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Learning and Education of Marginalized Women in the United States

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Abstract: *What do we 'know' about marginalized women's learning and educational experiences and how can this knowledge positively inform educators and researchers? All interested scholars are invited to share their research methodologies, experiences, and findings in this roundtable as we begin to develop a collective understanding.*

This roundtable arises from our individual and collective observations that while there is a large and growing body of literature on the learning and education of marginalized women, “their learning experiences continue to be ignored on a practical level” (Guisela)*. We have observed few systematic attempts to develop a comprehensive and coherent understanding of marginalized women’s learning and education. One consequence, as many of us have noted, is that adult educational programming designed to serve marginalized women often is ill- or even misinformed of their learning needs and the contexts in which they learn, and thus fails to accomplish its intended goals. Another consequence is that as new researchers struggle to give marginalized women voice, each must address the rather uniquely undeniable power differential between researcher and researched, with little focused advice from those who have come before. We aim to remedy this situation, by bringing marginalized women’s learning and education to the center of our analysis. Our long-term goal is to address the question, “What do we ‘know’ about marginalized women’s learning and educational experiences and how can this knowledge positively inform educators and researchers?” This roundtable begins our endeavor.

For all of us, the term “marginalized” has multiple meanings. The women we have researched include incarcerated women, women on welfare, working poor women, and immigrant undocumented workers. On the one hand, declaring these women marginalized describes their shared social experience of exclusion from educational choice; jobs that pay a living wage; safe, affordable shelter and daycare for their children; the full rights of citizenship; and other vehicles to power in mainstream U.S. society. “Questions of who is marginalized, in what ways, under what conditions, and by whom are raised, thereby linking interaction effects among economic, political, social, and geographical contexts” (Barbara). Furthermore, using “marginalized” to describe our research participants provides us a “common ground of inquiry” (Guisela), and establishes a foundation for building a collective consciousness of our research and analysis as vital contributions to the larger discipline of adult education.

On the other hand, “marginalized” as a descriptor “decontextualizes everyday experiences of the women we talk about and can imply victim status and powerlessness through abstracting individual lives into categorical ones” (Barbara). It “...serves to reduce the women to pawns in a system” (Jenny). Yet, all of our research projects reveal that marginalized women do, indeed, have agency. “[We] didn’t see [a loss of agency] in our work with women in the prison, for sure, even in such a highly regulated environment. And in the domestic and custodial women’s interviews I’ve done with my students, there’s a high level of agency as they carve out spheres of freedom for themselves within their work lives” (Carolyn).

Thus, there are at least two meaning standpoints from which “marginalized” may be understood: as a useful analytic toward a powerfully comprehensive and coherent knowledge

* This text is an analysis of email correspondence between Deborah Kilgore and the other roundtable participants in February and March, 2005. Participants’ comments are indicated with quotation marks and their first names.

base, and as a categorical denial of individual experience and agency. The tension between these standpoints presents opportunities to understand both process and product of research about marginalized women.

With respect to process, issues of power come into clarity in a way that is not as “pronounced” (Carolyn) as in other areas of adult education research. We all agreed with methodology texts that prolonged engagement with participants was important to gain a greater understanding of their lives that we “do not and cannot know except through them” (Barbara). Moreover, prolonged engagement also served the important purpose of developing “authentic and intimate relationships,” which was fundamental to understanding research participants’ perspectives (Guisela).

Our relationships with participants were built upon, and perhaps even defined by, mutuality. Several of us said we aimed to “[make] explicit...differences in background and [show] a genuine interest in learning about their experiences” (Guisela). “We each had something to offer; their experiential knowledge was honored and valued...” (Barbara). In addition to mutual respect, relationships were sustained by reciprocity. In her research with women on welfare, Barbara reciprocated the gift of the women’s stories, with “referrals for services, empathy when possible, [telling] my story of being a single mother, free workshops on applying for scholarships.” In her research with Central American immigrant women, Guisela “put my privileged status at the service of the participants. For example, I used my immigration status to request information for them, I accompanied one woman to doctors’ appointments, and I translated documents.”

With respect to research product, we all addressed the questions of representation and authority. For some, it “has at times paralyzed” us (Jenny). “How do we as ‘advocates/researchers’ position the women in our studies?” (Carolyn). To produce ethical interpretations that reveal both the social forces of marginalization and the everyday lives of marginalized women “required constant vigilance...” (Barbara). We each aimed to “capture their thoughts and concerns...the best that I could” (Jenny), but also felt an obligation to “analyze and interpret” using “a theoretical lens to make sense of their categories of meaning” (Barbara). Our findings are shaped by continual reflection on both our differences and our commonalities with marginalized women.

Our findings include the claim that marginalized women’s learning stands in contrast to adult education programming and practice. For example, adult education often is shaped by the hegemony of American individualism, while marginalized women’s learning takes place in relationship with others. Adult education often is a linear, progressive transfer of knowledge and ideology, which may or may not be internalized by marginalized women, whose learning often is incidental, informal, and experiential. Education that is at odds with marginalized women’s learning thus serves to reproduce their marginalized status, since adult educators believe that good education *should work*. Our research reveals why it does not, and suggests both limits to and possibilities for improvement.

We invite all interested scholars to join the conversation at this roundtable discussion and contribute to a collective, comprehensive, and coherent understanding of marginalized women’s learning and education.