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“What do future educational leaders know about gender?”: A feminist content analysis

Debora Nelli, Portland State University

The educational access, opportunity and experience of students and educators in U.S. educational institutions is influenced and often limited by their gender. Gender discrimination impacts the academic, emotional, vocational and economic lives of both students and educators.

The Glass Ceiling Commission sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor determined key factors in the amelioration of institutional gender discrimination were the beliefs, values and commitments of the institution’s leaders (U.S. Dept of Labor, 1995). The pivotal role educational leaders play in either reproducing or disrupting institutional gender inequity makes it essential to examine cultural artifacts for insights into the expressed and implied values, beliefs and commitments of future educational leaders regarding gender issues.

Purpose statement

Feminists have used content analysis to examine cultural artifacts such as texts, products, images and multimedia to expose and challenge dominant narratives and stereotypical representations (Leavy, 2007). Examining the textual cultural artifacts of academic socialization is also a uniquely appropriate project for feminist content analysis. There is often a tension between doctoral socialization’s primary purpose of imparting academic traditions and feminist ideals of questioning, revealing and resisting traditions that reproduce inequalities.

The initial socialization of educational leaders to the cultural norms of the discipline occurs during graduate study (Weidman, Twale & Stein, 2001). Additionally, doctoral dissertations represent “the intellectual culmination of the graduate school experience” (Boyer, 1990, p.74). This gives dissertations a unique descriptive value as an academic socialization artifact of future educational leaders.

Understanding the beliefs, values and commitments of future educational leaders in regards to gender issues provides a crucial first step in creating graduate programs and professional socialization experiences that can prepare educational leaders to meet the needs of all students and educators in a diverse contemporary society.

This study uses feminist content analysis as a lens to examine the gender consciousness, cultural beliefs and gender conceptualization of future educational leaders as represented by a key textual academic socialization artifact, the Educational Doctorate (Ed.D.) dissertation.

Research Questions

This study examines gender focused Ed.D. dissertation scholarship from U.S. public doctoral granting institutions in the last decade as indicated by the dissertation title. This inquiry into the consciousness and cultural gender beliefs of future educational leaders will focus on two questions, 1.) How prevalent is gender focused inquiry in recent Ed.D. dissertation scholarship? 2.) What are the cultural gender beliefs and gender conceptualizations represented in Ed.D. dissertation scholarship from leaders graduating in the last decade, 1998-2007?

Research Design

The study uses a mixed method approach to feminist content analysis with an initial quantitative stage to answer the 1st research question: How prevalent is gender focused inquiry in the last decade of dissertation scholarship?

Stage 1-Quantitative Sampling and Analysis

The sample for the quantitative stage will be the entire census of Ed.D. dissertations completed at public doctoral granting institutions during 1998-2007. Ed.D. dissertation titles will be collected using Proquest's Dissertations and Thesis Database for all public doctoral granting institutions identified by their Carnegie's institutional classification. Trained coders will examine, select and count dissertations titles with a gender focus. Multiple coders will be utilized and tested throughout Stage 1 data collection to ensure intercoder reliability.

Stage 2-Qualitative Sampling and Analysis

The sampling for the qualitative stage of the study will select a smaller purposeful sample of dissertations to undergo more in-depth analysis to answer the 2nd research question: What are the cultural gender beliefs and gender conceptualizations represented in Ed.D. dissertation scholarship from leaders graduating in the last decade, 1998-2007?

Textual representation from these selected dissertations will be examined to assess the presence of gender cultural beliefs, or stereotypes. Additionally, Tetreault's (1985) *Feminist Phase Theory* will be used as a theoretical model to assess gender conceptualization in the qualitative stage of this study. Tetreault's (1985) *Feminist Phase Theory* offers an evaluation model that has been successfully used to evaluate gender representation in textbooks, curricula, faculty professional faculty development and scholarly publications.

Contemporary feminist researchers also suggest that using gender as a category of analysis is complicated further by additional intersectionalities of advantage and disadvantage such as race, ethnicity, religion, age, class, and sexual orientation (Collins, 2000). Tetreault's (1985) model offers a lens to assess gender focused studies for a more inclusive gender conceptualization.

In addition to Tetreault's (1985) *Feminist Phase Theory* model, Altheide's (1987) ethnographic content analysis will be also be used as an additional analytical tool to allow the additional flexibility for additional themes to emerge that may not be captured solely by Tetreault's (1985) *Phase Theory Model*.

Implications for Adult Education

Unofficial educational policy is represented by dominant patterns of practice and cultural norms (Fowler, 2004). This study examines the current disciplinary cultural norms regarding gender as represented by educational leaders. If the cultural norms and unofficial policy of future educational leaders is to ignore, exclude or trivialize gender issues in education scholarship, gender discrimination in the access, opportunities and experiences of students and educators will remain uninterrupted by policies and practices in educational institutions.

A feminist content analysis of recent Ed.D. dissertation scholarship can offer valuable insights about the gender consciousness, cultural gender beliefs and gender conceptualization of future educational leaders. Insights gleaned from this key academic socialization artifact can inform program planning for the professional development of educational leaders.

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