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Formative, Restorative and Transformative Learning: Insights into the Critical Consciousness of Social Activists

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Abstract: Based on our research with diverse social activists in North and South America, we explore the central importance of critical consciousness and how it develops. We analyze the formation, restoration and transformation of critical consciousness in social activists and discuss implications for adult education.

Purpose of the Study

In this paper, we explore a common finding from our research studies, namely, the central importance of critical consciousness and how it develops among social activists. Studies include: an action research evaluative study of a Canadian schools global education project (Lange Christensen, 1995, 1996), an exploration of learning in the women's movement in Chile (Chovanec, 2004a, 2004b, 2006), a study of consciousness-raising in abused women who became anti-violence advocates (Chovanec, 1993, 1994), and an assessment of a classroom-based transformative learning process that moved participants towards leadership in ecological sustainability (Lange, 2001, 2004). In all cases, the purpose of the study was to explicitly investigate and expose the learning dimension of the social action/social movement as well as the learning experience of the social activists. We learned that, not only is the *transformation* of consciousness important, but also that the *formation* of a social consciousness in the early years establishes the base upon which a mature critical consciousness can flourish or be *restored* in adulthood. We conclude with implications for sites and processes of radical adult education.

Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework is informed by the radical tradition of adult education which draws inspiration from critical theorists and community-based practice. A critique of capitalism and a vision of social justice lie at the heart of such a framework. Our practice and our theorizing are also indebted to post-structural critiques that bring a more nuanced and complex understanding of the intersection among multiple oppressions and between oppression and privilege (hooks, 1990; Luke & Gore, 1992). This theoretical framework guided the analysis of consciousness as it emerged across our research studies. We theorize consciousness through Allman (2001), Freire (1990/1973) and Gramsci (1971) who start from the marxist premise that "consciousness is shaped by the social relations and that in turn shapes how individuals are positioned socially and how they relate with the material and physical world" (Lange, 2004, p. 124). Thus, consciousness is a collective, relational and material concept. This definition is distinct from those used in theories of cognitive and moral development or discussions about levels, states, and structures of consciousness. In particular, our approach is critical of theories that fail to acknowledge the collective and social dimension of consciousness.

Lange asserts that “the privileging of cognitive transformation; the psychologizing of social relations; the autonomous, cosmopolitan, expressive individual as an isolated actor” (p. 134) are problematic in transformative learning theory. In our work, ‘critical consciousness’ refers to the process by which humans, as knowing subjects, achieve a deepened awareness of the socio-cultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality (Freire, 1990/1973).

Research Design

All studies referenced in this paper used observation, interviews, and group dialogues to elicit participant narratives about learning experiences in social action. In all cases, analysis was a collaborative process with participants, searching for meaning about their collective experience. Chovanec’s research on the Chilean women’s movement is founded on nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in Arica, a small city in northern Chile. Methods included cultural immersion, document review, and interviews with 60 women (individuals, groups, and local governmental and non-governmental organizations). Alongside participant observation of an abused women’s support group in Edmonton, Chovanec individually and collectively interviewed four participants. Chovanec facilitated three “group dialogues” with abused women and two “analysis sessions” in Chile with the local research assistants and participants. For the Alberta global education project evaluation, Lange held two “dialogue groups,” with a total of 10 global education teachers as part of an action research process. Similarly, Lange used a “double spiral action research” process with 14 participants exploring sustainable work and living practices during a university extension course. Methods for both studies included ongoing group reflection/action, interviews, journal-writing and collective analysis. Lange is also conducting a longitudinal qualitative study of the original participants in the sustainability course.

Findings: Critical Consciousness of Social Activists

Early Learning: Establishing the Predisposition for Critical Consciousness

Most adult education literature is concerned with the transformation, rather than the formation of consciousness. Very few studies address the possibility that one might acquire a social consciousness early in life. Most theorize that childhood learning is distinct from adult learning and that childhood “meaning schemes” often require transformation towards inclusive, permeable, and integrated meaning perspectives, a process only thought to be possible in adulthood (Mezirow, 1991). Yet, many of our participants in both Canada and Chile attributed their formation as socially conscious citizens to the early teachings, values, and examples of significant family and community members. Referring to her own “consciousness of values,” a Chilean woman said, “The values of solidarity were recurring values... There was always the sense of reciprocity, quite strongly, and of appreciating [people’s] worth.” Likewise, in the Canadian context, all the participants in the global education and in the sustainability studies highlighted that the worldview formed during early childhood experiences was “my bedrock, my foundation, on which I have based decisions in my life.” That foundation was built on “honesty, integrity, fairness, courage, respect, loyalty, community service, and citizen responsibility.” Across studies, many participants identified their connection to a religious institution and/or liberation theology as influential. In Chile, consciousness was also formed through the family’s participation in a political party and the legacy of

workers' and women's struggles. As one woman stated, "I come from a family of socialists... Always in my house the environment was a socialist environment. Therefore, very early I started to participate. First when I was a little girl, so as not to leave me alone in the house, they took me to the meetings of the party." Thus, for participants in these studies, "the childhood moral-ethical framework... [was] the guiding marker for their living and a core element of their identity and ontological purpose" (Lange Christensen, 1996, p. 65).

This early socialization is recognized in many studies of social activists. According to della Porta (1992), "young activists often reflected a continuity with the political traditions of their families" (p. 7). "The actions of student radicals [1960s U.S.] were motivated by values learned from their parents" (Marx & McAdam, 1994, p. 88). In Chile, women "participated in a family dynamic where the political was part of the conversations... Under those conditions, it wasn't strange that a particular worldview would be shaped in childhood" (Cortez Díaz & Villagra Parra, 1999, p. 118). Gramsci (1971) provides further insight into this phenomenon: "The child's consciousness is not something 'individual' (still less individuated), it reflects the sector of civil society in which the child participates, and the social relations which are formed within his [*sic*] family, his neighbourhood, his village, etc." (p. 35).

Engagement: Precipitating Factors for Critical Consciousness

Thus, while it is not a wholly conscious experience, early learning establishes the predisposition for developing a more robust critical consciousness over time. Throughout our studies, we learned that the material experience of or the exposure to repression or marginalization were precipitating factors that engaged participants in a greater awareness of social contradictions and a deepening critical consciousness. This involved a complex dialectic between forming (building upon and extending early learning), restoring (finding one's way back to early socio-political values), and transforming ("a fundamental reordering of assumptions... a shift in the tectonic plates of one's assumptive clusters" [(Brookfield, 2000, p. 139)]). Each of these is represented in examples from our studies. For participants in the global education study, cross-cultural or cross-class experiences at home or in 'developing' countries exposed them to situations where they began to recognize that what 'ought to be' was not the same as 'the way it is.' "The exposure at the Youth Emergency Shelter to other people's lives which were so different allowed me to see that you cannot use that old expression that we are all equal and we all have an equal opportunity... These people had so many more obstacles, whether financial, emotional, or even physical," clarified one woman. Suffering the extreme repression of the military dictatorship in the 1980s, many young women activists in Chile deliberately sought opportunities to expand their consciousness through inscription into leftist political parties. As one woman explained, "I had a social conception of the rights of people already... And I liked the way [they] presented things so I entered the Young Communists to serve very young."

In the Canadian environmental sustainability study, one of the most significant findings was the restoration of the participants' foundational ethics to a conscious place in their daily lives. The frenetic pace of adult life had submerged their ethics of honesty, fairness, inner integrity, and community service. One participant mused, "I think that maybe some of that energy and vitality is something that I used to have in my youth and

it just simply got covered up with doing for the family, doing for my husband and sacrificing.” Several participants specifically identified how they had given over their ethical autonomy and personal identity to the organizational ethics and identity of their workplace. They said that “big organizations own your soul” in exchange for a paycheck, a professional identity, and the chance to climb the career ladder. Through the course, they reconnected with forgotten social and environmental relations by relearning organic time, contemplative practices, adequate rest and sleep, and non-commodified simple pleasures. This gave them the space and tools to transform their definitions of dominant messages and cultural scripts, including what it meant to be successful, secure, and fulfilled. Thus, the participants revealed an important dialectic: As they recovered suppressed values/ethics from their childhood (restoration), they engaged in a critique of dominant cultural values and economic structures and embraced new values of sustainability (transformation).

Abused women were politicized through the dawning recognition of their personal pain as a shared social injustice. “I didn’t realize it was a societal problem,” admitted one woman. But after being in an abused women’s support group, she recognized, “The social side has a really strong connection to battered women. It keeps us down. It keeps us in a lower level in society.” In the Chilean women’s movement, a new gendered consciousness emerged as women found voice and strength and carved new identities through the many and varied actions that comprised the movement. While her existing socialist consciousness was not shaken, one of the feminist leaders was deeply transformed through an emerging feminist consciousness: “There are rebellions that I have always had but today I have them with theory, with practice, with an ideology that is distinct from before. ... Today I have the ability to have a distinct discourse [related to] the theme of women.” Thus, while critical consciousness was a formative process for most of these women, feminist consciousness was an additionally transformative experience for some. Here again, the research reveals that transformation of consciousness is dialectically related to the earlier formation of consciousness.

So far, we have addressed (a) that early learning establishes a predisposition for critical consciousness and (b) that key factors precipitate an active engagement in critical consciousness. These findings exemplify Goldman’s (cited in Freire, 1990/1973) differentiation between *potential* and *real* consciousness: “Real consciousness [is] the result of the multiple obstacles and deviations that the different factors of empirical reality put into opposition and submit for realization by [the] potential consciousness (p. 105).” Thus, critical consciousness implies maturity and agency. It suggests an intentional individual choice and commitment that is made by citizens whose own lived experience resonates with their previously acquired consciousness. As Allman states (2001), ideas or thoughts can “become part of our consciousness when we receive them from an external source... [but] reception depends upon our active engagement with them” (p. 165-66). Across all our studies, participants used language that signified this engagement. Eyes, minds, doors or curtains were opened that could never be closed again.

Enacting Critical Consciousness

The critical consciousness of the participants in our studies was brought to a level of integration that is only possible through action. In acting on their critical consciousness, it was deepened, expanded and reinforced. Global education teachers

were committed to an integrated, holistic lifestyle and to teaching practices that manifested their commitment to justice. The desire to practice transformative global education was founded on a response to the moral-ethical question regarding how they can live out these values in their own classroom. “There *is* something I can do!” one man exclaimed, “I am a teacher, so maybe I can do something with my kids. I wanted to become involved in global education because I have an influence on the kids to do something that will help people.” In the case of abused women, action was the concrete realization of the interaction between their changing personal and social consciousness. Transformed from victim to survivor to advocate, an abused woman explains her newfound “obligation to educate... It was pretty quick that I knew I wanted to do something for other women and that started the Drop-In Centre right off the bat... And from there I started doing public education and I co-facilitated [the support group].”

The participants in the sustainability study created significant changes in their work and home lives. They enacted a new rhythm between having, doing, and being and thus, significantly repositioned themselves in their social and economic relations. Many joined various social and environmental movements or other community volunteer organizations to enact their critical consciousness and they collectively formed an institute devoted to sustainability education and community environmental action projects. Many Chilean women’s movements participants expressed their “political being” by becoming party militants, human rights advocates, and/or campus leaders. Along with numerous other initiatives, they created two women’s activist organizations in their city. Such commitment required actions that were often clandestine and always dangerous. One woman explains, “For those that had a real consciousness, it was necessary and urgent that things change and the only way was for the people to organize themselves.” The imperative labeled “necessity” could more accurately be understood as the enactment of a maturing critical consciousness.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

Parents and teachers hold radical potential as political educators. The role of parents and teachers as the first political educators is highlighted in these studies yet, it has largely been ignored in adult education literature and theorizing. To those adult educators who protest that we are not in the business of educating children, Eduard Lindeman (1926) clarifies, “This new venture is called adult education not because it is confined to adults but because adulthood, maturity, defines its limits” (p. 4). How might radical adult educators work closely with parents and teachers to develop the critical skills needed to nurture critically conscious social beings?

An important role of adult educators is to highlight contradictions that help to politicize adult learners. Critical and feminist pedagogies are based on exactly this premise. Among our participants, exposure to and analysis of social contradictions was an important precipitating factor in the development of critical consciousness. Why, after almost 30 years of substantial theory and practice in critical pedagogies, do adult educators remain frustrated and uncertain about their political role in learning and education?

Most importantly, *critical consciousness must be nurtured over time through deliberate educational interventions.* Consciousness is not a static phenomenon. It is fragmentary, contradictory, and constantly in the process of becoming. New situations,

particularly those as traumatically disjunctive as happened with military coups in South America or the escalation of neo-liberalism/neo-conservatism in North America, demand that a critical consciousness be constructed and re-constructed through ongoing and deliberate educational processes. Social and political institutions are critical sites for radical adult education. In all our studies, we uncovered the important role of political parties, labour unions, professional organizations, and community support groups in the development of critical consciousness. Are radical adult educators ready to take up this challenge – inside and outside the classroom?

Summary

Based on our empirical research with social activists, we propose a theoretical framework for understanding critical consciousness that incorporates formative, restorative and transformative dimensions in a dialectical process. We argue that family and community values are the foundation for the earliest form of political socialization, creating the predisposition for a critical consciousness. Precipitating factors catalyze this early consciousness into a more engaged critical consciousness, and, as active agents, individuals make daily choices and take social actions that further reinforce it. However, for this potential to be fully realized, critical consciousness must be deliberately nurtured, and sometimes, restored. This is the vocation of adult educators working with/as parents and teachers in diverse socio-political locations.

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