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Experiential Subsistence Learning: Researching the Transformative Moments in Motherwork

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Abstract: *In this paper I explore the learning and knowledge creation that takes place within the lived experience of motherwork through artful inquiry that includes storytelling, narrative and poesis.*

Introduction

Women continue to do a disproportionate amount of mothering throughout the world. Yet women's lived experience often contradicts the mainstream notion of what mothering "is" and "should be" (Rich, 1986). This contradiction contributes to the subordination of women and is increasingly recognized in discourse regarding motherwork among the social sciences. However, motherwork as a site of learning remains largely overlooked by theories of adult learning (Hart, 1992).

Adult educators link learning to change and transformation for individuals as well as for society. Personal transformation often begins with a disorienting dilemma which subsequently evolves (Mezirow, 1991). In order to effect change in society, adult educators recognize that goals of transformation are embodied in the day to day lives of people who challenge the existing oppressive structures of society (Youngman, 1996). Therefore a pedagogy of change must link personal agency to public effectiveness (Tisdell, 1995).

Research Design

The focus of my research is on "significant turning point moments" in women's lives that involve motherwork. As this is the work of basic human care, it requires a life centered subsistence orientation (Hart, 1992). Through artful inquiry that includes self inquiry, storytelling and semi structured interviews, women are invited to explore the transformative moments during the intensive work of mothering. While both the process and the products of knowledge creation and learning are explored, women's experiences are examined in the context of their positions within society, taking into consideration interlocking issues of gender, race and class.

Representation includes poetry and poetic transcription (Glesne, 1999) and short story which are becoming a recognized part of qualitative research. My goals are to present women's lived experiences in artful ways that evoke authentic and emotional responses in readers. I wish to counter the dominant (masculinist) views of mothering within society and to shift the focus of mothering research to the standpoint of individual women (Denzin, 1997) who have all too often been overlooked and silenced.

Lived Experience through Artful Representation

This paper presents a research work in progress. At this point, I have noted that women's storytelling often centres around moral or ethical dilemmas that involve some level of challenge to oppressive social structures or to previously held notions of what mothering would be like. Here, as an example of my work, is a short excerpt of a much longer story. It is written in the form of poetic transcription (Glesne, 1999). This piece reflects a turning point moment in a woman's life, where she challenges her previously held assumptions about motherwork

This piece below represents one small story within my research project. I argue that the learning that takes place in the transformative moments such as the one presented here has significance among theories of adult learning and can influence the future of adult education by adding a life affirming focus which is grounded in the lived experience of motherwork.

Excerpt from Poetic Transcription: Mum's Homework

...my fear was
sexual abuse
of little girls...

I felt I was bad
confronting authority figures.

I had been thinking
teachers and schools
were there to benefit
children.

I felt bad
Like
God will get me.

There was this
moment
of conflict:

A good mother
protects her children
from harm...

A good woman
does not challenge
social structures...

Does she?

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