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Non-Visibility Within Adult Education: Reading What Lies Written and Breathing Beneath

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Abstract: This paper explores, briefly, the non-visible aspects of adult learners, notably multi- and bi-ethnic learners. The complexity and contradiction of ascribed (publicly read) and (internally embodied) felt ethnic identities comes under exploration. .

Introduction

Much of adult education literature speaks of definite categories of learners: learners who bear markers of ethnicity, disability, sexuality, gender, poverty or any other source of difference. What becomes increasingly vital, because of kaleidoscopic transmutations of possibilities for a more nuanced identity, through accelerating migration, is the recognition that, with greater frequency, individuals do not belong to discrete categories. Many adult learners are read in one way, but identify in ways completely different from the apparent textuality of their bodies. How do and can adult educators accurately read identity subtexts of learners? Do teachers of adults have the tools and awareness to understand that a White woman can identify more as a Black woman or a Black man can identify more strongly as a White man. Blended families are creating less knowable pre-determined ethnic identities. This paper theorizes the role of liminal identity through understanding the complicated complexity for "non-visible" students attempting to negotiate their recognition and comprehension of self within adult education environments and relationships. The importance of this theorizing for adult education is to find entry points and avenues through non-visibility to read relationships between what is "obvious" about a learner and what adult educators have chosen not to see. What knowledge is lost and what assumptions are discovered as a result are critical to more fully understand the learners who have come to adult education within their wholeness.

Gaps Within the Liminality of Real and Imagined Identities

When engaging adult learners from a variety of backgrounds, instructors can rely upon "textuality of appearance" as shorthand for "reading" students. Within this world of swirling migrations of peoples and inter-marrying across cultures, the reality of blended families can often be subjected to "acts of erasure" or dismissal of a learner's full identity. By this term, is meant the discounting or the ignoring of what identity appears less visible. Public readings and private understandings of bodies carry tensions for the person containing a sense of self that, in turn, is being misread. Further, the sources for these stresses come from a variety of contexts that create "non-visibility" and "visibility" for readers of embodiment. In addition to the blending of ethnicities or "race," there are similar dynamics for people with identities borne from non-visible impairments (deafness, blindness or psychiatric disorders), class (presumption of middle classed as universal reading), regionality (readings of urban identity takes precedent over rural) and sexuality (heteronormative imperatives subsume possible readings of diverse sexual minorities). How can and do adult learners understand themselves within learning contexts in which they are being read inaccurately? This paper focuses upon the categories of "race." However, "race" being a biological mythological term, the preferred concept, is ethnicity.

Underpinnings Supporting the Theorization

Experiences of misreading, or not reading at all, my body as more than surface features is a common occurrence within adult learning environments for many. There are adult educators who continue to give greater credence to apparent physical attributes, rather than aspects of identity, which lay inscribed, breathing and partially hidden within bodies of learners. A typical experience stems from a moment within my university teaching when we, as teacher and students, as is typically done in first classes, were introducing ourselves to one another. One question arose of "How do you identify your ethnicity?" My response was "I grew up, through my large Jamaican maternal family, as both Canadian and Jamaican. In some very strong ways, I identify through my Jamaican heritage." Immediately, the reaction from the class was, "No way. How could I possibly take *that* on? You don't even look Black. Do you have pictures of your family you could show us?" Immediately, a significant part of who I was had to be "proven" or risk being publicly wiped away from further revelation or knowing. There was a "passion for ignorance" (Britzman, 1998) that "race" can be imagined beyond "black and white."

As an adult educator, the dynamic of erasing unconsidered, deeper senses of self in order to maintain the legibility of students' identities "easier" for the adult educator/reader rather than taking the time and effort to understand what lies just beneath. The skin. That thin, yet translucent, barrier straining in silence to, both, keep in and let out senses of self that can be deeply troubling for bodies that decipher an apparent contradiction. This paper works to disturb and provoke the taken-for-granted practice among many adult educators of "what I see is what I read; nothing else matters – or is even considered possible."

Embodied Textuality Elements in a Cohesive Relationships

With regard to "non-visibility," the key term in this theorization, the concept is placed alongside notions of "visibility" and "invisibility." Visibility relates to the dynamic of *being able to physically see, comprehend and understand what can be experienced*. Invisibility describes the dynamic of *being physically unable to see, comprehend and understand what exists to be experienced*. "Non-visibility" exposes the relationship between a person's whole and present embodiment of self and another individual's disregard or ignorance to read this complete presence. Further, replacing the misread meta/physical body is the reader's interpreting and manufacturing of experienced features to "fit" the reader's norms and expectations of meaning.

Several terms are evoked through this bordered living within multi- or bi-ethnicity. The first, from queer theory, is the notion of "closet," which is a social interaction construction whereby people hide devalued senses of self in order to be read as fully legitimate. Connected to the closet is the requirement to "come out" in order to achieve the potential for being fully read. Simply speaking and making public one's sense of non-visible identity is not enough to have one's full sense of self instantly legitimated. The connected notions of "proof" and "degree" have to be proffered. Proof speaks to the "reader" being the arbiter of whether the non-visible senses of self will be considered credible or outright disbelieved. The degree of proof determines the level someone's sense of self is legible (or in what contexts the person is read that way). Centrally, then, within this theory of adult educator/learner relationships the educator, already the one in power, is also the one who determines whether a student's non-visible identity is read as real or unreal, rather than the person who lives with the sense of self. Other dimensions within this theory of perception of non-visibility connect to Freirian forms of dialogue and Britzman's

(1998) *passion for ignorance* and the Foucauldian (1973; 1980; 1986) dynamic of *normalization* through, both, the *gaze* and the *confession*.

Speaking to Existing Theory Through Non-Visibility

Non-visibility speaks to two adult learning theories. Gadamer's (1989) notion of *conversation* and the process of knowledge being constructed between, or among, people fit well with how Freire (1986) shifts to the construct of *dialogue*. Continuing on, once the Habermasian (1984; 1987) overlay of distortion and power within conversations is integrated, then the introduction of non-visibility's role within adult education becomes clearer.

The second adult education theory within which non-visibility can be incorporated is Mezirow's (1981; 2003) perspective transformation. Non-visibility can be invoked to better understand the nuance of Mezirowan *meaning schemas*, or the taken-for-granted dynamics that are relied upon to govern social interactions. Certain norms of expectation are drawn upon to normalize how one individual wants to be engage – and read - by another. In an effort to keep interactions within the realm of convention, often information that is not deemed "normal" is removed from the equation. During those moments of exclusion, typically the misreading or devaluation of "the other's" identity occurs. The paper will explore other connections between adult education theories and the dynamic of non-visibility and ways erasures, intentional and unintentional, can be addressed within adult learning contexts.

Multi- and Bi-Ethnic Identity or Shades of Meaning

Presumptions that skin colour equate identity creates an either/or world that is simplistic and dangerous, particularly for those who inhabit that sense of self. That to appear "Black" or "Hispanic" or "Asian" automatically means that someone identifies "souly" that way. As the number of interracial marriages approaches 3 million within the United States and about 250,000 in Canada (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2008), there is an increase in bi-ethnic (for the purposes of this paper meaning first generation children born of parents of two markedly different ethnicities) and multi-ethnic (second generation children born of parents representing three or more ethnicities) identifying children. Many have, now, matured into adults seeking adult learning opportunities. This paper consciously has avoided focusing on "race," preferring the concept of ethnicity. Historically and traditionally, the concept of the "one-drop rule" has held sway over the construction of "race." Customarily, being bi-ethnic was equated to being Black. Ethnicity allows the breaking away from this legacy, while creating a greater fluidity across categories.

Within Rockquemore and Brunsma's (2008) and Wallace's (2004) works, the depiction of bi-ethnic and multi-ethnic identities, there are complexities that highlight that mixed blood does not automatically translate to Black. In a minority of instances, 13%, skin colour attributed to "race" does translate to Black; however, there was also 3% who felt themselves exclusively White. That vast majority of mixed ethnically identifying people in these studies indicate that there is lack of fixity to either Blackness or Whiteness. Bi-ethnic and multi-ethnic adults have learned overwhelmingly that theirs is a bordered identity. Many individuals with mixed backgrounds experience an easier movement between or among ethnicities. Challenges arise when interactions with others suggest that being mixed ethnically should be relegated to one category, Black and these bi-ethnic and multi-ethnic are read in a fixed way, yet feel in an embodied way a liminal sense within their worlds.

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There are struggles that are aligned with living between borders: challenges with one's social and personal definition of self, justifying or "proving" one's identity choice, situations where he or she is forced between categories, lack of bi-ethnic/multi-ethnic role models, the double rejection from both familial ethnicities and conflicting messages from family members and peers about identity choice. Much of these issues are interactional, socially constructing, reinforcing or negating an individual's sense of self. Adult educators can align their beliefs with skin colour equalling identity, without fully exploring how a learner has developed his or her internal sense of self.

Without a sense of how to proceed with one's adult life, there remains to some degree identity confusion because of the constant vague socialization from family and peer reference groups that impinge upon the multi-ethnic individual. Adult educators have to be aware that with learners increasingly coming from blended backgrounds, there will need to be heightened awareness that hidden beneath the skin colour may be a sense of self that is a mixture, beyond ethnicity or of one fixed ethnicity or another. Further, among mixed ethnicities there is a contextuality that further shapes the situatedness of identity. Through conversations and social interactions, processes of normalization arise to shape and challenge identities that don't easily fit within a category. Increasingly mixed ethnicity shifts beyond fixed categories, striving to fit nowhere and everywhere at once: to identify as transcending beyond one or other ethnicity, preferring to only see themselves as human – beyond the reach of categories. Much of this remains non-visible, beyond the perception of many adult educators.

Summary: Beyond "Race"

Within adult education, there are increasingly adult learners who come from blended ethnic families that are not readily apparent. Rather than focus on categories of "race," there needs to be greater attention to ethnicity and the existence of identities that are bordered between two or more. The complexity of bi-ethnicity and multi-ethnicity creates challenges for educators reliant on the colour of skin to determine the identity of learners. Some learners identify very strongly with an identity that does not coincide with appearances or a blending of ethnicity – or beyond categories of "race" or ethnicity to something approaching a more universalizing sense of human. Digging beneath the skin to better understand the legacy of embodied ethnic living is critical for adult educators to best align student interests with teaching efforts.

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