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# Spiritual Development and Commitments to Emancipatory Education in Women Adult Educators for Social Change

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**Abstract:** *This paper discusses the results of a qualitative research study of the spiritual development of a multicultural group of women adult educators for social change, and its relationship to their current commitment to emancipatory adult education practice.*

Teaching for social change is the work of passion for many adult emancipatory educators, often fueled by a deep underlying ethical, social and spiritual commitment. Indeed, it is important work, and there has been considerable theoretical debate and some attention to how adult educators can attempt to teach in an emancipatory way, in critical and feminist pedagogy, in discussions of challenging power relations based on race, class, or gender (Hayes & Colin, 1994; Tisdell, 1998; Walters & Manicom, 1996). What has been missing from the literature is attention to what drives this underlying commitment or how spirituality informs the work of such emancipatory adult educators. This is somewhat surprising, since almost all who write about education for social change cite the important influence of the work of educator and activist Paulo Freire, who was a deeply spiritual man strongly informed by the liberation theology movement of Latin America (Freire, 1997). As noted elsewhere (Tisdell, 1999), there has also been relatively little attention to the subject of spirituality and spiritual development (as change over time) in the mainstream academic adult education literature. There is limited broader discussion of how spirituality affects teaching and learning (Dirkx, 1997; English, 1999), and its possibility for offering hope to emancipatory education efforts (Hart & Holten, 1993; hooks, 1994). But with the exception of the recent study on community and commitment by Daloz et al (1996) where the connection between spiritual commitment and social action is implied, *empirical research* on spiritual development and/or how it relates to a commitment to do social justice work is extremely limited. Clearly there are both male and female adult edu-

cators and activists teaching for social change who are motivated to do so partly because of their spiritual commitments. But many are women of different race and class backgrounds guided by feminist and antiracist educational perspectives, who have also had to re-negotiate their spirituality in light of having been raised in patriarchal religious traditions. How has their spiritual development changed over time, and how does their spiritual commitment relate to their cultural background and current emancipatory education efforts? *In light of the lack of adult education literature that deals with women, spiritual development and social justice, the purpose of this study was to examine the spiritual development of a multicultural group of women adult educators for social change, and its relationship to their current commitment to emancipatory adult education practice.* The study offers new insight into spiritual development in the often ignored socio-cultural context, and some implications for how adult educators may draw on spirituality in their own emancipatory education efforts.

## **Theoretical Framework/Relevant Literature**

This study is informed conceptually by Merriam and Caffarella's (1999) recent call for more integrative perspectives on adult development and greater attention to how the socio-cultural context informs adult development. But given the fact that the focus of the study is on the spiritual development of a multicultural group of women adult educators teaching for social change, there are three bodies of literature that informs the study. First is the feminist, antiracist, and critical pedagogy literature in the field

of adult education cited above that strongly informs the work of the participants in the study. Second is the literature on spiritual development, which is particularly reliant on Fowler's (1981) study, which resulted in a stage theory (of 6 stages) of faith development, based on 97% white, Judeo-Christian sample. While Fowler's theory is framed largely from a psychological perspective with almost an exclusively white sample, it contributes to our understanding of how people construct knowledge through image and symbol, an area that has been ignored by most development and learning theorists. But in ignoring the socio-cultural context, it does not attend to how knowledge construction through image and symbol is also bound to culture. Finally, given the attention to women and culture, the literature by feminists of color (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1987; Gunn Allen, 1992; Hill Collins, 1999; hooks, 1994), who discuss how cultural image and symbol from within their culture inform spiritual knowledge construction and meaning-making, ways of living in community, and working for justice in the world is also central to the study.

### Methodology

From a research perspective, this qualitative research study was informed by a poststructural feminist research theoretical framework, which suggests that the positionality (race, gender, class, sexual orientation) of researchers, teachers, and students affects how one gathers and accesses data, and how one constructs and views knowledge, in research and teaching. With this as a guiding principle, this phase of this ongoing research was interpretive or phenomenological. There were 16 participants (3 African American, 2 Latina, 7 European American, 3 Asian American, 1 Native American). Criteria for sample selection were that all participants: (1) be women adult educators for social change either in higher education or as community activists; (2) have grown up and been educated in a specific religious tradition as a child; (3) note that their adult spirituality (either based on a re-appropriation of the religious tradition of their childhood, or a different spirituality) strongly motivated them to do their social justice work. All participants participated in a 1.5-3- hour taped (and later transcribed) interview. Questions focused on how their spirituality has de-

veloped over the years, motivates and informs their adult education practice, and relates to their own race/ethnicity, and cultural background. Many participants also provided written documents of their own writing that addressed some of their social action pursuits or issues related to their spirituality. Data were analyzed according to the constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998).

### Findings

As introduction, it is interesting to note that while all these women were socialized in a specific faith tradition, only one is currently an active participant in her childhood religion. Further, all of these women have personal experiences of marginalization. The women of color experience this based on their race or ethnicity. Of the white women, three are lesbians, two are Jewish, four are of working class backgrounds, and the only white, heterosexual, of upper-middle class background participant had been married to a Muslim man from North Africa, so also had personal experiences of marginalization. Such experiences may have contributed to participants' greater interest in "teaching across borders" of race, gender, culture, and also relates to the three overlapping themes of spiritual development discussed by the participants.

#### *Moving Away – Spiraling Back*

The first and most overarching theme was that spiritual development was captured as a spiral process of moving away and "re-membering" or reframing spiritual attitudes and symbols from their culture of origin. The participants reported a move away from their childhood religious tradition, due to what was viewed as some underlying sexism, heterosexism, racism, or other hypocrisy in their childhood religious tradition. Some more or less drifted away in their early adulthood, while others, such as Shirley, an African American Civil Rights Activist, were more intentional. She notes about her young adulthood "*I became convinced Christianity was a trick – the oppressor to keep us humble and in bondage... Even the terminology 'Lord', 'Master' – Father/ God – I had serious issue with it, and stopped going to church.*" Yet, all the participants also reported spiraling back and reclaiming important childhood religious and cultural symbols

and metaphors. For example, Julia, a Chicana, re-framed Our Lady of Guadalupe as a feminist activist liberator, based partly in Catholicism and partly in the Aztec Goddess traditions. And Greta, a white woman who also grew up Catholic, discussed the continued importance of the metaphor of the Resurrection in her life, though she has long since left the Catholic Church, and notes: “...*I think that has really profoundly affected me. That Easter – there’s always some resurrection. You go to hell, you die and you’re really at the bottom of mystery, but then you get resurrected. Often I think about when I’m in bad shape—that resurrection.*” The role of music from their childhood tradition was mentioned most often as what continues to be meaningful. Anna, an African American woman, described the music of Aretha Franklin in connection to her ancestors and childhood religious tradition as particularly significant, and notes “*The way that Aretha sings is very old, so when I go back to my childhood, it’s really connected to my parents childhood, and so on, and so on, so she takes me back to places I don’t even know that I know about. There are ancient roots that are beyond my memory of this time and place. ... When I listen to Aretha – all of those songs are songs of struggle ... about how to survive, how to resist oppression, and I got to thinking about other spirituals that I know, and they’re all at that level.*”

#### *A Healing Life-force of Interconnectedness and Wholeness*

Participants described significant personal spiritual experiences as those that pointed to the interconnectedness of all things through what many referred to as “the life-force,” that also facilitated healing and the courage to take new action, and/or that lead to developing a more global consciousness. Some of these experiences related to grief and loss of a loved one, as was the case for Anna who described a transformed presence of her mother shortly after her mother’s death. Harriet, who grew up Pentecostal in the rural South, described a physical healing experience that she had that helped her come to terms with being a lesbian, and notes her thinking at that time as “*a turning point for me, because I thought ‘why would God heal me, if I was this*

*person that was condemned to hell, , and I thought ‘OK, this is my sign, that it’s OK for me to be a lesbian’.*” Elise also reported a significant healing experience in the presence of a leader in the Siddha Yoga tradition in the aftermath of a miscarriage that helped her work through her own grief and also facilitated healing in her relationship with her own mother. These experiences were perceived as being a result of the Life-force, and as Lisa, who grew up in Alaska, notes, “*Spirituality is some kind of aware honoring of that Life-force that is happening through everything,*” that is about the interconnectedness and affirmation of all of life. This honoring of the Life-force was related to the theme of authentic identity development, taken up next.

#### *The Development of Authentic Identity*

Virtually all of the participants discussed spiritual experiences that facilitated healing and the courage to take new action as those that facilitated the development of authentic identity. Ava, who grew up in Central America, after describing parts of her mixed cultural heritage along with some of her Mayan ancestry, noted “*I think that spirituality is to know who you are, and to be able to define who you are, wherever you are, despite the changing conditions of your life.*” Many discussed this in relationship to personal changes, such as the importance of their spirituality in going through a divorce. Harriet’s experience of her physical healing, also assured her of the authenticity of her own lesbian identity, and Elise’s spiritual experience, helped her deal more proactively and more maturely with her own relationship with her mother. Furthermore, for Elise, the fact that her healing was facilitated by a woman was significant. And in explaining the incident noted above, she noted “*I needed that woman energy. I needed it. I needed a mother. I didn’t need a tangible mother. I needed to know and experience that love energy, that nurturing energy that my mother could not give, so I could forgive my mother... So to be able to have that experience was part of my personal development.*”

Some of the participants described experiences of moving away from their childhood religious traditions to develop other parts of themselves as an important part of both their spiritual development and

the development of their identity. Anna described her move away from her childhood religion in her young adulthood and her involvement in neo-Marxist social movements as facilitating a greater understanding of spirituality and her own identity. She notes *“I think Marxism is a form of spirituality because it really is about connections with other people; it’s a rather earthly bound nature of connections, but it’s still about looking back and looking forward, and taking care of each other... So I guess it became in my Marxist period, which lasted until I was in my 30s; it was a transformation of God being outside of me who controlled all things [to] an inside internal controlling force – that human, or that life on the planet work was involved in making change, involved in creating reality, taking care of each other... that those connections happen here because of what we do as opposed to some other something outside of you doing something, and so I think in retrospect, my spirituality was still there.”* Similarly, Greta and Shirley also described their foray into neo-Marxist political literature and social movements, along with their “atheist phase” as related to their overall spiritual development. In sum, all the participants viewed their spiritual development as related to a more authentic identity, and consequently to also be more accepting of others’ identity.

### **Discussion and Implications for Practice**

The findings of the study offer some interesting insights about the relationship between spiritual development, culture, and emancipatory adult education efforts. The participants indeed had a strong sense of mission in terms of trying to challenge systems of oppression based on race, class, gender, ability, and sexual orientation in their adult education practices. For many, this was fueled not only by their spirituality, but also by a connection to their personal and cultural history, and in some cases an ancestral connection as well. In this respect, the stories of the participants in this study are similar to some of the participants in the Daloz et al (1996) study on community and commitment.

In light of the importance of spirituality in the lives of these women, it was initially perplexing that only one of the participants was still active as a

regular attendee at services in the religion of her childhood. Yet given that most of these women are teaching classes or working in programs where they are problematizing and trying to change the nature of *structural* power relations based on gender, race, class, sexual orientation, dis/ability, it is perhaps no surprise that these women would also have trouble with similar structural oppression in aspects of organized religion. Class issues were alluded to by several, but most often what was specifically mentioned as problematic aspects of their childhood religious tradition was the sexism and for many, the heterosexism as well, particularly for participants who grew up Catholic, or in the more conservative Protestant denominations.

In spite of having serious issues with structural systems of oppression in their faiths of origin, most were strongly attached to the symbols, music, and some of the rituals from their childhood religious traditions and the conceptual meanings attached to them. For example, while Greta has long since moved away from Catholicism, the symbolic meaning of Resurrection – the promise of new life after a dark night of the soul – continues to be an important metaphor for her. Similarly, even though these women had moved beyond their childhood religious tradition, they did often spiral back, and “remember” those aspects of it that were life-giving, at the same time that they integrated and were exposed to new ideas, new spiritual traditions, and had further spiritual experiences as an adult. However, what the women in this study seemed to be most attentive to as they “re-membered” their faith of origin was related to symbolic forms of knowing and unconscious processes – the music, aspects of ritual, particular symbols. This was reminiscent of Fowler’s (1981) remarks in his critiquing of Piaget and Kohlberg for ignoring the role of symbol in the knowledge construction process.

It is important to also note that aspects of their childhood tradition that they were particularly attached to are also deeply rooted in a cultural identity. For example, there was evidence of this in the cultural and spiritual significance for Julia as Chicana of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, in what the music of Aretha Franklin brought up for Anna of the African American experience, the significance of wilderness for both Beverly, an Alaska Native

woman, and for Lisa who also grew up in Alaska. This aspect of the cultural significance of spirituality may also explain, in part, why Sue continued to attend services in the Korean Presbyterian church; while there were aspects she found problematic, it was affirming of her cultural identity as a Korean-American. In any event, this aspect of the study offers some beginning insights to the relation between cultural and spiritual significance that has been little discussed in the spiritual development or the adult development literature. Further, what was most often mentioned as an important spiritual symbol for these women was a feminine symbol, embodied in one reminiscent of their culture, or in who participants had framed as an important current spiritual symbol for them. It is interesting to note that currently three of the participants now identify largely with the Siddha Yoga tradition, which is headed by a woman. While only a couple of participants noted that feminine figures were important spiritual figures for them specifically because they were women, it may be that on an unconscious level these spiritual figures are important in affirming their gender identity and their spirituality as women.

As many participants discussed, spiritual experience is not primarily about rationality. For the participants, spirituality was about experiences of a perceived higher power or a Life-force, about an understanding of the wholeness of all of creation, about making ultimate meaning out of one's life purpose, which for these participants was partly working for social justice. In Fowler's (1981) terms, spirituality is largely about symbolic processes that are not rational. And as may be noted, it is difficult even to put language around spiritual experience, as language in many ways forces people to map rational processes around what is experienced outside of rationality. Yet at the same time, none of the participants suspended their rationality in the process of describing their own spiritual development. Part of what their spiritual development seemed to be about was having spiritual experiences, and critically and rationally analyzing some of what those experiences were about while continuing to be open to new spiritual experiences. The move away from their childhood spirituality was partly a result of rational thinking processes – thinking rationally about aspects of their childhood traditions and finding some

of what was taught problematic. Furthermore, integrating new insights from different paradigms and new spiritual traditions was an important part of spiritual development. For example, Greta, Anna, and Shirley went through an "atheist phase" that was influenced partly by a foray into Marxism, the Black Power movement, and other social movements on an intellectual level. Yet like Freire (1997) who discusses the similarities between Marxism and Christianity, they eventually were able to integrate the aspects of Marxism that focuses on challenging structural oppression, with their spiritual beliefs, to develop new aspects of their spirituality. However, these aspects of rationally thinking about their spiritual experience was not a substitute for spiritual experience itself which was viewed as being outside of the realm of the rational. Thus what may fuel spiritual development is the integration of symbolic knowing and spiritual experience with the rational process of thinking about those experiences. This potentially includes attending to the cultural and gendered nature of those experiences.

All of the women in the study reported that their spirituality and own spiritual development indeed informed their educational practices, particularly in what they saw as the interconnection of spirituality and culture. There was, however, a difference in how directly participants discussed these things in their educational contexts, particularly between how those who were working in higher education (8 participants) teaching classes focusing on diversity and those who did adult education work in community based organizations (7 participants). The higher educators tended to draw on it more in preparation for classes (through meditation), in advising sessions where it may be directly discussed, and in classroom activities where it might be more implicit, such as in the use of music, symbols, artforms, and occasional activities that might suggest a spiritual connection that moves beyond conflict. Those who worked in community based organizations, on the other hand, reported that it comes up more directly, because members of the community bring it up and incorporate it. Both groups discussed the important role of knowledge construction through the affective, symbolic, and spiritual domains, and the limits of rationality in emancipatory education practice. In sum, while this study is limited, it offers some insight into

women's spiritual development, and how spirituality informs the work of women adult educators teaching for social change and makes a beginning contribution to the emancipatory adult education literature.

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