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Learning in Context: Women in Transition from Situations of Domestic Violence

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Abstract: This empirical study explores learning among women in a transitional housing program for women and children who have experienced domestic violence. It situates this learning in the context of the women's lives, the program structure, and larger socioeconomic factors.

Purpose of Study

This study contributes to the small but growing body of literature in adult education that positions learning in its situational and socioeconomic contexts. This literature complements research exploring individual factors that influence learning and deepens our understanding of the complex ways in which learning is also influenced by contextual factors. Studies in this vein have shown that contextual factors such as economic systems, political systems, social systems, and group dynamics can have a powerful effect on learning (Cain, 1998; Fleming, 1998; Foley, 1999; Walters, 1989). One study of homeless women found that their learning was strongly influenced by relationships in their lives (Pearce, 1999). No studies have been conducted on what women learn through the process of experiencing domestic violence. This study helps fill that gap and contributes to building a body of literature that describes learning in specific contexts.

Theoretical Framework and Research Design

A feminist poststructuralist framework shapes this study. We explore how women's positionality within economic, political, and social structures influences their learning at the same time we explore how the women exercise agency within these structures.

The research site is a transitional housing program for women and children who have experienced domestic violence. The program is in an urban area in the western United States. The program staff is wrestling with the contradiction between their emphasis on empowerment and their structure of rules that limit women's decision-making and responsibility-taking.

The study sought to answer four questions: 1) What do the women in the program learn? 2) What are the stated objectives of the program and the curriculum of the classes? 3) How is the women's learning influenced by the structure of the program? 4) How is the women's learning influenced by larger socioeconomic and sociocultural factors?

These research questions were best answered by a qualitative methodology that enabled us to understand the women's learning from their perspective as well as observing the interplay of their learning and agency with the program structure and larger socioeconomic forces. We observed several sessions of group (class) meetings; interviewed and did member checks with

three women in the program, four women who have left the program, and the director and one social worker who conduct group sessions; and analyzed the content of relevant documents such as the course materials, program rules, and program mission and policy statements.

Data analysis followed Carspecken's (1996) approach that seeks to understand the meaning the women make of their own learning and experience in the program through initial data collection, analysis, and dialogical analysis with the women. When we had an understanding of the participants' own meaning, we then sought to link this meaning-making process to larger social forces and macro social theories. In this way, women's learning can be situated in their own meaning-making and their positionality in social dynamics and structures.

Findings and Conclusions

The Program

The program's goal is to help women become self-sufficient through providing a safe, low-cost apartment and resources to help them overcome the trauma of domestic violence, to develop skills for self-reliance, and to access community resources.

Women develop a plan for their transition by meeting with a case manager. Women must find employment, get job training, attend school, do volunteer work, or participate in the program's work incentives program. This case manager may refer a resident for therapy outside of the program. The case manager provides access to other resources in the community to assist the women in their transition to self-sufficiency. This includes low-cost housing applications, workforce services through government agencies, and free or low-cost community programs.

The women must attend three in-house classes: parenting, healthy relationships, and community issues, which focuses on skills for daily living (e.g., budgeting, home maintenance, rape prevention, etc.). Each group meets 10 times for 1 ½ hours and is led by a social worker from the staff. Women are also required to attend a parenting class led by a counseling center.

Program rules were developed by the original program staff and modified over the three-year life of the program with little input from residents. The purpose of the rules is to ensure safety and to facilitate 100 to 175 people living together. The rules have three levels of consequences, ranging from eviction to development of a contract with program staff. Actions resulting in expulsion include the possession of illegal drugs, possession of weapons, assault on other residents, and inviting an abuser on to the premises. Lesser offenses relate to inadequate maintenance of the property, breaking confidentiality, disturbing others, failure to care safely for children, and failure to participate in program requirements. One controversial rule that was adopted the second year of the program prohibits any male visitors within the secure building.

At the time of this study, the participants were 68 percent Caucasian, 16 percent Latina/Hispanic, 10 percent Native American, and 6 percent African American. Length of stay varies widely, but of those who leave the program before their two-year option is up, slightly more than half are asked to leave because they have violated the program rules.

What the Women Learn

Women in the program learned information, skills, new attitudes and new understandings of power through groups, case management, and conversations with other participants.

Through case management and sharing with other women, participants learned information about low-cost housing options, job training programs, and low-cost and free services at museums, schools, and other community and governmental organizations. In group sessions women learned information about parenting, the cycle of domestic violence, financial management such as budgeting and establishing or reestablishing credit, and household maintenance. In the community issues group participants also learned about services available to them such as GED and adult education programs, consulting on small business start-up, etc.

Women learned new skills especially through the groups and through case management. Improved parenting skills were reported by most of the women. Some examples of new or improved skills were the ability to listen to their children, to negotiate with them, and to help them through their anger at being taken away from their father. Women also reported they had learned to recognize their feelings, to make better choices in relationships, and to make decisions on their own after living with a controlling abuser.

Through the process of participating in the program and moving out on their own, women learned new attitudes about themselves. For example, one woman said, "It made you feel like you were, that no one was better than you. Maybe to get up and stand up for yourself." Another said, "You come into a place that's decent and clean and it's wonderful. That helps build your self-esteem up. So that your children aren't and you aren't feeling like garbage."

Women learned about power, especially because many felt they did not have enough of it within the program. Many agreed that they weren't in a position to handle much control when they arrived, but almost all suggested that the major change the program needed was to give women increasingly more control over class content and more flexibility in dealing with their individual circumstances. One woman summarized it, "I think if the women really, truly felt that they had a little bit more control, a little bit more input in their own lives and in structuring their own needs. Cause each, nobody knows really what they need more than they do." She also said,

You know, and I think they would get farther and see a lot more progress in the women, a lot more building of self esteem, which is desperately needed, um, if they would allow them to, and you know, yeah, it's gonna be slow, okay, it's not something that's going to happen tomorrow, you know, you're dealing with these people who are, ah, very timid, some of them to take that first step outside the box. And, ah, you know, it's not going to be a quick thing, but I believe if they give them the opportunity, you know, if they leave the cage door open, then eventually, they've sat on that perch long enough that they'll fly, you know? And, um, I just don't, I don't think they've really given the opportunity for those things and I think that's what they're missing.

Women have opportunities to help select content for one of the four groups, but the others follow a fairly structured format. In theory, women can choose whether they will work, study, or

volunteer as their way to meet program requirements. However, in practice, the need to support themselves and their children necessitates working. Some are unable to work or study because of mental illness, but the program rules require them to do so. Staff are wrestling with how much they can "bend the rules" in these cases; so far they have not bent them.

The Context for Learning

The context for learning is framed by three factors: the experience of domestic violence, the program structure, and the resources the women draw upon outside the program.

Women who leave domestic violence have few options for safe, affordable housing. Often they have little money, few marketable job skills, and children to support. Many are traumatized and experience short-term or chronic mental health problems. Shelters limit stays to 30 days and women cannot stay with family because their abuser could find them. The risk of injury or death from the abuser goes up significantly when women leave their abuser. While the transitional housing program is a highly-sought-after option because of its many benefits, it is also a last resort for the women. This puts them in a position of dependency as they enter.

This dependent position of the women in the program is connected to the interactive power relations in the program structure. Women agree to abide by the rules of the program and meet program requirements. In this sense their participation is consensual. At the same time, most do not have another viable housing option, so the program's threat of eviction becomes coercive rather than contractual. The staff also has the power to report concerns to the state family services agency and to recommend that agency remove the woman's children from her custody. Again, this gives the staff tremendous power.

Following Carspecken (1996), interactive power in social relations is best understood by examining the cultural milieu in which the power relations occur. In this case, the use of power must be considered in the context of the program's cultural model of self-sufficiency. Women who accept this cultural model and are able to fulfill program requirements face little threat of eviction and engage in significant learning. They take responsibility for their position as implied by the contract they have agreed to and see themselves increasing control over their own lives, especially when they leave the program and move in to their own (subsidized) housing.

However, there are women who do not accept this cultural model and women who are unable to fulfill program requirements, often because of mental illness. They live with the constant threat of eviction that hampers their learning. This self-sufficiency model hides structural and social factors that contribute to the women's situation and "failure". Because of the existence of a contractual agreement, the program is able to place responsibility on the women for their bad situation. The women have not complied with the requirements, therefore, eviction is their fault. The program director states this, "I don't know if the numbers have gone down, um, but a lot of evictions seem to be more lack of program participation. So, to me that's like, I don't know, that says that we're at least upholding them to something that they're not doing, that they're choosing not to do and so we're saying, 'You need to go.'" This self-sufficiency mission hides economic, political, and social factors that contribute significantly to the difficult situation of these women (Bowker, 1993; Tan and Basta, 1995).

Women in the program also have power. Some use their power to learn skills and information that will lead to housing, jobs, etc. Others use their power to resist the cultural model of the program by creating a culture of chaos in their lives (this makes them unable to attend group sessions regularly and to complete other program requirements). Another form of resistance is leaving or getting one's family evicted. This allows the women to maintain their cultural identity but does take away the program benefits (similar to Willis' findings about the lads (1977) and Ogbu's findings about a culture of resistance among African Americans (1979)).

Women's learning in the program is influenced by a third contextual factor, that of outside support. Some of the women have family members who are supportive emotionally and financially and can draw upon outside resources. This facilitates their learning by reducing stress and providing them with more time and resources. For example, women with access to cars reported a much easier time making job interviews, getting to work, shopping for bargains, etc. For the women without a car and without funds for childcare, simply getting to a job interview (and complying with program requirements) became problematic. Although women recognized the safety aspects of the no-male-visitors rule, they also saw it as a hindrance to getting support from male family members (e.g., computer repair) and religious leaders (e.g., blessings when ill).

The Interaction of Learning and Context

The three factors of context affected the women's learning, as did the women's own abilities and belief structures. The situation of domestic violence served as a motivator to learn what the women need to get out of a situation of dependence on their abuser. For example, one woman said,

I don't know, some people might think it's strange, don't get me wrong, I wouldn't want to go through what [child's name] and I have been through again, however, going through it has been a very unique opportunity, ah, to meet a lot of different people, ah, in a lot of different situations. Um, it's been a very educational opportunity, um, on an emotional, physical and you know, spiritual level. But, ah, you know, we can, you know you can take a situation and uh, a bad situation and learn something that, that it did for you or you can let it break you. You know, and, ah, I choose, obviously, not to be broken.

Some of the women's learning was motivated by the women's own desires to learn and some was motivated by the program requirements. For example, many of the women said they would attend at least some of the group sessions even if they weren't required, especially the ones they were interested in or if they had more say in the curriculum. Several reported that even when they went unwillingly, they usually gleaned something from the session. So the contractual/coercive nature of power in the program does clearly result in learning among the women as they attend groups and work with their case managers.

The more complex question is what the power relations themselves teach the women. Across the board the women said they understood the need for the rules for safety. They also all pointed to their fragile state upon entering the program. However, after women had been in the program for a while, they expressed frustration with the rules and the lack of freedom. Some complained about the pressure to comply with program rules and how it led some women to return to their

abusers. One said, "I can understand incentives, so to speak, okay. I can understand that, but I don't know if threatening someone with their housing being taken away quite gets what you really want to get across to those people, you know." For some women the lack of power blocked their progress toward self-sufficiency and empowerment.

Finally, women's learning is influenced by outside resources. Some point to family members who provide important support and others point primarily to governmental agencies such as training programs for opportunities to learn job skills. Some receive scholarship monies for training programs. Many receive therapy and they point to this as an important site for learning. Lack of family in the area hampered learning for some of the women by reducing social support important for dealing with domestic violence (Tan and Basta, 1995). Some also were unable to comply with requirements for government services and missed these opportunities.

Connection of learning and context to larger social forces

Learning among women in this program is connected to the dynamics of gender and class and to the dominant cultural model of individualism/self-sufficiency.

The process of gender in the U.S. contributes to the initial situation many women in the program find themselves in: few job skills, little work experience, and inexperience with political and economic affairs. This is particularly the case in the region where this program is located, as traditional gender roles have kept many women from pursuing post-secondary education and careers. The inequities of gender are also visible in the relatively high level of tolerance for violence against women and the lack of social supports for women trying to stop such violence.

Class and the priorities of the capitalist economy also contribute to keeping poor women in low-wage jobs with few opportunities for further education. Recent welfare reform legislation has exacerbated this situation by excluding college degrees from the educational "options" offered to women (Sparks, 1999). In this way gender and class combine to limit opportunities for learning and to limit access to resources.

The cultural model of individualism and self-sufficiency pervades the program and the larger society. And yet, for many of these women, the goal of true economic self-sufficiency is unattainable because of mental illness and/or class and gender bias. The structure of the transitional housing program and many governmental services is set up to blame the women for their failure to achieve self-sufficiency and ignores structural causes for their situation.

Implications for Adult Education Theory, Practice, and Research

This study contributes to adult education theory by showing how gender, class, and cultural models affect learning and how women have agency within these structures. Such a study helps build theory that integrates context and the individual in describing learning.

The study raises questions for practitioners. Can women truly become self-sufficient when they only have access to low-status knowledge and highly-restricted government entitlement programs? The program is too young to see how "successful" women fare over time, but clearly this question must be raised in assessing long-term success and learning.

Another concern raised by this study is that about half of the women in the program are asked to leave due to rule violations. These tend to be racial and ethnic minorities and women with fewer economic resources. For many of these women, their survival has depended on community or familial cooperation. A cultural model of interdependence might serve these women better by building on strengths they already bring to the program and by providing cultural continuity. Would a more flexible, more collaborative program structure with an emancipatory focus be helpful to more women and have longer-term benefits?

Finally, this study shows a need for further research in at least two areas. One important approach is a more detailed study of access to resources and differentials among women of different classes and races to see even more clearly how these influence learning. A second promising approach is to study an attempt to create a more emancipatory program structure.

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