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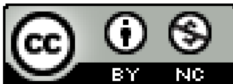

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Sexual Intimacy and the Cultural Learning Relation

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Abstract: This paper reflects on what we can learn about adult learning by pondering the phenomenon of mature sexual intimacy. Deep learning transpires in this intersubjective context, the paper concludes, because sexual love opens us to deep felt vulnerabilities.

Saying yes to sexuality is saying yes to all in life that defies control – to passivity and surprise, to being one part of a very chancy world (Nussbaum, p. 709).

It is interesting and perhaps a bit revealing that reference to sexual intimacy is rare in the literature of adult education. Certainly, for most of us, the deep privacy (closeness, boundedness, exclusivity) that seems an ineluctable part of sexual intimacy places it outside of the more public purview of adult education. What legitimate (non-defiling) reason, we might wonder, would an adult educator have for thinking that something as private as the realm of mature sexual intimacy is important to our field? The following argues that, rather than being outside of what should concern adult educators, we can learn much about adult learning by reflecting on mature sexual intimacy.

We Are Cut

One of the more nefarious consequences of our great cognitive powers as human beings is that we can understand the vastness of our own vulnerability. For example, although we do not like to think about it much, in the back of our minds, we all know that, someday, we will meet our end. But even this rather dismal thought is not, for the most of us, the worst of it. Very often, life itself, with its stream of dark dangers and losses, wounds and aggrievements, is seen as the true source of our vulnerability. The difficulty with being so cognitively alive is that we clearly appreciate the many contingencies of existence that operate far beyond our control. As much as we might wish otherwise, and as fantastic as our own powers might be, we are far from perfect.

We do not start our lives with such a dark sense of things. As psychoanalysts of the "object relations" school like Melanie Kline (1975) and Donald Winnicott (1971) relate, an infant spends the first weeks or perhaps even months of its life in swaddled bliss with a nebulous, all encompassing sense of things. It feels no fear or anger, love or shame. With no prior experience to guide it, the infant is unaware even of its own body boundaries and cannot tell what is inside or what is outside of it. It cannot discern one object from the next. For all intents and purposes, an infant is not in the world but *is* the world.

When its personal powers for controlling its environment begin to develop (focusing, grasping, tracking movement, making sounds), the infant makes "the step from an absolutely self-sufficient narcissism to the perception of a changing external world and the beginning of the discovery of objects" (Freud, 1922, p. 104). It begins, for the first time, to experience itself as an entity cut apart from the world. At first, of course, the infant is so self-centered that it has no sense of the limits of its powers. As Winnicott (1971) and others describe, the small infant experiences itself as "omnipotent" (p. 11). Soon, however, when needs are not immediately met, the infant also realizes that not all lies in its control and that it is, in fact, desperately dependent.

According to Martha Nussbuam (2001), it is this burgeoning recognition of its helplessness, this primal and unhealing wound, that stimulates the emergence and development of human emotions in the infant. Emotions, Nussbaum contends, are not simply biological drives that are part of our brain's machinery but, rather, are ways humans come to think about things that are deeply important to them but are irrevocably beyond their control (p. 19). The emotions of anger and gratitude, for instance, develop early in life as infants confront the delay that occasionally exists between the upsurge of need and its gratification by the world. The omnipotent infant reacts with rage and shame when the things it desires are withheld, revealing its profound helplessness. Then, when finally fulfilled, the infant feels suffused with the emotion of gratitude. Later, when growing cognitive abilities allows a child to differentiate objects and is able, for instance, to recognize key people in her life, gratitude can blossom into love. When her loved one disappoints her, moreover, she can react, at this point, with more complex emotions like hatred, envy, and jealousy and, when suffused with the ambiguity of both loving and hating at the same time, can feel the first pangs of guilt. As a child discovers her own body edges and begins to locate herself within the boundaries of her own skin, she becomes increasingly aware of her own physical precariousness, particularly apparent in those parts of her body less distinctly separated from the world. She comes to react with the emotion of disgust at substances (spit, vomit, urine, feces, blood) that pass one way or another across her body boundary, substances of ambiguous status, neither quite inside nor outside of who she is (Nussbaum, 2001).

Emotions like these run through us like rivers, fed by the unending source of our sense of vulnerability. We are washed over by fear, awe, loathing, disgust, love, shame, longing, and grief throughout our entire lives. Emotions, Nussbaum relates, are lifelong ways we deal with our experience of utter vulnerability and helplessness.

We Are Held

Despite the support of our emotions, the fact that we are cut from the world leaves us wounded. In the case of young infants, the anguish of vulnerability can be assuaged when the people who care for them who, using Donald Winnicott's (1971) wonderful choice of words, "hold" the child (p. 11). For Winnicott, "good enough" holding keeps the infant from feeling like it is "infinitely falling" and helps it brave its first experiences of being cut from the wholeness of the world (p. 10). The caregivers meet the infant's needs quickly enough to prevent an overwhelming storm of anguished feeling but not so quickly to prevent it from experiencing both reality and the efficacy of its own emerging powers. "Good enough" holding is essential at this stage if the infant is to develop capacities to trust both itself and its world. It helps the infant learn that it is alright to be dependent, that it does not need to be omnipotent, and that it need not be ashamed of its weakness.

As the child grows, it is held in other ways. For instance, Winnicott (1971) tells of how "transitional objects," like a favorite blanket or teddy bear, helps the child retain the feeling of attachment she has even when separated from her caregiver (p. 5). Her blanket gives her time to grow capacities for autonomous agency without suffering a loss of connection to those she loves and needs. He also describes "play" as a kind of "holding and facilitating environment" within which the child can learn to "bear and metabolize [her] painful affects and to help it process vulnerable feelings" (Layton, p. 144). As Winnicott (1971) relates, "whereas inner psychic reality has a kind of location … somewhere within the bounds of the individual, and whereas what is called external reality is located outside of these bounds," playing transpires in a space that grows between a child and her caretaker (p. 53). It is a context within which the child can

explore new cognitive and physical powers, realize the limits of it own omnipotence, and accept its helplessness and dependence. It is within this space between the child's internal psychic and external realities, this "thirdness" as Jessica Benjamin (1988) refers to it, that the child gradually finds her entry into the sociosymbolic order.

It is most intriguing that Winnicott's (1971) concept of a holding and facilitating environment captures so wonderfully key qualities of Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of communities of practice. According to Wenger (1998), a community of practice is a bounded space of human interaction within which people draw upon a shared stock of cultural artifacts and meanings to negotiate shared understandings and coordinated practices. As such, just like the space between mother and child, it too is a thirdness that enables people to exercise their powers of personal and collective agency without being overwhelmed by the chaos of the world. As Wenger relates, in the process of intertwining their lives in communities of practice, people acquire a sense of personal identity, produce and reproduce new meanings, and forge bonds of care and solidarity with others. It is within the boundaries of these intersubjective spaces, Lave and Wenger contend, that humans learn most deeply.

If conditions are favorable, all along the trajectory of our life course, we are held and nurtured within these "transitional" spaces of our culture. Like newborns at a family gathering, we are handed from the arms of one community of practice to the next, each time sheltered from the darkness of wild contingency, and each time learning more about the powers of our individual and collective agency. In our earliest communities of practice, we are coddled and sung to and, as paleoanthropologist Steven Mithen (2005) argues, just like our ancient hominid ancestors, fall into the harmonies of intersubjective life and develop capacities for understanding the feelings and points of view of other members of our species. Later, when we acquire what primatologist and cultural psychologist, Michael Tomasello (1999), asserts is our species unique capacity to "share attention" with other members of our species, we can begin to participate fully in intersubjective contexts and, "to pool [our] cognitive resources in ways that other animal species cannot" (p. 5). From our immediate family community of practice, to extended family and friends, to childhood playgroups, to same-sex peer groups, to multi-age work groups, we make our way, our communities of practice weaving together like a braided cord. At the same time as we develop adult capacities to participate in (and be held by) multiple, complex, and shifting communities of practice, we also seek out and explore deeper, less fleeting, and more intimate forms of thirdness. Our participation in sexually intimate relationships, at this stage, becomes a particularly vibrant context for learning profoundly and poignantly about our world.

We Have Longing

In my view, Lave and Wenger's rather cognitivist formulation of communities of practice (especially as articulated in Wenger's 1998 book) misses, indeed perhaps even suppresses, something deeply important. Just like in M. Night Shyamalan's 2004 film, *The Village,* in which members of a small town believe that a pact with mysterious creatures in the forest surrounding their village will protect them from unnamable evil as long as they never enter the woods, Lave and Wenger focus on what happens inside the boundaries of the community of practice but never speak of the darkness beyond. Ironically, just like in *The Village*, one of the things that ends up being most present in their notion of communities of practice, is the mysterious external absence, the nameless and suppressed vulnerability, that, in fact, is the primal constituting force of the community of practice which can never finally be expunged beyond its boundaries. As a consequence of Lave and Wenger's melodramatic presentation of communities of practice

(melodramas reinforce our sense of selves but rarely unsettle us), they occlude the profundity of what transpires when we participate and learn in an intersubjective thirdness. The psychoanalytic perspective is helpful here.

Winnicott's hopeful image of the holding and facilitating environment is offered as one way a child can metabolize the anguish of its helplessness. As psychoanalysts generally realize, however, humans never fully escape the dreadful sense of their own separateness and vulnerability. My previous image of a baby handed from thirdness to thirdness does not and can never protect us from our fundamental human plight. While we may not always be in pain, we never escape the itch of our primal wound. As a consequence, we develop defensive styles of living that aim to protect us from the worst.

As part of her attempt to come to terms with the recent rise in what she calls retaliatory political sentiments in the USA, Lynne Layton (2006) describes the psychic defenses that develop and prevail when people are insufficiently held by their sociocultural context. Elements of these defenses include:

> an overwhelming sense that vulnerability is a shameful weakness that cannot be psychically tolerated; an inability to mourn losses; a need for certainty that arises from an inability to bear ambiguity and ambivalence; a predominance of defensive splitting and projection, through which one assigns blame to others while claiming unsullied innocence for oneself; a predominance of humiliation and other forms of shaming; and an either omnipotent or submissive mode of conceptualizing relations to others. (p. 145)

Certainly, it might overreach to claim, as Christopher Lasch (1979) does, that late capitalism generates cultural conditions that produce widespread narcissism whose diagnostic criteria precisely match Layton's description. As Layton (2006) observes, "Since no one escapes the slings and arrows of narcissistic wounding, no matter how gentle the culture, most people's psyches are apt to revert on occasion to narcissistic modes of relating" (p. 146). Still, it does seem likely that the rampant colonization of the lifeworld by the economy and state that occurs in late capitalism, particularly in its neoliberal mode, might indeed be making things much worse (Habermas, 1989).

Layton (2006) provides yet another thing to consider. Due to the gendered nature of our current global context, the particular reactions of men and women to their "narcissistic wounding" are usually distinct. Typically, although certainly not always, women attempt to minimize their sense of vulnerability by experiencing "their agency as selfish and so … submit themselves pathologically to men." Men, on the other hand, strive to escape their helpless feelings by experiencing "connection as a humiliating form of dependence, to which they have responded by seeking omnipotent control over women" (p. 147). All of this, one can imagine, plays out in interesting ways in the thirdness that forms when people become sexually intimate.

Psychoanalyst, Otto Kernberg (1995), helps us understand some of these dynamics. Normally, within the homoerotic context of their teenage peergroups, Kernberg relates, young men defend themselves from insecurities about their male identities by splitting off and denying need for emotional connection. Sexuality is fantasized as a context for omnipotent agency through which a man can obtain recognition by controlling the pleasure of his partner. In his fantasy, the young man reduces the sexual act to its starkest physical aspects with little emotional connection. Circling just beyond the boundaries of a man's fantasy of omnipotent control, however, is his deep longing for connection and his great fear of being seen as imperfect.

Contrarily, within the homoerotic context of their teenage peergroups, young women normally defend themselves from insecurities about their female identities by splitting off and

denying need for physical agency. Sexuality is fantasized, in their case, as a context for romantic emotional connection through which a woman obtains recognition through attaining true love. In her fantasy, the young woman reduces the sexual act to a rather warm, emotional experience with nebulous physical detail. Again, just beyond the bounds of this fantasy of passive romantic connection lurks the young woman's longing for autonomy and control and her great fear of being seen as aggressive and desiring (Kernberg, 1995).

While Kernberg's depiction may seem rather dichotomizing, it helps us understand the psychic ambiguity that lurks just below the surface when human beings pair up. Certainly, whatever the case, the fantasies that people bring to their sexual partnering, only constitute a starting place for their relationships. In fact, the reason sexual intimacy is particularly important for adult educators to consider is that it is in this little community of practice that the great opportunities and impediments for deep and transformational learning come most clearly into view.

We Intertwine: The Cultural Learning Relation

Within the context of mature sexual intimacy, human beings have a wonderful opportunity to learn to exist with others in, what Martha Nussbaum (2001) identifies as the hallmark moral state, "mature interdependence." She describes this state as one in which a person:

> is able to accept the fact that those whom she loves and continues to need are separate from her and not mere instruments of her will. She allows herself to depend upon them in some ways, but she does not insist on omnipotence; and she allows them, in return, to depend in certain ways upon her; she commits herself to being responsible for them in certain ways. (p. 224-5)

The reason sexual intimacy has such potential to shape this attitude (and, equally, why it can be the context of equally destructive, pathological force) is because it generates a play space within which the couple will confront some of their deepest insecurities. While there are myriad ways of forming a healthy, mature sexual relationship, a few things are essential.

First, the couple must form a bond of trust within which they are able to reveal vulnerabilities. This is particularly so given that the sex act itself involves physical transgression of body boundaries (most saliently, but not only, experienced by women). As Luce Irigaray (1988) relates, in the sexual act, the space for play, is as close as a mere skim of mingled mucous that the couple produces and delights in together. Passion obliterates our solitude, for a moment mixing our souls. But, we do not lose ourselves completely. In love, Irigaray insists, we move into what she calls, a "chiasmus," a properly dialectical space, within which we exist with the other but at the same time stay ourselves.

Second, the couple must develop a tolerance for ambiguity. The rigid splitting that people bring to relationships, deeply shaped by gendered cultural norms, can be gradually softened and shifted in the mature sexual relationship. Men (and women, too) learn, as Hegel long ago insisted, that deep recognition comes not through control but through yielding to the other's freely given embrace (Honneth, 1995). Women (and men, too) overcome their fear of being obliterated by their partner's and their own aggression and learn the pleasure of agency. In this way, definitions of masculinity and femininity shift, and with them entire life scripts.

Third and finally, drawing on things learned within the bounds of their intersubjective thirdness, the couple must face outwards with new capacities for love, tolerance, and responsibility. The very closedness of the mature sexually intimate relationship is what prepares

the hearts of its inhabitants to tolerate the monstrous ambiguities of the external world. And, perhaps the most touching of ambiguities that faces everyone who loves is how, "in the final analysis, all human relationships must end, and the threat of loss and abandonment and, in the last resort, of death is greatest where love has most depth; awareness of this also deepens love" (Kernberg, p. 63).

As adult educators, we strive to understand how to support learning. We dream up techniques and tools, study learner attributes and group dynamics, and criticize structures of domination. A quick look at mature sexual intimacy reveals something else deeply important to keep in mind, however. Human learning in communities of practice always transpires in relation to the perennial vulnerabilities that plague us as a thinking and deeply emotional species. We never really just teach new things. In every case, learning involves brushing up against the darkness of what we do not know and cannot control. This is the thrill of being in love. It is also the thrill of the cultural learning relation.

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