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Being Invisible And a Minority: Adult Undergraduates in The University Classroom

Carol Kasworm Dr.
Northern Carolina State University

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Dr. Carol Kasworm
North Carolina State University

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Abstract: This study explored the social constructed understandings and meanings of student identity for undergraduate adults situated in research universities. Key findings suggested negotiated beliefs and actions within positional and a relational frames of being a minority in number and invisible in a culture focused on young adults.

Introduction and Conceptual Framework

In the last thirty years, various researchers have suggested that adult undergraduate students are often in competitive environments where their academic capabilities are questioned (Kasworm, 1990) or where they experience age or class discrimination and treatment as second-class citizens (Kasworm, Sandmann, & Sissel, 2000; Quinnan, 1997). These social contexts influence adult students' beliefs about themselves and their capabilities as learners. Given limited past research of adult student identity, this study explored adult students' constructed identities in the unique environment of research universities.

Grounded in a conceptual framework of social constructivism, this research considered adult student beliefs as internal co-constructed understandings developed in socially and culturally mediated engagements (Twomey Fosnet, 1996). As noted by earlier research of adult identity in community college settings (Kasworm, 2005), adults come to the intergenerational college classroom with competing cultural sites of themselves and their life roles. This research delineated these constructed beliefs of adult students and examined the student in relationship to the research university classroom as a social and historical resource that shaped individual identities. Further, this research was premised on the understanding that the identity of an adult college student in a community of practice was internally constructed and socially and culturally mediated.

Research Case Study Design and Analysis

This study was framed in naturalistic inquiry in the tradition of qualitative case study research. Drawing upon a larger study of six settings, this study focused upon two research universities. A purposeful sampling pool of adults included those who a) were at least 30 years of age, b) were in good academic standing according to their institution's criteria, c) were currently enrolled in a college transfer program at the community college, and d) had completed at least 15 hours of academic coursework beyond developmental studies. The final interview sample for this study included 23 adult university students, representing an age range of 31-47 (mean of 38.5 years); gender composition of 13 females and 10 males; marital status breakdown of 14 married, 3 divorced, 4 single, 1 widowed and 1 non-response; racial representation of 17 Caucasians, 4 African-Americans, and 2 Hispanics; and work status of 7 full-time workers, 10 part-time worker, 4 with no response and 2 not applicable. Each participant was contacted initially by letter with a follow-up telephone contact to secure commitment. A semi-structured

audiotaped interview on the college campus lasted for approximately 1 ½ to 2 hours. For this current study, analyses were grounded in inductive thematizing and categorizing of narrative data of individual themes and entire data set across the two colleges. Through inductive analysis exploring the rich complexity of co-constructed understandings and actions, key categories and themes were identified.

Findings

Adult students at research universities identified their negotiated world in the classroom through their understandings of place and of contextual relationships in relation to their adult student roles. These adults identified the parameters and nuances of their place in the classroom through a co-constructed positional identity: "a person's apprehension of her social position in a lived world: that is, depending on the others present, of her greater or lesser access to spaces, activities, genres, and, through those genres, authoritative voices, or any voice at all" (p. 127-128). These students were "strongly affected by the position (they) … are cast into within interactions" (p.188). These acts of co-construction incorporated adults' worlds of life roles, their historic biography, and competing identities. In addition, these adult spoke to contextual interpersonal relations defined as the co-construction of a relational identity. Because these adults participated in many cultures and had many identities from work, family, and community beyond the college, these adult students interacted and made meaning of "how one identifies one's (interpersonal) position relative to others, mediated through the ways one feels comfortable, or constrained, for example, to speak to, to command another, to enter into the space of another" (p. 127). These identities were not fixed and static, but represent aspects of their sense of themselves as they interacted and negotiated their place and self in the collegiate contexts. They were "always authoring the meaning of action" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998. p. 279).

Sense of Place and Position – Positional Identity

Adult students believed they were often viewed as invisible and undervalued in the research university culture. They presumed that they needed to "prove themselves" as worthy for this more selective environment. Thus, most of these students framed their identity in beliefs and actions to be academically competitive, to prove themselves worthy of this academic judging environment, and to also gain the best college education that was available in their region. These students suggested four frames of positional identity meaning making which impacted their sense of judgments and actions. These frames included beliefs of:
1. Being "other" in an academic judging world
2. Being academically competent
3. Being self-sufficient and persistent
4. Being a successful student in the classroom.

Being other in an academic judging world.

Adult students in research universities believed that university academic programs would be demanding and competitive, that they were entering into an academic judging world. In particular, these individuals often noted tacit feelings of being invisible and undervalued, of being other in this university environment. Thus, university adult students negotiated their positional identities through a set of beliefs and experiences as they purposefully sought out acceptance through academic judgments in the classroom context. In their pursuits, these adults did note that they were typically

alone, often without peers and colleagues in these pursuits. Because they were few in numbers and were of a different age and generation from the younger college students, they noted experiences of being invisible.

Being academically competent.

As part of this positional identity, these adults recognized that they had to measure up to the standards of this academically competitive environment (Kasworm, 1995). These students valued the opportunity to participate in the university's intellectual complexity, often enrolling in specialized academic programs (e.g. nursing, engineering, forestry). These adults entered into the university, having typically identified their academic limitations. They reported their informal (and sometimes formal assessment findings) of rusty or inadequate knowledge and skills due to a gap in time between current college involvement and past college and/or high school coursework. They also recognized the challenge of assumed higher level expectations by the faculty for their performance of academic knowledge and skill in the classroom. They suggested that their university's institutional culture was tacitly committed to a "sink or swim" environment for students who had academic deficiencies. Thus they spoke to a positional belief based in varied personal strategies for excelling in college work.

Being self-sufficient and persistent.

Adult university students assumed that their future success and place as an accepted student at the university would require them to be self-sufficient and persistent. Because they were invisible and undervalued by the institution, these adults believed that they had to take responsibility for figuring out the complexities of the university and making it through the maze of bureaucracy and implicit understandings related to university policy and procedures. Many students suggested that university services, bureaucracy, and policies presented unknown challenges and related anxieties

Being a successful student in the classroom.

These adult students held specific beliefs about the characteristics, beliefs, and actions of a successful college student--of an ideal student image within the classroom. Unlike the previous study of adult community college students(Kasworm, 2005), they did not reify the ideal or successful college student image. Rather, they viewed themselves as being successful college students through their own efforts (and with assistance from faculty feedback). This perspective was a powerful understanding, because they viewed the classroom as a high stakes environment--a competitive and judging environment. Their image of a successful college student represented the following standards: a) standard of being a purposeful learner, b) standard of being competitive, and c) standard of valuing one's maturity and active engagement. In addition, most adult students suggested that this successful student image also was imbedded in implicit faculty expectations for academically successful students.

Many adults believed that they needed to be purposeful learners. They shared their comparative impression that younger students were forced into attending college and of their lack of purposefulness and goals, in relation to adult students. Many adults suggested that younger students were unfocused and uncommitted. These younger adults were often observed to be passive in the classroom and were more focused upon their peer acceptance through their social life than through their academic life. As part of this challenge of becoming a successful university student, these adults also believed that they needed to be competitive to succeed within the classroom and in relation to the broader university environment. Many adult students spoke to explicit beliefs and

actions surrounding this belief of acting on challenge and competition. Some students believed that it was the natural world of universities—a culture of competition that expected student self-reliance, rather than a culture of hand-holding and nurturing support of all students to succeed   Lastly, these adults held a standard of valuing one's maturity and active engagement.   In particular, adult students noted their beliefs of classroom engagement was influenced through age and life commitments, and beliefs of being successful through active engagement in the classroom and the learning process. These adults believed their differences of age and life commitments were relative to those same differences with younger adults. They assessed that typically these negative differences represented more difficulty in memorizing (often through short term memory), having rusty academic skills, and having many distracting responsibilities. These adults reported that they had developed strategies and understandings through developing stronger concentration skills, memory enhancements, time management strategies, and focused energy to complete college assignments. Although they also saw themselves as being aged in comparison to younger students, they quickly discovered that their age was not a detractor, but was just a difference. Some adults saw their age status as a positive influence in their engagement, as part of a personal transformation and a personal identity enhancement. Lastly, adult students often noted that they took a more active role in the classroom and were more often interacting with faculty to understand the content and concepts. Many adults noted that they felt adult students were often the only students to engage in asking questions of the faculty.

Sense of Relational Identity in the Classroom

In relational identity, adult students identified who they believed accepted them as themselves, who valued them as students, and who they negotiated more meaningful personal interactions and supports.   These students noted that the research university was highly competitive, oriented toward gifted youth, and towards appreciation of academic excellence. They had to prove themselves to the faculty and to demonstrate their abilities relative to the younger college students. In this journey in a competitive, judging environment, these adults focused towards relational acts that were authentic, that were in the connected classroom, and in their adult sphere. Thus, these adult typically found valuing relationships with some faculty, but found limited supportive relationships with adults, and very few relationships of value with younger students. It would appear that the adult student in a research university was someone alone in their pursuits, drawing upon identity relationships with individuals external to the university for their sense of adult being. These adults expressed beliefs of their relational value based upon being a successful college student and thus creating invitational spaces and interactions with faculty and fellow students. However, robust, supportive friendships were limited for these adults, in part because of their other adult role commitments beyond the university, their lack of identified institutional place at the university, and their limited numbers in the various classes and curricula. It appeared that their coconstructed sense of otherness impacted their relational identities in the research university.

They believed that a research university was the ultimate environment for collegiate learning (with regional universities and communities colleges to be of lesser quality and standards). Further, these students held equally high expectations for the quality of faculty instruction and for the quality of classroom instructional experiences in a research university setting. Their co-constructed positional and relational identities with faculty were first anchored in their judgment of quality faculty. In essence, they did not care about faculty and faculty instruction that was mediocre and of lesser quality.   They had various understandings of how to identify quality faculty, but more often spoke to their disappointments regarding mediocre instruction and related instructional

resources supports.

Faculty relationships.

There were four descriptive types of relationships between them and the faculty. These relationships were coconstructed in the connected classroom. [These adults rarely had the time and/or would meet with faculty outside of class]. These relationships types reflected a) entry phase – faculty were revered and god-like, with perception that their key role was to judge adults as worthy or inadequate for college studies; b) functional phase – faculty were viewed as key instructional leaders and managers for a course with no differentiated actions towards adult learners; c) respectful phase - faculty were believed to offer a special openness and support to adult students, and d) collegial phase - faculty were part of a collegial, peer-relationship with adult students.

Y*ounger student relationship.*

Adult students suggested a rather complex and varied set of relational engagements with younger students. It was apparent that adult students viewed the younger adult students from three very different frames. The first frame was anchored in adult student beliefs of the academic quality of an institution and the expectations of that institution for its students. These adults observed and judged one subgroup of younger adults as not ready for college involvement; these young adults reflected significant immaturity and wasted and unused talent in the classroom. In particular, many adult students were upset with the lack of commitment and engagement in classroom learning by these younger adults. In this first frame, adult students suggested that they co-constructed their sense of student identity through oppositional judgments of the many younger students who were immature, unfocused, and passive in the classroom. They spoke to their observations of these immature youth and of their avoidance of younger students when asked to provide class resource notes or take leadership in the class (because these younger students avoided taking academic responsibility). The second frame focused upon their positive relationships and valuable exchanges with younger students. Within this intellectually engaged and conscientious younger learner group, adults noted friendships and personal interactions beyond classroom content and tasks. Within this intellectually engaged and conscientious younger learner group, adults noted friendships and personal interactions beyond classroom content and tasks. Adults did report that for a subset of younger students, they felt respect and were engaged in classroom interactions; however, there was very limited friendship development that impacted their sense of adult student relational identity. And the final frame, the third frame spoke to negative relationships with younger students who either excluded adult students or suggested that adult students weren't valued as student colleagues. With this group, adult students did not feel a sense of respect or collegial exchange. For most adults, they accepted these cool interactions and social discrimination. However, they rationalized these interactions as the behavior of young immature adults who needed to find acceptance within their peer group.

Adult students valuing adult students.

Adult students often felt very much alone and undervalued as an older adult in a sea of youthful adult energy, with a predominance of young adult students who focused on the social rather than the academic, and in an institution which articulated a young undergraduate support culture. How did adult students construct their understandings of relationships with other adult students? Adult students spoke to varied understandings of their adult-to-adult relationships and

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impacts in this research university environment. These perspectives reflected two understandings: a) Valuing adults as positive role models and as colleagues in the classroom and b) Experiencing a lack of connection and loneliness of being an adult student.

Implications

This study of adult undergraduate students in research universities suggested adult student identities are coconstructed within a cultural context where adult undergraduate students are undervalued in the research university culture and often invisible because of limited numbers in the classroom. In creating positional identities, these adults perceived that they must be academically competitive, hardworking, and academically successful in the classroom. They held high standards for themselves and for the faculty, younger students, and the university. They believed that they were more serious and intellectually engaged in the classroom. The preponderance of younger students, on the other hand, were judged as often immature and socially focused upon their younger adult social lives, as opposed to the rigors of the academic classroom. Relational identity appears to be also anchored through this positional identity. Faculty interactions were primary source for affirming their position and thus their relational identity. Adults noted limited impact upon their relational self with younger students and adult students in classroom contexts. As suggested by Shaw in this postmodern world, the sense of identity development has other dimensions. "This…theory of human agency… does not negate the power of race, gender, or class in determining the ways in which we define ourselves and are defined by others; it simply adds a category of "difference" that is determined by individual agency, or choice… Thus, as Grossberg points out, "the relations of ethnicity or agency are determined, not merely by ideological practices of representation, but also in affective practices of investment" (1994, p. 15). Adult student identity for undergraduates in a research university is extremely complex and multilayered, and is also embedded in the affective practices of investment. Thus, future research requires future exploration of new theory and understandings of how student identity is coconstructed in student acts of agency and investment within specific and diversity cultural contexts.

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