990) describes as the primary purpose of knowledge creation – *education* (the exploration of possibilities) rather than deduction (the production of specific truths from general truths) or induction (the discovery of general truths from specific observations) (Harvey, 1996; Gitlin and Russell, 1994).

To gain some sense of the ways that postmodernity is transforming the moral sensibilities of adult educators, I have been conversing with two small groups (5 people) of adult educators (Masters students in the Mount Saint Vincent University adult education program), one in Halifax, Nova Scotia and the other in Kingston, Jamaica. I have met face to face with each group for a one-day workshop and have conversed extensively with them using an Internet-based discussion forum. My approach in my research has been very open and exploratory. My interest has been to work with the members of my two study groups to make sense of their experiences as adult educators in postmodernity, to question the ways in which they feel their

moral sensibilities are being influenced in contemporary times and to explore with them the current potentials of adult education. To understand how new postmodern moral sensibilities flow into and through the aggregate of communities that constitute adult education, I have begun exploring the complex traces of its passage that are deposited in people's memories and in cultural and textual artifacts (memos, institutions, manuals, etc.). Fortunately, qualitative research offers us a rich and proven toolbox for gathering, sorting and coding rich and complex data such as this (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). It also provides means for seeking patterns and meanings that can be mapped and then offered back to the adult educators as a basis for collective inquiry (Gitlin and Russell, 1994). I am deeply aware that the ultimate usefulness of my research – for my students, for you the reader of this paper, and for other adult educators—will depend to a large degree on the “richness” of my collected data.

Luckily, I had the opportunity in this study to engage with two geographically distinct groups of adult educators. While I appreciate the increased richness of insight that two distinct groups provide, I do not assume that a comparative and intercultural approach has left me, somehow, in a superior position to assert the generalizability of my findings. At this stage, when the impact of postmodernity on our moral sensibilities are so dimly understood, I feel that my rather modest investigation is a small first step towards assembling a more general and far-reaching understanding of adult education in postmodern times (Bracht & Glass, 1968). While my study might not place me in a position to assert broad truths, it does enable me to point the way to exciting potentialities.

### **Being Moral Adult Educators in Postmodern Times**

Of all the experiences discussed in my two groups, the one that has been most prevalent has been the great confusion that all seem to feel in face of the vast social and cultural transformations now transfiguring our society. Both Nova Scotians and Jamaicans feel that the past five years have wreaked great changes in their worlds, both personally and as adult educators. As one participant in the Jamaican group so bluntly put it: “Everything is up for grabs, now. What we believed was solid fact just a few years ago, doesn't seem to matter anymore.”

Both groups attributed much of this change to the information revolution. On the Canadian side, the rapid growth of new technologies are exposing them and their children to increasingly diverse value and cultural systems. On the Jamaican side, the proliferation of cultural products from outside of Jamaica via television, movies, music and Internet seems to be creating great dissatisfaction with the way things are. On both fronts, participants observed how old patterns and values are increasingly deemed insufficient, boring or outmoded.

While both Jamaicans and Canadians clearly articulated similar experiences living in changing times, there was a deep difference in the extent to which they viewed these changes as positive. The Canadian group was unanimous in its view that many contemporary social changes were positive in that they made it easier for different kinds of people to be accepted in our society. The view of two people was that adult educators should devote themselves to fostering further social change so that it would be even easier for people who have been traditionally marginalized in society to find acceptance. The other three people were a bit more suspect of carrying the trend too far. They believed that adult education still has an important role in maintaining an ordered world.

The Jamaican students, on the other hand, were very suspect of any complicity that adult education might have with furthering rapid social change. This group talked much about recent government initiatives to engender a more skilled workforce by raising national levels of literacy. For the most part, the Jamaicans viewed their work as adult educators to be to help people develop relevant job skills and to assist them with living with the negative side-effects of urbanization and poverty. In one very interesting conversation, however, the students talked about the different “hobby courses” that several of them teach to augment their income. One student mentioned that she teaches Swedish massage techniques in the evenings and that recently she has been torn because some of her students are asking if she can teach them sensual massage. At the same time as she resists taking this step (she does not think it is proper), she is reluctant to give up on a potentially lucrative educational market. From this conversation, it seemed that, outside of their formal work as adult educators, that this Jamaican group was much more open to the different potentials of adult education. All of them saw adult education as

an experience to be enjoyed for its own sake.

Participants in both groups made much of the concept of self-directed learning. The Canadian students strongly believed that adult educators should value the uniqueness and the autonomy of their learners. The role of adult educators should be to provide experiences that meet the expressed needs of adult learners. The Nova Scotians were very comfortable viewing the adult learners as consumers of an educational product. They felt strongly that adult educators should value the unique potentials of each student and provide individualized adult education experiences to maximize personal growth. The Jamaican group also believed that it is important to meet the needs of their students. In their case, though, the Jamaicans felt more strongly that students should be guided towards socially acceptable forms of behavior. As one student put it, "individual freedom is important but only if it doesn't undermine the freedom of others."

In sum, while students in both groups have a sense of vast social changes currently transfiguring our world, they were undecided about the fate of adult education. Some of them, especially the Jamaicans, still believed deeply in adult education's potential to foster a well-trained workforce. Most of them believed that adult education has more to offer than just work training. A few of them, this time mostly Nova Scotians, saw adult education as a way to provide people with exciting, enlightening and fun experiences. It was this small group who most easily took to the notion of adult education as a culture and social practice consistent with the emerging values of consumer society.

### Conclusion

Bauman's theories and these adult educator's experiences conspire to suggest that we indeed are undergoing a transition in our field. The emergence and consolidation of consumer society is working its way through our moral sensibilities as adult educators. The realm of inquiry I have begun to traverse has tremendous implications. Changes in technology rapidly overtake us and create in us new ways of being alone and being together. The "togetherness" of postmodernity offers very different opportunities for collaboration, dissension, acceptance and dispute. The ways we learn, the things we learn and our motives for learning all are transformed. These changes create a very different landscape of morality within which adult educators

must act. My hope is that adult education can retain its emancipatory potential in postmodern times.

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