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Recommended Citation

Swai, E. V. (2006). "(Re)Discovering Self Women's Construction of Identities: Socio-cultural View," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2006/papers/55>

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(RE)DISCOVERING SELF: WOMEN'S CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES: SOCIO-CULTURAL VIEW

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Keywords: Womanhood identity, African women, learning identity

Abstract: Through an analysis of how women participate in constructing their identities, this paper interrogates the notions of construction of identity (womanhood identity) as a learning activity among women in Lukani Tanzania. Current dominant theoretical framework in adult education and feminist literature have typically positioned African women as “unknowers” and marginalized in the process of knowledge construction and learning—a link thoroughly constructed both by positivists and poststructural theorists who have called attention to African women’s limitation in participating in learning and development.

Introduction

I have noticed an increased frequency in the construct identity in both feminist and adult education literature. Particularly disconcerting is the way in which women, and African women in particular, are theorized in the context of learning and constructing womanhood identity. Following the work of cultural-historical activity theorists, specifically the works of Vygotsky, (1978) Leont’ev, (1978) Engestrom (1987, 1990), learning and the construction of identity is conceptualized as an activity that is historical, occurring within the community of practice (Wenger, 1998). The idea community in the concept of learning emanates from Marx’s view of resolution and contradiction in that all human activity, including learning, is contested and occurs within conflictual contexts. In this study I explore the ways and reasons women in Lukani, Tanzania participate in learning as an activity for constructing their identity. I locate the formation of Lukani women’s identity from socio-cultural historical conditions of rural Tanzania, within the context of their day-to-day interactions. Additionally, I look at learning, knowing, and constructing identity from autobiographical perspective, in that, rather than looking at women as objects of learning, I acknowledge them as active participants in their learning. The paper concludes with a discussion that learning and construction of one’s identity cannot be divorced from socio-cultural and historical conditions, day-to-day interactions, and learners’ perspectives on what it means to learn. Failure to do so leads to a conception that learning is an expression of value-free human capacities rather than a specific activity for social organization, and learners as reactors to social processes rather than as active participants in shaping those processes.

Theoretical Orientation and Research Design

Though I locate myself within African feminism and cultural-historical activity perspectives, this study incorporates work from a multiplicity of critical social theorists (Beurdieu 1988; Bateson 1972; Foucault 1970; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). I suggest that how one comes to know or construct her identity cannot be understood in isolation from the broader

socio-cultural and historical processes within which one exists; her interactions with others as well as her own needs and interests are inherent. This perspective is incongruent with the idea that one comes to know through cognitive development and awareness of deficiencies or oppression, a view that is commonly held by cognitivists. African feminists and cultural-historical activity theorists, together with other critical social scholars, argue that the concept of consciousness and awareness as a theory of learning constructing identity does not offer a means of making visible the actual social nature of the learning process of marginalized groups such as women. These scholars suggest that learning should be conceptualized as a conscious, goal-directed and social action (Sawchuck, 2003). One critic notes (Sawchuk, 2003) that "... learning... as a mediated system of participation... people... are hardly free to participate in any way they chose. People have different experiences by virtue of their standpoint in the social world, by virtue of their relationship to tools that mediate their participation, and by virtue of their distribution of material and cultural resources" (p. 16-17).

The discussion of how women participate in constructing womanhood within cultural-historical activity perspectives cannot be isolated from distribution of cultural means because how one comes to participate in learning is mediated by what one considers important in her life. This consideration occurs within the complexity of social organization, culture, division of labor and other mediating factors; and individual capacity (both material and cognitive).

Social organization in this paper is conceptualized as a systematic ordering of social relations, such as gender, racial, age, class, etc., – a method by which societies organize itself to accomplish goals, order and prioritize objectives.

In this paper, I address the following questions:

1. What are the socio-cultural and historical conditions that have shaped Lukani women's learning?
2. What ideas that shape their day-to-day interactions, and may impede learning?
3. What are the women's perceptions about learning and their goals in life?

Data on the socio-cultural and historical context of Lukani were traced back to the larger social-historical processes of rural Tanzania. The main question was: What are the specific socio-historical processes and practices under which the participants of my study operate? Here I identified the politics, the economic the cultural and social artifacts that may have produced rules and norms to shape the lives of residents of Lukani and create gender imbalance. I also identified geographic space to point to the location in which these communities operate and which also contributes to shaping what people do and prevent them from doing other activities. I also identified natural forces and resources that have create conditions for ways people think and act.

The second type of data is the day-to-day interactions of the residents of Lukani. I identified people's interactions as well as rules and norms that shape those interactions, and which may have created certain patterns of behavior. The question leading this type of data is: What discourse about womanhood and social and cultural artifacts maintain womanhood identity? I observed peoples' day-to-day interactions in marketplace and in community, women's specific activities, and people's use of words that represent ideas about womanhood. I also identified cultural artifacts – shelter, clothing, and marriage institution. All these are treated as mediating factors that shape women's thinking and actions.

The third data comes from selected women. I focused closely on their perceptions about their roles and position as women, their resources, behaviors, their life objectives and goals. These women's perceptions shed light on the meanings they attach to womanhood; their

resources shed light on the reasons for the decisions they make, and the objectives and the goals they set for their lives. Their behaviors both in the family and community explained the extent to which social norms and values about womanhood, as well as illustrated what is legitimated and available to them, and how it has shaped their thinking and actions.

Research Design

Critical ethnography was chosen as a method to interpret webs of cultural, social, and political processes and practices that were significant in shaping women's thinking and actions. When developing this project, it became clear that I needed to examine the culture and women's thinking and actions together, as it is not possible to act on one and not the other (Cunningham, 1993). I decided to use the work of Thomas, (1993) who describes critical ethnography as not only a method to produce knowledge about the condition that formed social norms, rules, and values, but also to ask moral questions about desirable forms of social relations and ways of living for political purposes. My interest in this study was to interrogate socio-cultural and political processes, people's day-to-day interactions and women's own thinking and actions towards learning and construction of their identity as women. These three moments helped to understand this phenomenon. Therefore, this study generated three types of data: the socio-cultural and historical local context, women's day-to-day interactions, and individual women's reflections and actions towards their learning.

Findings

To understand the reasons and ways women come to know and construct their identity, this study traces socio-cultural and historical conditions in which women in Lukani operate, and which produced cultural materials and symbols that created ideas about the roles and position of women in Lukani. During colonial period, the local knowledges that women possessed such as herbal knowledge, traditional birth services, and spirits, was discarded and in its place, people were made to learn within formal settings and about modern knowledge including modern medicines, scientific knowledge, Christian religion and the like. The knowledge that used to mediate the thinking and actions of women in Lukani was discarded as primitive, backward and in need for elimination. The new education for women in Kilimanjaro, and in Lukani in particular, was provided within the idea of Dundas as he presented his findings as:

I would say that by education of the women alone could solve many of our foremost problems. It is the ignorance of the woman which keeps the African back, it is largely due to their ignorance that hygiene in the African home is so deplorable and it is above all due to their unenlightened ways that the birthrate is greatly below what it could be and that infant mortality deprives the country of a good portion of the population it so sorely needs. (Dundas, 1927, pp. 34)

Within such discourses, women were identified as ignorant and this ignorance was the cause of all social maladies including child mortality and low birthrate. Education for women was then developed within these assertions, which included caring for children, and maintaining the health and hygiene of their families. The skills taught included cookery, sewing, crocheting, knitting, and literacy for bible study (Kweka, 1995; Mushi, 1995) and many more, while men's education was geared towards clerical position with colonial government. While curriculum for women was developed to help them understand traditional roles of 'modern women,' which included instilled the notions of hardworking with primary roles of taking care of children and

homes, men's education was to help them understand the roles of a man in a modern society – that of formal employment, outside the home and community.

During independence, in 1961, the government of Tanzania had a formidable task on its hands. Women were a minority at every level of education, making up 40 percent of first-year primary school students, 29 percent of secondary school students, and less than 1 percent of first-year university students. (Ministry of Education, 1986) To meet the demand for Tanzanians to fill the formal employment posts, the government followed an education policy designed to increase enrollment in formal education, as well as initiating adult literacy programs. This policy was compatible with the new government's economic strategy encouraging export production, industrialization, and an open economy.

The ensuing analysis showed that education experts defined the problem of education in Tanzania as stemming from either an inadequate supply of schools or an insufficient demand for education. This supply-and-demand framework provides a ready explanation for the gender gap in education -- a gap that has become a popular target for policy interventions because education for women is correlated with lower birth rates and improved child health. Despite the difference in worldviews between men and women brought about by differences in education, and the rapid social and technological development that was taking place in all social, economic and political spheres, the basic logic of the provision to education women remained largely the same.

While emphasis of Tanzanian education was placed on fostering attitude changes regarding upward mobility and formal employment as the main source of livelihood and the backbone of the national economy, women were excluded from this now valued cultural means in two ways: First, their education did not develop their skills in formal sector, therefore, it would be near to impossible for them to participate effectively in the formal employment activity. Second, the fact that women's education was geared towards domestic chores rather than formal employment, their interests in formal education was thwarted. In such a context, women within the contexts of colonial and post colonial Tanzania were systematically and effectively denigrated, ignored and denied social status in modern society. Hatcher (1999) has noted the origin of people subordination and argue that, this is a two way process: First, objectification and decontextualization and second, the process of accessing the resource, which is only possible if the subject installs herself in the relationship to the world which the constitution of the resource presupposes.

From this analysis then, what made it possible for the construction of women in Lukani as subservient to men was first, to alienate them from education that would lead them into accessing cultural means - formal employment and second, to construct formal employment as the most valued cultural mean. Leont'ev (1978) has identified people's alienation as a social process in which they are separated from societal material and intellectual riches accumulated throughout history arguing:

When people cannot appropriate such material and intellectual richness, what occurs is an enormous reduction of the possibilities of their individual development, which remains well below the levels already socially attained by human kind. (Sawchuk, Duarte, & Elhammoumi, 2006, p. 226)

While both men and women were expected to participate in the development of society, men could just use their education to access formal employment, while women couldn't, and instead, used different means to access those cultural means including trading their physical labor, and even their humanity, which continued to construct them as inferior and incapable.

Day-to-day Interactions and Learning

Learning within day-to-day interaction is about meaning making. By participating in social and cultural activities we derive our meanings of what we are and what we are expected to do from the cues that we get from others in the community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Thus, people make meaning of their role and position as well as of their environment as a result of their participating in a community of practice. Meaning making is a continuous process of negotiating identity in the community of practice (Wenger 1998).

It would be difficult to find adult educators and feminist scholars who would not agree that learning and construction of identity occur also within people's day-to-day interactions. Very few however see people's day-to-day interactions as an active site in shaping people's thinking and actions. In this study, I identified how people in Lukani interact through language. Language was identified as a site which leads into structuring social relation in Lukani such as gender. The identification of language as a site for structuring gender relation was led by the idea that language is intimately connected to one's position in community (Ochs and Schieffelin, 1989; Zentella, 1997). Ochs (1988) argues that language helps mediate an individual's relationship to the social world. The language of interaction in Lukani was Kiswahili rather than Kichagga, which was the mother tongue of the people in Lukani. In the homes, people used Kichagga as a medium of interaction, while in public; they used formal language – Kiswahili, which was foreign to many women. The use of foreign tongue in communication, positioned women at disadvantage situation because they could not be effective in expressing themselves in public and this condition, both reflected and reinforced the idea that women were incapable of thinking and expressing their needs and interests. Men on the other, due to their exposure to modern education were far much better in Kiswahili than women, and therefore, more capable in negotiating their needs in those interactions.

In the learning context research has found that learning in mother tongue help in cognitive development than learning in a foreign language, where language has to be translated before the concept is formed in one's cognition (Fafunwa, Macauley, & Sokoya, 1989) in their study on children educated in Yoruba language (mother tongue) and those educated in English (foreign).

Women Reflections and Perception of Learning

The third data comes from women's reflections and perceptions of their learning. I focused closely on their perceptions about learning and knowledge, their roles and position in learning activity, their resources to help them access modern education and their life objectives and goals. Anita, 56 years old, a mother of 6 children and a retired volunteer of over 30 years as a parish worker became a school leaver at the age of fifteen. In an interview, Anita shares with me her feelings about the difficulties faced by women like her who had neither adequate formal education nor land in which they could freely access. According to her, most women in Lukani had neither access nor the ability to benefit from education or land, a condition which placed at a disadvantage in relation to men.

From the women's narratives, the most learning was that which they learnt informally, from observing their parents, siblings, peers, and from the church. What they considered knowledge was information they got from those sources and their participation in activities that led them into roles such as wifehood, motherhood and daughter-in-law hood and the like. In all the identified women, scarce in resources impeded their participation in formal education, and therefore, their focus remained in the learning that was attained from informal settings.

Discussions and Implications for adult education theory and practice

The relevance of learning as an activity of constructing identity is important in contributing to adult learning theory because it illuminates on the learning that women participate, and which is often goes unnoticed or is obscured by dominant perspectives on learning (within a formal setting and for the world of formal employment). In this study, I challenge existing literature on learning as an individual activity devoid of socio-cultural and historical together with people's day-to-day interactions. I suggest that, the vast majority of theories of adult learning cannot adequately conceptualize and document learning that includes conscious as well as tacit dimensions; that is individually directed as well as collectively organized; and that is rooted in specific socio-cultural and historical contexts. My emphasis is ways in which socio-cultural and historical conditions together with people's day-to-day interactions shape how one comes to learn, know and construct identity, simply put, learning or constructing identity cannot occur in isolation from socio-cultural and historical conditions within which one operates.

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