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Carole E. Pearce

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### Recommended Citation

Pearce, Carole E. (1999). "Informal Learning of Homeless Women: A Feminist Study of Surviving the Everyday," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/1999/papers/34>

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# **Informal Learning of Homeless Women: A Feminist Study of Surviving the Everyday**

Carole E. Pearce

**Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine how homeless women learned to survive in their daily lives. Their relationships contributed to many years of unsettling experiences and continuous transitional situations. Each woman followed a progression of sophisticated street smarts, but eventually faced a devastating decision which served as the impetus for a learning experience that resulted in an empowering change.**

## **Introduction**

Poor women, victims of social and economic oppression, are the most likely individuals to become homeless. By the very nature of this oppression, they must learn to survive in adverse circumstances. Within the social context of homelessness, women in transition must learn to survive each day and hopefully realize a better quality of life in order to move beyond homelessness and poverty. These women are faced with numerous challenges that may warrant the attainment of further knowledge. There are times that stressful situations, such as loss of job, change in familial circumstances, etc. motivates an adult to seek new information.

Homeless women, coping with daily multiple and adverse situations, make decisions based on prior knowledge, obtained in both formal and informal learning environments. Specifically, formal learning environments include public schools, vocational-technical training schools, business schools, and the like. While informal learning environments are not structured and primarily constitute an individual's daily life experiences.

Michael Welton (1995) suggests that all social relations provide the arena for learning to take place and refers to this viewpoint as the social learning paradigm. He suggests that there are three types of institutions that "are the indispensable source from which our character and identity is formed and reformed" (p. 134). They are: family and schools; groups and associations; and cultural groups that promote religion, art, social norms, and the like. Personal identity and behavior patterns are formed through our social learning processes.

## **Paradigms of Women's Learning**

The context of women's learning is patterned by and reflects the multiple roles and tasks performed by women in our society. In turn, their relationships form an intricate web that serves as a foundation for their ongoing learning experiences. Mary Catherine Bateson (1994) reminds us that sometimes we learn by "plan and experience" (p. 42) and at other times we learn by observation. Most importantly each of us learns how to transfer knowledge from one experience to another.

Women's learning may be viewed from two perspectives: the analytical learning paradigm and the relational learning paradigm. In real life, it is difficult to distinguish the characteristics and tendencies inherent to each paradigm. However, for the purposes of this discussion, each learning process will be examined separately.

The analytic learning paradigm investigates the acquisition of knowledge that is gathered through formal institutions. The relevance of including this paradigm stems from a feminist interpretation that knowledge obtained in formal institutional settings reflect the male-dominated norms pervasive in our society. Specifically, this knowledge has been sanctioned by society, and taught in a manner that meets the needs of men and society.

The relational learning paradigm examines knowledge that is acquired from informal sources, particularly life experiences. Of primary interest, is how women utilize what they learn outside of formal institutions, such as schools and community activities.

### **Research Design**

The design of this study was constructed by drawing from the tenets of three forms of research: qualitative research, phenomenological methods and feminist research. Qualitative research is based upon the notion that reality is best understood by examining the social interaction among individuals. The underlying philosophy of phenomenological research methods guides the researcher to examine a specific situation within a particular environment. Feminist research methods (methods that are used by individuals who consider themselves feminists) were used to guide the relationship between the researcher and the participants, the acknowledgment of "voice," and each woman's oral histories.

I conducted three seventy-five minute interviews with each of the four study participants using the phenomenological interviewing approach. These interviews focused on obtaining specific information regarding the critical incidents, or significant events, that each woman had while being homeless. From each woman's collection of stories, I searched for evidence that she had learned some information and how this learning took place using thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews. The transcripts were then examined to identify the emerging themes and categories that were used to formulate the study findings.

### **Emergent Themes**

The experiences of the study participants was grouped into four themes: perception of self, instability of relationships, ineffectual decision making, and resourcefulness.

Perception of Self. The theme of perception of self is broken into three parts. First, I explored how each woman viewed herself. Second, the perception of self includes each participant's perception of how others view her. The third component is how I perceive each woman as she referred to herself in relationships or the comments that she made about herself. These self-identifying perceptions affected how each woman went about making decisions and how this affected her learning outcomes. Sometimes, these perceptions were heavily influenced by parents and other primary relationships in her life. There were other times that each woman's perception

of self was based on how she felt dealing with a particular situation in her life. These perceptions were predicated on their initial perceptions of self as a child.

**Instability of Relationships.** The interviews revealed a pattern, based on interpretation and how I viewed them, that suggested that each woman experienced unstable relationships. The relationships with parents, siblings, children and men that each woman named in her interviews had an influence on the decisions that she made and often affected her learning. Many times a study participant commented that she learned from her mistakes when taking familial relationships into account.

**Ineffectual Decision Making.** The decisions made by the participants did not always yield the desired outcome. At times some negative outcomes included: instability in a relationship, lack of suitable housing, or little or no economic benefits. How each woman went about making decisions affected the learning processes during their transitional status.

Sometimes it is difficult to discern between the decision making processes and the informal learning processes as they often follow similar or parallel paths. Occasionally, how the study participants made decisions and the learning that took place was often identical.

Each of the women interviewed made decisions in various ways. All of them commented at some point that their decision making strategies evolved from learning by the mistakes that were made through life experiences. It is interesting to point out here that throughout the span of their transitional status, their decision making skills ranged from making impulsive decisions through contemplative thought and planning.

**Resourcefulness.** The theme of resourcefulness examined the ways in which each woman utilized her understanding of a problem that she had to deal with and how she went about resolving the situation based on her understanding of her needs at that time. This section reflects the crux of this study: how each of these women learned to survive. The ingenuity of each woman ranged from one participant's experiences of living on the streets when she stated: "I was a con artist" and another's experiences of "I was acting," when discussing her flight from an abusive relationship to another woman's belief that you "do what you have to do." Sometimes the study participants acted contrary to acceptable moral behavior by lying, cheating, and stealing. Most often they survived by figuring out who they could trust to assist them during their transition, and more importantly learned to craft conscious resolutions to the dilemmas they were facing.

The term 'street smarts' refers to a compilation of the various ways that each woman went about surviving while in transition, whether it be negotiating to reside with a friend, live on the streets, or seek refuge in a shelter. Acquiring 'street smarts' is a very complicated, intricate process. This process begins as a child when the learning process begins, often very intrinsic at first, or learning by observing one's parents. Formal schooling also plays a part in this as a child, who turns adolescent, negotiates her social relationships in both the public world, and in the private world of home. How an individual feels about herself, or self-esteem, is very important and affects how decisions are engineered. When a girl or woman is abused, whether physically, emotionally, or both, she will make decisions under duress and will often take drastic measures

that ordinarily would be of a more calculating nature. As one participant comments "When you're being abused you question everything that you're doing."

### **Study Conclusions**

The informal learning progression of the study participants was affected by many external factors that stemmed from familial and social relationships. The foundation of each participant's social learning began as a child relating with her parents. Overall, her family life did not always provide a nurturing environment to encourage a positive sense of self and as stated in many instances was detrimental. Specifically, each woman lacked positive role models as a child to develop a personal identity that fostered self-esteem. Moreover, her family environment did not provide a positive and stable atmosphere for support in their formal education, or to establish strong and healthy social relationships with their parents.

Each woman, through unforeseen circumstances, was forced to prematurely assume adult roles and responsibilities while still an adolescent. This fact, coupled with a poor foundation for positive learning experiences within the family unit, forced her to persevere throughout periods of transition ill-prepared to meet the challenges that she faced. In this sense, each woman as a young adult did not have the guidance to distinguish between good and bad choices. In essence, each woman did not learn the skills to initiate effective decision making and maintaining a healthy relationship, or possess sufficient education to obtain sustainable employment.

Their informal learning path could be sub-divided into situational and intentional learning. Their situational learning course involved a complex web comprised of learning from mistakes, controlling relationships, crossing moral boundaries, and making spontaneous decisions. When viewing situational learning from a feminist lens, each woman was under the power and influence of controlling relationships with their father, a boyfriend, or a mother or whom she was dependent on at the time. To some extent, their learning was limited within a particular relationship since each woman succumbed to the choices established for her instead of making decisions based on her own choices.

When participants employed intentional learning, the process consisted of planned activities that utilized community resources and services. Therefore, each woman took the initiative to make conscious choices about her learning despite of the desires of someone who had previously dominated her life. Most often when engaged in intentional learning, the participants were making plans or had already left an abusive relationship. Thus, the intentional learning was self-initiated.

### **Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

From this study, I discovered that the learning of these women is greatly affected by their relationships and that often these relationships provide intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors for a positive or negative learning experience. I also learned that their dominant relationships influences their social ability for positive informal learning experiences and that this interference affected an awareness of their own personal identity and development as women. While we do not know that their self-esteem was affected by their relationships, we do not know the extent

that self-esteem was suppressed by the men in their lives. Nor do we know the extent to which these women believed that they could make a change in their lives because they continued to repeat similar behaviors that were devastating to their lives.

Homeless educators could benefit from incorporating ideas drawn from the theory of perspective transformation, which is defined as "the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167), to enhance the learning strategies of homeless women. Educators of homeless women may consider ways to foster self-efficacy and self-esteem into their daily interactions with the women. Without a strong sense of self and belief that she has control over her thoughts, feelings, and actions, a woman in transition will be more likely to repeat similar behavior that stifles her chances to obtain a stable and independent life. Furthermore, educators of homeless women must remain cognizant of the fact that decision making among homeless women affects their stability and seek ways to encourage homeless women to make decisions that will disrupt their transitional cycle. This may be accomplished by examining the decision-making process of each woman and provide a means that would encourage reflective learning.

Homeless education classes should incorporate ideas to encourage women to engage in critical thinking. It was apparent that these women did not often acquire critical thinking skills through their life experiences. However, these women crafted ways to obtain street smarts and possess the capability to analyze this knowledge in a positive manner. By employing critical thinking, a homeless woman may examine previously held assumptions, attitudes, and behaviors to discern different ways of navigating her life.

Finally, educational programs for homeless women may provide tools that will empower women to initiate conscientious and healthy behavior to obtain stability in their relationships and in other areas of their lives. Specifically, the women must realize that there are practical solutions to their problems and actively seek the tools to achieve a stable life.

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