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The Use of Life History Collage to Investigate Significant Learning Experiences of Woman Development Leaders from India

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Keywords: arts-based research methods, life history, empowerment theory, development leaders, India

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to use life history collage to explore significant learning experiences related to the personal empowerment of female development leaders from West Bengal, India. Findings indicate a complicated understanding of empowerment - distinct and unique to Indian culture, customs and familial relationships. Central to each woman’s process of empowerment was contact with and the determination to fight against patriarchal norms. These norms were experienced in the brutality of village life and witnessed in dowry deaths, female infanticide, domestic violence, poverty and ignorance.

Purpose of Study
The purpose of this study was to use life history collage to explore the significant learning experiences of female development leaders from West Bengal, India and how this learning influenced their sense of empowerment and commitment to adult education programming.

Gill, Warner, Weiss, and Gupta (2009), indicate that the nature of development organizations is changing, and those who work in non-governmental organizations have moved beyond the role of “passive beneficiary to that of the change agent, [and] a key driver of economic and social development” (p. 24). Evidence from development programs demonstrates the importance of women as major actors in the reduction of poverty and facilitation of social change (Kumar, 2009). However, despite this role of change agent and the importance that women leaders in development organizations play, little is known about the women leaders themselves (Gill et al., 2009). This study contributes to the adult education literature in two ways. First of all, it contributes to qualitative research practices by introducing an arts-based research approach that uses participant created art projects as data. Secondly, this study contributes to our understanding of empowerment stories and motivations of adult educators and program planners from developing countries.

Theoretical Framework
The term “empowerment” is contested in the critical academic literatures of the West, which question whether personal “empowerment” without changing existing power structures is a sufficient goal (Inglis, 1997). While I respect these arguments, the concept of empowerment is central to the work of the Indian development leaders studied. Their slogans, songs, educational directives, even letter head are all built around the concept of female empowerment. Thus, in order not to intellectually colonize these women by questioning their use of the term
“empowerment”, I have instead chosen to foreground the concept by considering each woman’s sense of empowerment through the lens of empowerment theory.

In the international adult education literature, empowerment is understood to be situational at various levels of psychological, familial/interpersonal, socio-cultural, economic, political and legal aggregation (Handy & Kassam, 2004; Malholtra et. al, 2002; Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Furthermore, empowerment is often thought of as a process, or change from a condition of disempowerment, which involves an individual’s participation in activities associated with empowerment such as education and political action. In order to participate in activities associated with empowerment, one must have resources (Handy & Kassam, 2004; Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002; Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). This paper presents an analysis of the processes and resources that influenced the empowerment of five West Bengali development leaders who are also part of the same family.

**Research Design**

This study utilizes life history collage and interview to understand the significant learning experiences related to processes and resources of empowerment. Antikainen (1998) defines significant learning experiences, as “those [experiences] which appeared to guide the interviewee’s life course, or to have changed or strengthened his or her identity” (p. 218). In March of 2010, I traveled to Kolkata, India to live and work with the women for two weeks. The women studied were Pretilla, Mina, Kabita, Manami, and Mimi, Pretilla founded their development organization, Sasha, thirty five years ago. Mina and Kabita are her daughters and Mina is the current director of Sasha. Kabita’s daughters, Manami and Mimi are currently program directors at Sasha.

In order to facilitate authentic reflection on significant learning, I asked each woman to create a life history collage. The point of the collage was to prioritize, situate and illuminate meaning through the expression of art (Loock, Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 2003). By using art to explore learning, I introduce a form of qualitative inquiry that is post-colonial and postmodern in nature due to its ability to disrupt traditional narratives, minimize researcher developed questions, and challenge accepted ways of knowing (Barone & Eisner, 2006; Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008; Cole, Neilsen, Knowles, & Luciani, 2004; Coles & Knowles, 2008; Leavy, 2009; McNiff, 2008)

After making the collages, I asked the women to explain the elements included in their collage and their significance. This dialogue was recorded and no pre-formulated interview questions were asked, although I did ask clarifying questions. Follow-up questions were asked in taxis or rickshaws on the way to or from meetings and the information typed up nightly in an electronic journal. The data was coded for emergent themes and informed by the research question: What were the significant learning experiences that led to each woman’s sense of personal empowerment?

**Findings**

The findings of this study indicate a complicated understanding of empowerment - distinct and unique to Indian culture, customs and familial relationships (Mukhophyay & Seymour, 1994). Central to each woman’s process of empowerment was contact with and the determination to fight against patriarchal norms and the brutality of village life as witnessed in dowry deaths, female infanticide, domestic violence, poverty and ignorance. (Agarwal, 1999; 1

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1 For purposes of anonymity, the last names of the women and the name of their organization have been changed.
Hauswirth, 1932; Mather, Greene & Malhotra, 2003). Two stories emerged which shape the direction and determination of these NGO leaders.

**Kabita’s Marriage**

As mentioned earlier, Pretilla founded Sasha in the late 1970’s with the mission of empowering women, but her own history was embedded with age-old customs and patriarchal norms. She entered into an arranged marriage at 13 and wrote in her life history collage “only because of my in-laws wish, I had children in my early age”. When Pretilla’s daughter Kabita (Mina’s elder sister, Mimi and Manami’s mother) was eighteen she too was given in an arranged marriage that she was not ready for. Kabita’s marriage was a major turning point for the entire family because Kabita’s father arranged the marriage, but felt remorseful immediately after.

Mina related the story in her interview:

> She was just admitted to the college, and her dream was to complete her college education. She was so determined. But my father wanted to arrange her marriage… and Kabita was so angry. She said, “No, no, no. First I will complete my education and then I will marry. You give the word to the family and you should request for them to wait for me.” The whole community was angry – “No, she has no right to say this – you must obey our decision.” Kabita did not touch water for seven days, she fasted but nobody cared….But after the marriage [our father] was so sorry, it was a wrong decision. He believed that she should have the chance to complete her college education. So he created pressure on their family and took Kabita and told in front of everybody, “I promised my daughter I would give her a chance to complete her college education, so I am taking her back.”

This story represents many important points. The first point is Kabita’s determination to complete her education, but the second point is her father’s willingness to break with tradition, admit a mistake, and advocate for his daughters education. This would be radical behavior for many Indian men today, but considering it took place over thirty years ago is astonishing.

Kabita’s husband also supported the decision despite the fact that his family “did not want [her] to continue [her] studies”. Kabita and her husband remained married, fell deeply in love, and she gave birth to Mimi six weeks before her graduation – right in the middle of preparing for her final examinations! Mina told me that her father’s regret at Kabita’s arranged marriage extended to her. He never pressured her to get married and he insured her participation in college two years later.

**“Social Holocaust” in the Village**

Several incidents happened in the village in the few years prior to Kabita’s marriage that undoubtedly influenced her father’s break with traditions, but also planted the seeds of Sasha’s birth. During Mina’s interview, she told the story of her best friend who was married at fifteen to a boy from a wealthy family. The boy had picked her because she was beautiful and intelligent, but his parent’s did not like her because she was poor and had no dowry. Mina recounts the shock and sadness she experienced when she and her friends heard about her death:

> “The whole day we cried and cried - it was a great shock to us. But somehow we managed to see her. We saw that someone tied her with a very strong rope and set fire to her”. Mina’s friend had been burned to death because she did not bring a large enough dowry to the family. Dowry deaths, like female infanticide, are an unfortunate but not uncommon cultural manifestation that stem from poverty, ignorance, ancient cultural practices and extreme patriarchy (Agarwal, 1999). Of course these practices are illegal, but rarely prosecuted.
Mina told several other stories of torture and cruelty perpetuated on the women of her village and how this period of “social holocaust” made her mother, Pretilla, feel as if she must do something to help these women. Pretilla started Sasha as a small support and education group, and much of Mina’s own story is about her commitment to grow Sasha in order to empower rural Indian women. Although the Bose women never suffered from physical abuse themselves, they encountered many challenges as they organized women for political and social change, and continued to witness brutality and violence in the villages, including the attempted infanticide of a baby girl they later adopted as their own.

Analysis

Enabling Factors

Enabling factors form the conditions under which choices are made (Malhotra et. al., 2002). In other words, enabling factors are the critical inputs that support the process of empowerment, but are not empowerment itself. While there is disagreement in the field as to whether or not education actually leads to women’s empowerment (Supputhai, 2008; Mukhopadhyay & Seymour, 1994; see also Liddle & Joshi, 1986), it is clear that a lack of education is linked to disempowerment, and thus education is considered an enabling factor (Malhotra et. al., 2002). In the case of the Bose women, all of them had access to education, but it is important to revisit the story of Kabita’s arranged marriage to consider the additional enabling factors which led to her, her sister’s and her daughter’s empowerment.

If you recall, Kabita’s father arranged her marriage but afterwards felt regret and pressured her new family to release her, so that she could complete her college education. This reversal of decision is endemic of what Mukhopadhyay & Seymour (1994) call the “tensions between macrostructurally-generated pressures for and microstructurally-generated pressures against educating women” (p. 7). At this time in India’s history (the mid 1970’s), a great deal of national attention was placed on women’s issues, including women’s education and economic opportunities. Kabita’s father was a prominent village doctor, highly educated, liberal in his attitudes toward women, and aware of the many abuses against women in his own village. However, he must have felt caught between two worlds. Educating women was and continues to be controversial in rural settings because educating one’s daughter delays marriage and might make her unattractive in the marriage market. Educated girls require larger dowries and might have independent ideas that challenge authority and traditional family roles. On top of this, less than 1% of the Indian female population attended university at this time (Mukhopadhyay & Seymour, 1994), which makes Dr. Bose’s commitment to his daughter’s education an extraordinary act and indicates a family culture which itself became an enabling factor for each women’s empowerment. During one conversation with Manami, she stated, “in my family, you are considered an illiterate person if you do not have a Master’s degree”. A family context that champions and supports high levels of education for women is in stark contrast to a dominant cultural view in which too much education is seen as a liability for women (Mukhopadhyay & Seymour, 1994) and must be considered as a powerful enabling factor for the empowerment of these women development leaders.

The empowerment literature typically considers familial/interpersonal contexts as a site in which women may or may not feel empowered (Malhotra et. al, 2002), but not as an actual enabling factor. However, in the case of the Bose family, it seems as if the patriarch not only supported the women in his family, but championed their causes. Hertz-Lazarowitz and Shapira (2005) found a similar dynamic in their study of poor, rural Israeli/Arab women who became leaders in their community. Their findings indicate that “within traditional yet changing family contexts, the women sought support from male family members, notably fathers” (p.177). This
paternal support benefited Mina because her father supported her education and never pressured to marry. For her mother, Pretilla, the support enabled her to form Sasha. As she writes, “with the help of my husband, I work a lot with the women. He was a very famous doctor and he loved to serve his village people. Only because of his help, I worked for the people”.

The Process of Empowerment

The process of empowerment is recognized as one’s involvement in activities, events or relationships that may lead to empowerment such as paid employment or participation in consciousness raising groups (Malhotra et al., 2002). In considering the processes of empowerment for Mimi, Manami and Mina, it seemed to me that Sasha, and their participation in this organization, was at the heart of the matter. Sasha has been in operation for over thirty-five years, and while the organization was born out of the pain and suffering of village women, it grew from the sweat and tears of the Bose women. In Mina’s early experiences of helping women through Sasha, she explains that she would “sit with [a woman] and join with her crying”, because at this time they didn’t have money and this was their method of work. However, over the years hundreds of women joined Sasha and they began to organize protest rallies. Herrick (1995) considers this type of social movement as the height of empowerment. He quotes Brenton (1994) as saying:

The awareness and the exercise of the right to access resources is a necessary condition for empowerment but not a sufficient one. We would argue that the conscientization process which leads to empowerment includes not only the right to access existing resources, but of the right and responsibility to participate in creating resources, and eliminating inappropriate or ineffective resources (p. 29).

The above quotation indicates that it is not enough to be empowered yourself, but that empowerment must lead to a sense of responsibility for social change.

As indicated earlier, the older two generations of Bose women witnessed a great deal of brutality and oppression in their village and they also rescued and adopted a baby girl that was discarded by her birth mother, all of which influenced their commitment to social justice. Pretilla and Mina formalized their efforts into the organization and growth of Sasha, but even Kabita conducted informal education classes in health, hygiene and reproductive knowledge for her village women when she was a young mother. Although Gill et al. (2009) recognize that this type of grassroots leadership by women has had an enormous impact in mobilizing and empowering poor, rural women, Handy and Kassam (2004) go even farther by stating that participation in NGO leadership is positively correlated to measurements of empowerment. These authors explain that “experiences (of self and others) allows a woman to see the lack of autonomy in her life choices not as a given but something that can be changed” (p. 20). Thus, Mimi, Manami and Mina’s experience as development leaders is reciprocally empowering. As they fight to empower oppressed women based on a consideration of social justice and their own sense of responsibility, they in turn become more empowered through the participation and rewards of empowering others.

Conclusion

In conducting this research I found myself navigating back and forth between cultural considerations, empowerment rhetoric, and the simple consideration of these women as friends and powerfully inspiring development leaders. Originally I found myself hesitant to contemplate these women’s examples of empowerment with my own Western empowerment ideals. However, in time I came to believe that the difference lies less in the manifestations of empowered women, but rather in the contextualized learning experiences that brought about the processes of empowerment, and the conditions within which empowerment is expressed. In this, empowerment theory contains certain limitations in understanding the empowerment processes.
of women whose significant learning is nested in a sense of family and intergenerational reliance, but catalyzed by death, suffering and injustice.

The actions of the family patriarch and other influential men were also crucial to the process of empowerment as they enabled women to expand their roles, push against age-old customs to gain education, defy early marriage and in some cases reject married life altogether. A consideration of patriarchal advocacy for women’s empowerment in developing nations seems an important line of inquiry for future research.

References


