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Experience, Learning, & Consciousness: Advancing a Feminist-Materialist Theory of Adult Learning

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Abstract: This paper theorizes from the literature of feminism, sociology, historical materialism, and adult education to advance a feminist-materialist approach to the long-standing debates regarding individual and social dimensions of learning and the relationships between experience, learning, and consciousness.

Feminists have a long history of questioning the presuppositions of the field of adult education. These interrogations have ranged from the questioning of patriarchal biases and practices in adult education to the development of feminist epistemologies and pedagogies. The most recent feminist interventions have drawn heavily from post-structural theories of identity, difference, voice, and critiques of Enlightenment rationality. The influence of post-structuralist feminism on adult education appears to make sense given its emphasis on positionality, experience, and the self, all of which are particularly salient issues to adult educators. However, there remains an important conflict between post-structuralism and the critical tradition of education, particularly in regards to a critique of capitalist social relations and a vision of social transformation. Further, post-structuralists advance understandings of the self, the social, experience, and identity, which are rooted in the circulation of language and detached from the material world. The purpose of this paper is to reconsider the notions of the individual and social dimensions of adult learning and their relationship to experience as a central component of learning and consciousness from an alternative feminist framework.

I want to argue that a feminist-materialist framework, which is explicitly a Marxist-Feminist approach, adds a necessary dimension to on-going debates concerning the individual, the social, experience, learning, and consciousness; debates which remain active in our field as we struggle against a pervasive, psychologized focus on the individual. Marxist-Feminist scholarship attempts to develop the philosophical tradition of dialectical historical materialism as it relates to questions of race, gender, difference, identity and experience. The articulation of these categories by Marxist-Feminists is essential to the theory and practice of adult education, in a manner that radically departs from the political limitations of post-structural feminism. Feminist scholars in our field are already developing this analysis by examining educational practices such as mentoring (Colley, 2002), informal learning (Gorman, 2007), and learning in diaspora and under conditions of war (Mojab & Gorman, 2003; Mojab, 2009)².

Marxist-Feminism is, to me, not simply a set of theoretical constructs that I use to guide my interpretation of the world around me. Marxist-Feminism is a framework for inquiry, the production of knowledge, and political struggle; it has provided for me a way of looking at how the world is put together through the everyday activity of people and a way to understand how certain forms of knowledge come to dominate our consciousness and activity. In embracing the analytic foundations of Marx, my colleagues and I work from a particular strain of Marxist

² I want to acknowledge and express my gratitude to my colleagues who have worked over the past few years to develop our thinking on this issue. In particular, Shahrzad Mojab, Amir Hassanpour, Paula Allman, Helen Colley, Bahar Biazar, Nadeen El-Kassem, Sheila Wilmot, Sheila Gruner, Bonnie Slade, Bethany Osborne, and Soheila Pashang.

theorizing, typically known as dialectical historical materialism, characterized by Marxist authors such as Derek Sayer, Bertell Ollman, and Martin Nicolaus, and tirelessly promoted in the field of adult education by Paula Allman. These theorists have directed our attention towards Marx's critique of idealism and ideology, his development of the notion of dialectics, his understanding of the objectification of the social world, and his method of historical materialism. They deviate from positivist political economists in that they help us to understand how Marx himself learned to understand the social world and thus, how to go about conducting inquiry into its messy organization. They help us to understand Marx's critique of idealism as an ideological method of thought that reifies the social world outside human activity, distorting our understanding of the relations of domination and exploitation that characterize our everyday lives. These authors impress upon us the importance of understanding dialectics as a method of seeing social relationships as composed of mutually determining forces; "opposites" that cannot develop outside of their relation to one another. They have guided us to the foundation of Marx's thinking; the social world not as a structure or system, but as human activity and forms of consciousness, as intricate forms of human social relations. In this way, we come to understand Marx and Engels' emphasis on "the material world" as a focus on the production and reproduction of our lives, which they characterized as a double relationship, both natural and social. (Marx & Engels, 1888/1991).

However, I move beyond the analyses of these authors by looking to feminist scholars such as Dorothy Smith, Himani Bannerji, Teresa Ebert, and Silvia Federici for a more thorough articulation of "material" and "social" relationships. From Dorothy Smith I draw a unique re-articulation of Marx's ontology as a way of conducting social inquiry and as a way of understanding individual and institutional arrangements. Smith has demonstrated the contemporary forms through which the social world and our consciousness become objectified forces outside the individual. Himani Bannerji gives us a profoundly thorough articulation of the "social organization" of the material through the social relations of gender and race. Contrary to post-structural articulations of gender and race as discourses, Bannerji provides a Marxist-Feminist understanding of race and gender as "no less than active social organization" (2005, p. 149). Race and gender, she argues, are logics we use to organize our world, the ideas and knowledge we circulate, the ways in which we labor and produce. The social formations of race, gender, and class cannot be disarticulated from one another, but rather continually shape and influence how our behavior and consciousness of each develops and changes.

The Marxist-Feminist framework that I am proposing for adult education will focus on at least these aspects of the feminist extension of Marxist thought: the social world as socially organized racialized and gendered human relations; ideology as an epistemology for the reification of the social and the abstraction of the individual; and "praxis" as an articulation of the dialectical relationship between experience and consciousness, with particular emphasis on how experience is formed through material and social relationships. With this important project in mind, I limit my discussion here to revisiting a central relationship of adult learning theory: the individual, the social, and experience.

Revisiting the Individual and the Social in Adult Learning

The conceptual grounds of Marxist-Feminism, as articulated above, constitute the foundation of my understanding of the relationship between the individual and the social in adult learning. Historically, our theory of learning has been based on a very different understanding of this relationship. Early scholarship in the field of adult education emphasized, almost exclusively, the individual dimensions of learning. By individual, I mean that the focus of inquiry was on how

individuals change in the process of learning, specifically, how their behavior changes. There was little or no attention to the influence of the social on the individual. As has been widely noted, these behaviorist conceptions of learning limited our understanding of this complex phenomenon to its cognitive, and explicitly psychological, dimensions. As we have recognized the limitations of these purely cognitive approaches to learning, pragmatism came to dominate our understanding of learning. This scholarship, perhaps exemplified by the traditions of Dewey and Kolb, brought us to a point of understanding learning as a necessarily social activity, although they have been rightly critiqued for treating the social as flat context unconnected to contestations of power.

More recently, scholars in the field have attempted to widen our understanding of learning by promoting the importance of the social in adult learning theory. The importance of social context in learning process, particularly informal learning process akin to socialization, have been substantively discussed by Jarvis and Foley among others. On the whole, these authors have argued that learning is both an individual and social process. They have demonstrated how learning is necessarily cooperative, how it is deeply influenced by the social context in which it takes place and by the cultural constructions that dictate its parameters. Some feminist and anti-racist scholars have regarded this work as pseudo-social, arguing that it ultimately relies on a highly individualized conception of the “autonomous adult learner” (Gorman, 2007). The developments of transformative learning theory have directed attention to learning as a process of social construction, or meaning making. However, these articulations, which vary significantly from theorists such as Mezirow to Cunningham, have relied on an implicitly discursive understanding of the social. These various analyses have taken great pains to elaborate the importance of the social and in doing so have often neglected to say exactly what they think constitutes “the social.”

I would argue that adult learning theory is beleaguered by an ambiguous understanding of the social, and thus the individual, which often privileges one at the expense of the other. We have seen a recent resurgence re-naming of the problem of reducing the social to the individual and an increased sense that we can no longer account for certain social relations, such as capitalist patriarchy, through this myopic focus. Some authors, such as Jarvis, have rigorously established this relationship by, for example, drawing on Ponty’s phenomenological ontology. Other theorists have found inspiration in Habermas’ work. The common thread here is either an implicit or explicit objectification of the social. The social is understood, almost always, as something that exists outside the individual and with which the individual interacts. Our reaction to this problem has been to rely on a post-structuralist rejection of ontology, which at the same time embraces an understanding of the social world as the circulation of meaning. This is not a problem unique to adult education. It constitutes one of the oldest, and still most rigorous, debates in social theory.

For Marx, the problem of the individual and the social is intricately connected to the debate between idealism and various forms of materialism as philosophical frameworks. Briefly, Marx rejected idealist philosophy, which posited that human consciousness dictated social reality. The genius of *The German Ideology* is his proof that the exact opposite of idealism, a crude, deterministic materialist philosophy that argues that reality dictates consciousness, is in fact a repetition of idealism. For both of these perspectives, reality was only considered as “*the object of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively” (Marx & Engels, 1888/1991 p. 121 emphasis in original). Marx and Engels argued that social theorists were thinking about social reality as merely forms of consciousness that exist outside of people; or in the language of adult educators, as knowledge or culture that is objectified outside the learner. Marx argued that social reality is human activity; the social world is made up of all the labors we

perform in cooperation with one another *and* the way we think and make meaning of this work. The relationship between reality and consciousness is not linear, but dialectic, and thus the relationship between the individual and the social is not static but cooperative. By this I mean, that if the social world is composed of our activity, then we cannot be separated from it. We are always active participants, at once leaders and followers, in the everyday world around us.

From a Marxist-Feminist perspective, the individual can only be understood through her/his relation with the social, as the two cannot be disarticulated from one another. It is for this reason that I use the language of “social relations,” as it guides me to constantly think about the social world as a complex of human activity and relations. The contribution of Marxist-Feminists to this Marxist ontology is to expand our understanding of “the material” as all human activity and organization that is gendered (generally) and “differenced” (specifically) through particularly salient relations of race, religion, ethnicity, caste, language; any axis upon which humanity is divided against itself (Bannerji, 2005). Adapting this sense of the social, and thus the individual, to the field of adult learning theory has vast implications, particularly for how we theorize epistemologies of racialized and gendered populations and approach our base assumption of learning as the acquisition of new knowledge or “meaning making.” However, to begin we must revise our understanding of the notion of “experience.”

A Revised Notion of Experience

If we work from this understanding of the social and the individual, then we must consider the messy relationship it posits between experience, learning, and consciousness. This relationship is significant for many theorists, but adult educators have paid special attention to it over the years. I glean my understanding of consciousness from Paula Allman’s work, particularly her excellent discussions on the dialectical relationships between experience and consciousness. However, Mojab has critiqued Allman’s work for limiting her discussion of the dialectic between materiality and consciousness to forms of labor power and not considering the ways in which labor power is racialized, gendered, and enacts embedded colonial relationships³. Allman and Mojab’s work points us in the direction of an important revision of our notion of “experience” in adult learning.

Since the advent of Dewey’s work on experience and education and Lindeman’s influential assumptions about the nature of experience and learning, adult education theorists have held that “learning,” as opposed to “education” or “instruction,” is best theorized as some conceptualization of experience, reflection, behavioral change and/or changes in the interpretive domain, meaning that, through learning, we “make meaning” differently. How, then, do we understand experience? Dewey argued that experience can only be understood as “educative” if it contains the two principles of continuity and interaction. Following this logic, experiential learning theorists have pursued the theoretical and pedagogical implications of reflection and context, particularly in theories of reflective practice and situated cognition. This position lends itself to an emphasis on the individual processes of meaning-making and an examination of how those processes are mediated through the social. Often, the notion of experience is itself left alone; experiences are just something that happens. Jarvis (1987) has taken pains to elaborate on the philosophical, sociological, and psychological dimensions of experience and argues that experience “involves relationships between people and their socio-cultural milieu” (p. 164). This interactionist logic results in an “all the world’s a stage” argument that again separates the

³ Mojab has articulated this critique in a forthcoming book chapter on adult education and imperialism.

individual out from relations in the social and simultaneously fails to tell us anything more about experience. Post-structuralist critiques of the interactionist argument have left experience at an ambiguous location between meaning, representation, and identity. The inability of post-structural theorists to explain experience, rather than just describe it, is largely attributable to their refusal to ground meaning in materiality.

I want to propose that in the field of adult education we have largely relied on a reified notion of experience as the basis of learning theory. By reification I do not mean commodification; this is a relationship that has been profoundly misunderstood and misarticulated in our field. By reification I mean, simply, “mistaking abstract concepts for real entities” (Sayer, 1987 p. 54). This is part of the process Marx refers to as ideology and which Dorothy Smith argues are

procedures that mask and suppress the grounding of a social science: ideological procedures fix time in an abstract conceptual order. They derive social relations and order from concepts...They substitute concepts for the concerting of the activities of people as agents and forces in history (Smith, 1990 p. 34).

As adult educators, we have largely theorized experience as something that comes from somewhere else. This conceptualization is subtle and pervasive; we can see it in the ongoing positing of the social world as structures systems, or discourses that impact us, rather than as human relations in which we participate in active, but contradictory ways.

If we follow a Marxist-Feminist ontology, “experience” is our participation in disjointed social relations (Dorothy Smith, 1988). This means, we do not attempt to understand experience as a pre-reflective, sensory driven phenomenon. Instead, we focus on the “particular historical forms of social relations that determine that experience” (p. 49). In this way, we move beyond understanding “the ideas, images, and symbols in which our experience is given social form as that neutral floating thing called culture” (p. 54). Instead, we focus on how we construct knowledge from our experience in relation to delineating the historical and material relations that condition it and which constitute the social world in which our experience takes place. From a Marxist-Feminist perspective, the notion of experience must consider the complexity of these material appearances and forms. This is something that as adult educators we have struggled to do and have recently fallen back on notions of subjectivity and difference to understand experience. But, as Himani Bannerji has argued, the self is not a “found object on the ground of ontology, nor are they to be seen only as functions of discourses” (2001 p. 3). By this Bannerji is referring to the Marxist epistemological notion that individuals and their practice in the world are the embodiment of the dialectical relationship between forms of consciousness and the active human social relations that make up our everyday experience.

Moving Forward to Learning and Consciousness

A Marxist-Feminist notion of adult learning begins where every constructivist theory of adult learning begins, with an assumption of who individuals are in the social world and what constitutes their experience. However, rather than posit the individual as an autonomous subject that interacts with a swirling world outside them and beyond their powers, Marxist-Feminists approach everyday people and their learning as an active human project based in human agencies. This implies an extremely dynamic relationship between learning and consciousness, one in which we may be able to expand the notion of dialectics as the ongoing movement of contradictions in the social world to learning as the ongoing movement of consciousness through the movements of contradictions between experience and meaning. The efforts by Marxist-Feminist educators to revise our notion of adult learning are not limited to reworking our

theoretical paradigms for the purposes of new descriptions of social phenomenon. Rather, a Marxist-Feminist notion of adult learning pushes us to consider the relationship between active social organization, re-organization, and learning; while consciousness moves in unconscious ways, the outcome of educational efforts will not be just new ways to make meaning, but transformed human relations and practice.

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