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Informal Learning in Community: The Role of Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity

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Abstract: *This paper, representing a subset of data from a larger study, provides a preliminary social analysis of a specific site of informal learning with welfare mothers in a job readiness program and the role of subjectivity and intersubjectivity in meaning making. As the women came together to talk about their experiences with each other, they were listened to, taken into account, and validated in their past experiences, current circumstances, and feelings; they also had an opportunity to learn from each other thus illuminating informal learning. The informal learning of women on welfare can assist us in understanding how subjugated knowledges are constructed and how we might facilitate learning.*

Introduction

The importance of informal learning among adults cannot be overstated. How we learn about our world, our place in it, our roles and how to effectively function occurs primarily in the informal sector. It is often through informal learning situations that identity is formed and reformed, cultures are transmitted, relations are negotiated, and social action is initiated. While there is interest in informal learning in organizations (Marsick & Watkins, 1990) and in community development and community learning projects (for example, Cadenas' work in Mexico; and Binghman, 1996) there is little research on the nature and dynamics of informal learning in specific social contexts of adult learning. This report provides a preliminary social analysis of a specific site of informal learning with welfare mothers in a job readiness program and the role of subjectivity and intersubjectivity in meaning making.

Conceptual Frame

According to Foley (1993) much of adult learning is not acquired through formal education but is gained through experiences, through participation in an aspect of social life such as family, community or work. He defines informal learning in Neighborhood Houses in Australia as "generally tacit or implicit, embedded as it is in routine activities of women in the house...takes place in conflict shaped by individual, interpersonal, institutional, and broader social and cultural factors...[and] is not automatic or inevitable" (p. 25). To this he adds that the development of critical consciousness occurs as significant learning.

Livingstone's (in press) work indicates "anyone can engage in informal learning on his or her own volition and schedule, and apparently people in the most socially disadvantaged statuses are just as likely to do so as those in the most socially dominant positions" (p. 22). Unlike Foley, Livingstone sees informal learning as explicit as distinguished from everyday perceptions, general socialization and other tacit learning. He identifies four criteria for explicit informal learning: conscious identification of the activity as significant learning; retrospective recognition of a new form of knowledge, understanding, or skill; acquired on one's own initiative; and, a recognition of the process of acquisition.

Whereas the majority of people with a diploma or higher education seek out further, or continuing, education on an annual basis (p. 14) Livingstone notes that less than a quarter of those without a high school diploma enroll in further, or continuing, education raising the question as to the role of informal learning for those "excluded from advanced forms of organized education?" Further, Livingstone indicates that in informal learning there is a reliance on elders, or those more experienced, as the major source of knowledge, particularly in job-related learning. The older people are the more they tend to rely on their own past learning experiences to guide them in learning; older workers are teaching younger ones informally.

Foley (1993) contends that by analyzing the dynamics of informal learning insights can be produced into the ways in which people develop critical consciousness for action. Bingham (1996) suggests that critical learning occurs through community work for

survival as in Appalachian grassroots organizations, while Hart (1990) suggests that certain enabling conditions are necessary for critical learning to occur. These conditions include developing a "structure of equality" and group membership where similar social positions, assumptions, and experiences are shared. All contend that critical learning begins with personal experiences, uses small group discussion, and assumes political commitment.

Patel (1996) describes how a sense of a shared space facilitated women's venturing into the public realm of the state bureaucracy whereas the Highlander Center has documented numerous civic learning projects that grew out of participatory popular education. Social injustice creates tensions that mount over time creating actions of resistance and reaffirmation grounded in knowing (Freire, 1985). These "moments of culture" are violations of knowing which bring about mobilization, thus "breaking the silence" and "giving voice."

Harstock's (1998) feminist standpoint theory is helpful in understanding how materialism creates a feminist material reality out of which knowledge is produced. Women's lives are structured by social relations of the dominant patriarchal system; are struggled over and produce contradictory and conflicting experiences. This vision of feminist reality, grounded in real experiences, is won through struggle of seeing beneath the surface of social relations and the informal learning that comes from the struggle to change those relations. A standpoint depends on the assumption that epistemology grows in a complex way from material life. Maher and Tetreault (1996) contend that the multiple feminist standpoints point to a new set of problems which contradicts a unitary worldview of any group. Postmodernism emphasizes the constructedness through language, discourse, and histories of all identities. Thus positionality "acknowledges the knower's varying positions in any specific context...of gender, race, class" (p. 160). Positionality signals that context is a key to understanding all knowers and knowledge; that it is relational and evolving.

Research Design

A participatory research model (Reason, 1994) using collective dialogue was designed to facilitate documenting the experienced realities of women on welfare. Small group discussions were conducted at a job readiness program in Nebraska sponsored by a local community-based action program (9 sessions, 18 hours. November 1997 to March 1998). The welfare mothers who participated are a group of thirteen (13) African American, Latina, Anglo, and biracial women ranging in ages from 19 to the mid-40's; each woman has from one to four children. At least one facilitator of the job readiness program was also present. All sessions were audio-taped and transcribed, observational field notes were kept. Data were analyzed through a coding system which identified recurrent themes found in the women's stories. The larger study included several stages: talking with women to identify issues connected with welfare reform; creating an interview protocol; and interviewing recipients. Our intent in this report is to relate findings from stage one of the study and to examine how women's subjectivity and intersubjectivity facilitate how they make sense of their everyday circumstances.

Constructing Knowledge

Under Welfare Reform recipients are required to be involved in work or work-related activities as they make their way toward self-sufficiency. Job readiness workshops are offered for those who need to develop employability skills as determined by the caseworkers. Often the participants have years of employment history but are required to attend job readiness, nonetheless, in addition to educational or vocational training. I initiated discussion sessions at a job readiness site as a way to learn about what was happening with women's education and to understand the concerns and struggles that women were experiencing under the new law. We met with the women every other week to discuss their experiences. The women were enthusiastic about the sessions because they had few opportunities to talk with a group of women about what was happening and they appreciated knowing someone was interested in listening to their stories. Not all thirteen women were present at each talk session even though the job readiness workshops were mandated under their self-sufficiency contracts; there was a fairly consistent core of about 4-5 women with others cycling in and out after several sessions.

They knew we had questions about educational issues but other than that we were interested in the women talking about whatever was of concern to them. During the first two sessions we suggested topics for discussion but over time the women de-

termined the issues they wanted to discuss. As these talk sessions proceeded we began to see processes of informal learning taking place.

Knowing and Being
At every step of participatory inquiry, researchers draw on their own locations to inform the process and findings. Like the researchers, each welfare mother brought her own history of experiences, beliefs, and feelings which she represented to other women in the group. Each brought her own contextualized, contradictory grounded truths. Some were mothers of infants while others had teenaged children. Some had substance abuse problems, at least one had a disabling health condition, one was a victim of incest. Some women had experienced homelessness, others were in residential drug rehabilitation programs, and still others had histories with incarceration or had been accomplices to drug crimes. Their histories with welfare varied as well.

Poor women's epistemology, how one knows what she knows, presents a partial and particular perspective with consequences to her being and moving through the world. As they talked with one another, sharing their stories, intersections of experience within the welfare system emerged. All of the women related stories of humiliation, moments of powerlessness, struggles to provide for their children, and problems in coping with the reform measures.

During these talk sessions welfare mothers were analyzing power and their place within social power structures. As Keysha put it "popular opinion is, I just know, like in the media and all that good stuff, they are always slamming us, and it's like, all we're trying to do is just get by, go to school, take care of our kids, and maybe feed them, if they'll let us. We're just not popular." Later she related an incident with her caseworker as he attempted to find the child's father and get him to make child support payments. "They took me...by the side of this room, sat me down in the squeaky chair and people just kept walking in and out and then there is a waiting room...anybody could just hear all my business. 'So who did you have sex with?'...I'm answering all these questions about my daughter, and who I was having sex with before and after...and having me in a non-private room...and all these men and women just walking by and looking at me like I'm trash." The women's experiences had given them a knowl-edge of the welfare system and an acknowledgement of one's position as defined by the dominant culture.

Maher and Tetreault (1996) contend that rather than formed from any fixed essence all women develop relationships which can be "xplored, analyzed, and changed as long as they see themselves as not simply individuals but differently placed members of an unequal social order"(p. 163). What others say about us is shaped by social constructs of what it means to be a woman in today's world. Who we believe we are emerges from our own understandings of self, positioned against the contexts within which we live. These myriad definitions, labels, and imposed identities (by self and others) are often confused and contradictory.

Issues of Intersubjectivity
How did the women respond to one another? How did their interaction influence the formation of identity and their place in the world? Several themes emerged as women theorized their experiences including the concept of wearing masks to seem other than who you are, creating space for one another to speak, the need for emergent discussion topics from women's interests and concerns, and crossing of borders from one social location to another with its inherent internal conflict.

Jennifer, for example, came to the group on a regular basis but hardly spoke during the first sessions she attended. New to welfare, Jennifer wasn't sure about the benefits she would receive or whether or not she had even signed a contract. As the women quizzed her they offered her advice about the contract and how to access the services she needed for her and her family. By being accepted as part of the group and by receiving space to share her stories, she began talking more about her situation, bringing herself to the point of asserting what she needed to do for herself. First attending sessions in February, by early April, she had decided to file for bankruptcy because of excessive debts from her two ex-husbands and to approach the bank that held her student loans to see if payments could be adjusted or suspended for the time being.

Jennifer had arrived at a new understanding of her positionality. The women's affirmation changed what Jennifer knew about herself, about welfare, and about being able to change the realities of her

material world.

Tonya, an African American mother of three small children, was able to negotiate with her caseworker approval for a four year degree by committing to 17 credits each semester for the two years including summers and by getting a part time 20 hours a week job since education did not count toward work. When we first met her she was successful in her commitments, if not overly exhausted and stressed, keeping her life together and caring for her children. She was determined to complete a degree in accounting because she knew she needed a professional job in order to make enough money for her family. Her determination brought her to the attention of the Governor. Tonya was a model of success. In a public display of media hype she had been invited to the Governor's mansion to accept an award for her determination and progress. "Do you know how this makes me feel? Others will be compared to me, the women who are trying to make it on nothing and being humiliated in the process. I don't like being the poster child for welfare reform." The powers that be were reading her determination as compliance with its reformed system of self sufficiency.

While these two women illustrate their ability at "abstracting from immediate experience" in order to "unravel the complexities of the human world," (Hart, 1990, p.66) the talk sessions may be more typical of women's consciousness raising groups of the 1970s in that the ability to sustain a theoretical distance was not always present. However, rather than becoming group therapy sessions, they often became times of exchanging information about how to manage caseworkers, how to negotiate for rights, how to prepare for home visits from Child Protective Services, or even reflecting on what it means to be a poor woman in contemporary society.

Maher and Tetreault (1996) address this phenomenon, "in which not individuals, but a group, struggles with the transition from subjective knowing, through to a kind of constructed knowing (p. 166). We also saw a shift in understanding from an individual, subjective perspective to a new collective understanding "to examine, challenge, and reconstruct" knowledges. While their overall material lives had not changed, the meaning they made of their experiences changed through interaction. As women try to make sense of their experiences, recollections, and feelings the dialectic of the individual and society play back and forth. The individual is influenced by and influences the social structures and ideology of everyday life.

From this knowledge negotiation takes place within each individual and between individuals. The reflective dialogue and collaborative storytelling, where one story triggers memory or reflection of another, present opportunities for women on welfare to make sense of the oppression, subordination, shaming, triumphs, and relentless drudgery of poverty.

Discussion and Conclusions

The interactive group narrative approach which we used provided an opportunity for the women to share what was on their minds as the new reform measure got under way in one Midwestern state as well as support each other and provide alternative ways of thinking about and dealing with the everyday realities of living on public assistance. All of the women were involved in learning from each other while at the same time teaching each other; this includes the researchers as well. Learning as a social process where meaning is negotiated and knowledge is integrated into what is already known often occurs in informal learning settings.

Action taken was most often at the individual level in dealing with caseworkers and struggling for one's rights yet there was potential for collective action. During a session in April Jennifer recounted how she had been denied the chance to get some education because of her age (she was 38 years old) and instead was slotted into a short term computer course. "I didn't get it in writing or on a paper or anything, but she did say, well you're too old. Like she said...I have one shot and I'm out. If I miss one day, I'm out." The other women who were there that day seemed especially agitated listening to Jennifer and discussed the appeals process in detail, advising her about what she might do to have the decision reconsidered. They also talked of the mediation center that "will step in and provide a third party when you talk to your case manager." They appeared short on patience in how they, individually and collectively, were being treated. Sue summed up the conversation. "It truly is time that people start to get a class action suit because certain classes of people have inalienable rights more than welfare women. It's like if you are disabled, mentally retarded or elderly, you have these inalien-

able rights and you will get these things...but welfare women and their children have no rights. Basically, what they're saying is they don't value us. If you happen to be a woman and you're fighting for some measly little check that's probably like $4000 or $5000 [annually] but yet you put that back into the economy, so it's not like you're sitting on these nesteggs of chunks of money. You're buying things, you're stimulating the economy, your children are well, are taken care of...What do you think, should we start a lawsuit?" Shortly, thereafter, we were asked to leave the job readiness sessions. Nevertheless, we took the women's interests to a public legal assistance center who took up the struggle to help women get educational access by representing individual cases and getting it on the public agenda. Some would see this involvement with lawyers taking on individual cases as weakening women's power because once again they are represented by others; we see this as one way to use the system to alter social injustice.

It would appear that informal learning has both implicit and explicit aspects as evidenced by the preliminary analysis of the talk sessions with welfare mothers. Following Foley it can be said that learning occurs in routine activities and that elements of critical consciousness can be developed. Conflict takes on variegated hues within this site of informal learning where conflict did exist between at least one of the job readiness facilitators and some of the women and was also evident in us as researchers eventually losing access to the group as the women became more politicized. We have not examined those dimensions here. Finally, Foley states that learning in informal settings is not automatic or inevitable. We agree, yet, since it was not our intent to initially study informal learning questions about learning were not specifically asked of the women. However, Livinstone's criteria of the retrospective recognition of new knowledge, skills, or understandings can be inferred by the intentional problem solving that occurred and the negotiated identity reformations. Certainly, the women initiated their own learning but whether they recognized the process of acquisition or consciously identified the activity as significant learning is in question. These are questions for future investigation.

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