

NARRATIVE RESEARCH AND FEMINIST KNOWING: A POSTSTRUCTURAL READING OF WOMEN'S LEARNING IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT. This paper reports on qualitative research with 8 board members and 8 directors of women's social action organizations. A poststructural reading of the narrative data gives voice to an undertheorized aspect of humanist relational learning in women's organizations and makes visible the power-relationships. The power relationships are explored and shown to be an integral part of how women learn and lead, challenging the usual reading of women as kind, caring and uncomplicated. Through the medium of narrative, this research explores women's learned practices of resistance, and offers a paradoxical view of relational learning that attends to the ethic of care as well as to power relations. Implications for the education of women are drawn

LA RECHERCHE NARRATIVE ET LES ACQUIS FÉMINISTES :
LECTURE POSTSTRUCTURELLE DE L'APPRENTISSAGE DES FEMMES DANS DES
ORGANISMES COMMUNAUTAIRES

RÉSUMÉ. Ce document fait état de la recherche qualitative réalisée auprès de huit membres de conseils d'administration et de huit directeurs d'organismes d'action sociale voués aux femmes. Une lecture poststructurelle des données narratives dévoile un aspect de l'apprentissage relationnel humaniste dans les organisations de femmes, sur lequel très peu de théories ont été élaborées, et souligne les rapports de force. Les rapports de force sont explorés et apparaissent comme partie intégrante de la manière d'apprendre et de diriger des femmes, ce qui vient remettre en question la perception habituelle de bonté, de bienveillance et de simplicité des femmes. Au moyen de la narration, cette recherche examine les pratiques de résistance apprises par les femmes et propose une vision paradoxale de l'apprentissage relationnel qui participe tant à l'éthique de la bienveillance qu'aux rapports de force. Nous pouvons y constater les répercussions sur la formation des femmes.

“Don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now” (p. 60), says Thomas King (2003), in the Massey Lectures, aired on Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) radio. And indeed, you will hear women tell how they

lead and learn in social action organizations. This article is an attempt to relate their experiences of being part of community based organizations that strive for justice, security, and learning opportunities for women. Whereas the contemporary adult learning and education literature stereotypes women's learning as relational (Fletcher, 1998), caring and connected (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), and inclusive (MacKeracher, 2004), there is insufficient attention to the complex ways in which women learn to be community developers, teachers, and community activists. The common perception of women as caring and connected leads to an almost simplified portrayal of their learning as homogenous, uncomplicated, and harmonious (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). This study looks at what the women say about their learning experiences in the nonformal learning arena, and then analyses this learning in terms of its importance for educational practice.

I came to this research as a feminist and as a member, both past and present, of feminist organizations such as those represented in the research. I am deeply committed to women's learning and leading in the community. I am simultaneously drawn to feminist research, to telling stories and analyzing them, and deepening our collective understanding of how women learn. To paraphrase Thomas King (2003), I am committed to living my life differently because I have heard women's stories of learning. Here are some of the stories.

METHOD/METHODOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS

This study focused on women's social action organizations in eastern Canada, and included interviews with 8 directors and assistant directors (minimally paid) and 8 board members (volunteers) to explore how they negotiate the structure and culture of their own organizations, which include members and funding bodies, as well as how they learn to be "good" board members and feminists. The organizations are feminist in orientation and range from women's centers, anti-violence agencies, transition houses for victims of violence, to women's counseling services. The organizations offer support, education and protection for women, as well as a safe space for them to gather, dialogue and provide mutual support to each other. Some of the organizations provide a drop-in center, others have libraries, and others provide emergency housing. The general structure consists of a paid director, one or two paid staff members, a volunteer board of about 10 members, and in the case of the women's resource centers, members outside this structure who pay fees to support the activities of the organization. The women interviewed range in age from 25-60 and have been involved from a minimum of 1 year to a maximum of 25 years (the median length of involvement was 5 years). Four of the board members are no longer serving on the board but are still attached to the organization. Of the 16 interviews, 4 were done by

email, 4 in person, and 8 by telephone. The research asks about whether relational, caring and feminine are adequate descriptors of these women's interrelationships.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

The theoretical framing of this inquiry occurs at the intersection of several frames of thought, the first of which is a feminist reading of the literature on women's learning. The feminist reading suggests that learning by males and females differs and yet, gender stereotypes do not apply (see Alcoff & Potter, 1993). This feminist reading can, without intending to, perpetuate the notion that women are kind and caring and men are logical and unemotional in their relationships. The second theoretical underpinning is poststructuralism, which positions the study as a challenge to everyday readings of women's learning as united in voice and cause, and uncritically caring. Rather than focus on a list of gender differences, poststructuralism "informs an analysis of how women experience and express shifting identities that reflect multiple social influences" (Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Ryan, 2001). Poststructuralism is concerned with the nexus of discourse, power and knowledge and how these intersect (Hughes, 2000). It draws on the work of Foucault (1977, 1978) and his emphasis on the ubiquity of power and resistance. In the case of this research, poststructuralism allows the researcher to look at the dynamics of power in women's relationships.

The third theoretical underpinning is narrative as a way of uncovering the stories of the women who are involved. In many ways this research develops and supports the use of narrative and poststructuralism, which have been applied together in few instances in education (e.g., Blumenreich, 2004; Johnson, 2001), and even fewer instances with feminist theory (the work of Chapman, 2003, and Tisdell, 1998, are somewhat of an exception). In this article the narratives are interpreted and analysed, treated as data that can be coded to highlight women's lives and learning.

Although it is not intended to speak for all women, the dominant humanistic relational learning theory in education (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982; MacKeracher, 2004) stands as an alternative to the masculine bias in many theories of growth and intellect. Yet, much of this relational theory is premised on the notion that women grow and develop best in connection and that this will foster empathy, vulnerability, and participation. Guided by these frameworks, the researcher attempts to complicate the learning relationships of women in nonprofit social action situations by focusing on the factors that affect their learning to be members and factors that affect their functioning.

NARRATING THE FEMININE

The geographic setting

One of the conceptual tools that Foucault provides is a 5-part grid to use in the analysis of power. The first aspect of the grid is a recognition of the differentiation of the legal, traditional, and economic conditions which enable or bring power relations into play (Foucault, 1982; Marshall, 1990). Of these three conditions, the economic seems to be the most significant in this study. The poor to working class economic status of the region enabled the exercise of power in the women's narratives. The women, directors and board members, were living in the Atlantic region of Canada, in an area that is primarily rural and which has fiscal and social challenges such as illiteracy, lack of jobs, and inadequate housing. Consequently, the women who were interviewed for the study invariably reported that they were concerned with looking for government funding to support their centers, create employment, provide pre-employment counseling and education, initiate literacy programs, and help women in their struggles with government bureaucracy. The greatest learnings for many of them were the degree of reliance on government, the social and economic effects of the local environment, and the amount of good will and collaboration involved in being active. Yet, the reality of the situation produced effects. So, it is not surprising that one of the board members, a woman in her 40s who has been a board member for 10 years, identifies her specific geographic locatedness as contributing to conflict in the organization. In describing her women's center, she tells of how there is

not a lot of room for overtime pay, a lot of restrictions because women put in too much and sometimes don't get paid money. This causes some friction in that they expect others to do the same thing. Then you're accused of being less. There is an underlying belief among male-dominated government funders that women's organizations need less money because women will pick up the slack. This overwork and underpay can cause jealousy, feeling unequal, and that you are being treated differently. Our experience at the [women's organization] was that we left exhausted. Even the staff were jaded, beaten down by the system.

She is pointing out here how government power in the form of underfunding, creeps into the organization, causing women to overwork and then be difficult in relating to each other. The omnipresent power that is part of their relationships causes some of the women to be jealous and to resent some of the other women. In a similar vein, a board member of another organization reports a similar phenomenon: "Some women guilt others into taking on things that they cannot handle nor do they want to handle. They can 'guilt' women into volunteering, even to self-detriment-financial and stress-wise." So involvement in a center that supports women's learning to be board members, good citizens and volunteers becomes complex and leaves some members disenfranchised and resentful of others. This process serves

in many ways as a “dividing practice” that sorts or classifies the good from the bad members (see Ball, 1990).

Yet, there is a consistent note of optimism in the participants’ voices, affected to a strong degree by their commitment to the organization, which in some cases has been for more than 25 years. Power, exercised here in the form of guilt, produced a desire in this board member to directly acknowledge the guilt trips and to actively resist them by saying no. The resistance in this female board member was formed precisely at the point where power was exercised by another (Brookfield, 2001). This power and its resistances are a form of agency and produce positive effects in the women who resist it. In this sense, the dynamics of the organization are complicated and not defeatist. The learning is about how to cope, resist power with power, and to work for opportunities for other women. Instead of being docile bodies, in a Foucauldian sense (1978) women embody resistance and produce a discourse of dissent.

Discussion and “talking things through”

The second dimension of Foucault’s (1982) 5-part power analysis grid is an awareness of the “types of objectives pursued intentionally by those who act upon the actions of others” (Marshall, 1990, p. 24). In this study, it became clear that the main objective of the directors and the board members was to be feminist and participatory in decision making and leadership practices. In practice, this took the form of informal invitations to join the board, shared leadership of the chairing of meetings, and the use of the circle as a seating arrangement. The board typically meets once a month, during which the members are involved in a variety of informal learning activities: how to chair a meeting, how to apply for funding, how to organize a women’s event (e.g., Take Back the Night March). Given this particular structure of informal learning and inclusion, talking about issues of power and conflict was difficult for both board members and directors/ leaders.

The directors, by and large, saw themselves as problem solvers who describe the resolution of conflict in a relational way. One director in her 50s who talked about her many years with the organization and her own leadership style, described how she encouraged members and staff to deal with conflict:

We talk it out and we discuss issues when they come up. Personally, I feel that healthy organizations do have conflict. I feel that conflict occurs when there is a difference of opinion or when others feel that they do not have a voice. When I experience conflict, I like to address it in a respectful way. If it is a conflict between a colleague and myself I will sit down and talk to them about how I am feeling. I feel that conflict must be addressed in order for someone to feel respected and safe in an organization. I don’t know how conflict is dealt with in other organizations in the community.

That sometimes makes women's organizations challenging places because there is an upfrontness about problems and a seemingly endless willingness to talk things through. The production of this regime of truth about women as relational learners is producing two connected yet contradictory effects: on the one hand, it reinforces the power of feminism and of women having voice, yet on the other hand it produces a truth effect that women are essentially relational. The latter universalizes the experience of women and learning, and further contributes to women's isolation and separateness. It also produces a form of self-surveillance in that women are "encouraged" to voice concerns but in ways that are conducive to conflict resolution. There is an established discourse around who voices what discord, and which voices are listened to. Women who know they will be heard exercise more voice, others exercise the self-discipline of restraint.

Yet, not all board members share the view that conflict is negotiated and decisions are consensual. Most would say there is consensus or as one woman put it, we "agree to disagree sometimes." On occasion women's organizations choose not to make a policy since it will be too divisive, "such as whether men can participate or not." One board member, who resigned after 5 years on the board, talked about how she experienced the negotiation of conflict:

I gave up because as far as I was concerned, it was top down. We had become like a men's organization, very patriarchal. The director used to say to us at board meetings – "You the board are my boss," which was really disingenuous since we all knew she made all the decisions. And, then again I don't blame her in many ways – she was right there on site all day and she had a lot of day-to-day decisions to make – it made more sense but it really made me resentful at meetings. We, as a board, support, not direct, staff. So rather than fight it, I just left when my term was up.

With the use of the dominant discourse of consensus, sharing, and collegiality, a regime of truth was produced that served to further structures of power, albeit in this case a power that produced services (potentially not the most effective services) for community women. There is a contradiction built into feminist organizations. Whereas relational learning and feminism are about supporting voice, as one board member notes, "If you allow people to have their say, it can't be warm and fuzzy." And, as she points out, "At my age, I don't want warm and fuzzy; I want honesty." This statement resists the dominant discourse in feminist organizations ("can't we all get along?") and "the judges of normality" (Foucault, 1977, p. 304) who want things to be connected in women's organizations. This participant resists by saying that warm and fuzzy is neither desirable nor a goal for her.

Yet, it must be said that although the discourses of the bureaucratic organization ("you the board are my boss") and feminism ("we support staff") are contradictory, women's strength in organizations is their ability to negotiate

this binary. Even within a disciplinary institution, women can find ways to resist. As Foucault (1980) notes, “Each society has its regime of truth. . . that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (p. 133). This research shows that two discourses—bureaucratic and feminist—can in fact operate as parallel regimes of truth.

Learning in the organization

The third aspect of Foucault’s (1982) power analysis grid is to recognize the technologies that are used to bring power relations into play (Marshall, 1990). In the women’s narratives there is evidence of many technologies of power being used, especially in relation to the effort by most of the organizations to foster the lifelong learning and development of women, especially in the area of feminism(s). One of these technologies is the use of the discourse of learning, which produced a desire in many of the women to learn more about feminism, and for some to offer quiet resistance by sitting silently and disregarding the new learning.

Significantly, more than half of the 16 participants indicated that their learning about feminist organizations occurred informally and incidentally. Very few of the women reported having any formal study in feminism. They learned by watching the leaders, participating in meetings, organizing events for women and working with other members.

One board member who has been an active leader and participant in the local women’s organization for 10 years, talked about the incidental learning that occurred. Though she had studied feminism and been active in women’s organizations for many years in large centers, being a board member in a rural area was a somewhat disorienting experience for her and caused a transformation in her own thinking:

I have learned that you need to choose your battles and to find compromises. . . [I have had] personal growth regarding facilitation skills, learning to politically disagree yet work together. I stand my ground and know I need to give a bit. . . . In terms of practical skills I have had both formal and informal learning. I have learned to lobby government, to be diplomatic, as well as to find strategies to try to work with government. It is no easier these days than yesteryear to do that and to secure funding. Sometimes it is frustrating in the organization because there are so many different levels of education, knowledge, experience, and this translates into different understandings in the organization. When I lived in [large city], the women’s center was homogeneous and we could be gung ho on many issues including abortion. Here it is harder in some ways—there is more diversity on the board and sometimes we just have to let go of some of our ideals.

Board members report a considerable amount of learning in “relation to personnel issues; budgeting. . . negotiation skills, finances, and fundraising.” One board member noted that her learning came through dealing with staffing issues, from finding out that sometimes there is conflict and not everyone

wants to negotiate difference. Yet, she pointed out that they were able to work through the issues because “it was all women on the board; women are less inclined to grandstand or to engage in impression management.” Relational learning in feminist organizations has been subjected to truth rules, in a Foucauldian sense, about how feminist organizations ought to be, rules that have arisen in women’s efforts to define and support themselves, and also in their effort to effect social change. Yet, in practice, relational learning for women was influenced by two seemingly contradictory regimes of truth – relational and bureaucratic. The women in this study negotiated both regimes at once. In some cases they resisted the technologies of power in the form of the learning discourse and in others they welcomed it. In some cases, the effects of the power were both compliance and consent.

Learning with clients

A fourth aspect of Foucault’s (1982) 5-part power analysis grid is understanding forms of institutionalization. Although the women in these narratives were not in traditional institutions such as school or hospitals, there is no doubt the women’s organization was an institution that effected disciplinary power (Marshall, 1990). Because they were partly funded by government and filled many social service functions, these community based organizations were viewed by local women as quasi-governmental, which influenced which women came to them and which women avoided them. In part because of dealing with women in crisis, to some degree, one of the sites of considerable learning for participants was with clients. This is especially true for the executive directors who had day-to-day responsibilities in their organizations for dealing with victims of violence and with the legal system. Or in some cases, with low-income women who needed support to deal with government workers or housing authorities. Here is how the director of a women’s shelter talked about her work with a client who had been beaten and sexually assaulted and who formally charged the abuser in court:

It is just an incredibly gruesome trial, gruesome experience. . . . Technically I have overstepped the boundaries with her. . . . because I had her and her children in our home many, many times. According to the social worker code of ethics, that is overstepping the boundaries, professional boundaries. I had gotten too close to this young woman and I was too involved in helping her and that wasn’t healthy. Now I understand a whole lot more about boundaries and that kind of stuff than I did then. Yeah, technically speaking I probably did overstep some of the boundaries by having this young woman as a guest in our home and by taking a very personal interest in helping her. . . . You know what, I’d do it again. There are times when you have to heed this stuff and times when you have to deliberately decide that the circumstances warrant you taking a different approach.

Though her own professional code of ethics insisted that this social worker-director keep a professional distance from the client, she was unable and

unwilling because a relationship had built up between them and the victim was in serious need of help. In her view, the “right” thing to do was to resist the code and to act according to her conscience. This is a case of using the ethic of care to resist the technologies of power in the code of ethics which attempts to regulate her behavior. As a woman and director she acts against the power that seeps into her daily activity and attempts to control her. Her resistance is care, concern and relationship which stands in opposition to a regime of truth that all transition house directors maintain boundaries in all situations. As well, she resists a managerial discourse of impartial leadership and distance from clients. Hers is an active resistance that produces a subject who is knowledgeable and feminist, as opposed to one who is pliable, docile, and subordinate to the state or its disciplinary institutions.

Informal and incidental learning

A fifth aspect of Foucault’s (1982) 5-part power analysis grid is understanding the degree to which the exercise of power is rationalized by the situation (Marshall, 1990). The situation that these women found themselves in is key to understanding how they relate. Because the women’s organizations see themselves as resisting many of the patriarchal and hierarchical dimensions of traditional schools, government bureaucracies, right-wing churches, and such, they have been readily able to resist the credentialing and traditional educational criteria espoused by government. They recognize that the discourse of learning is mostly caught in that of education and institutions such as schooling, higher education and vocational instruction. This discourse, readily apparent in the discussions of credentialing, most educational literature and in everyday conversation produces a truth that worthwhile learning ought to be sanctioned and initiated by approved institutions. Whereas lifelong learning has become a catchphrase for government bureaucrats and policy makers (see Boshier, 1998), funding priorities suggest that only “education” is bona fide. For women and women’s learning this is especially problematic since much valuable and really useful knowledge is gained through experience (see MacKeracher, 2004). Although government has sanctioned official educational systems and perpetuated them, creating an educational fortress in society, these women’s organizations often resist by offering their own nonformal education, celebrating informal learning, and commending the women who come for services for their “life experiences.”

One of the directors, a 15 year veteran of a women’s center, talked about how she learned about feminism:

I have been involved since '84, kind of working on projects. . . the learning experience is everything from learning how to engage with government to understanding women’s oppression. And looking at solutions to breaking up some of those barriers so that the learning here has been tremendous. Absolutely, I mean I could never, I can’t imagine learning what I learned someplace else. The

learnings have been, you learn how to do public speaking. You learn how to put together project proposals. You learn financial planning. You learn how to budget, you learn interpersonal skills. You learn conflict resolution. You learn how public policy is developed and you learn how to challenge public policy. You learn how to engage with the political process and the bureaucratic process. . . . And all on your feet. There was no manual to pick up. I mean even with our re-entry program here, which we started about two and a half years ago, maybe three years ago. When we started we had bits and pieces of information and like we developed a five hundred page re-entry program. . . . So even as far as something basic like a re-entry program that was kind of moderate and up to date and relevant for today. . . . We had to invent that ourselves. We learned together.

The valuable learning here is wrapped in the discourse of learning (not education). Although this woman and most of the directors and board members has a post-secondary education she is pointing to the fact that her most valuable learning has occurred experientially and informally. This discourse resists the power of the institution and the rhetoric of government which sanctions only formal learning. The regime of truth produced by government and perpetuated by higher education officials and faculty has been resisted by these women. They produce the truth effect that learning can indeed occur in the community and that it can be valuable. This is a way of drawing attention to the many women in the community who do not have access to credentials and yet who have experienced lifelong learning, not as rhetoric but as the embodiment of growth and change. The power exercised by the institution has the effect of creating female subjects who are learners inside and outside disciplinary systems.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

Education has long been attentive to the dynamics of complex power relationships (Apple, 1990; Brookfield, 2001; Cervero & Wilson, 1994), and to the gendered nature of teaching and learning relationships (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Yet, some essentialist, universalizing, and stereotypical readings of women's learning and relating remain. This study attempted to resist these readings by explicating the intersection of power, gender, and relational learning in women's organizations, from a feminist, narrative, and poststructural perspective. By probing these intersections, the research contributes to our field's research on women, learning, and social activism.

The narratives show that women are not one-dimensional, docile bodies, and that stereotypic readings of how women learn are just that: stereotypes. The relational learning-in-practice in these local women's organizations serves as a critique to relational learning-in-theory, which ignores power relations. Intricacies of power, authority, and discord factor into the everyday learning and discourse of the organizations, regardless of gender of participants or leaders. Yet, in these women's organizations there is an articulated attempt

to surface tensions and to work through conflict, though not always successfully. Harmony and caring, however, are not the only attributes of women's learning. Many of these women learned through experience and through conflict (Boud & Miller, 1996). Women are indeed affected and influenced by a caring dimension but that does not always translate, nor would they want it to, to homogeneity and niceness. The truth effects arising from their narratives are two-fold: Women are indeed caring in how they learn and women are indeed able to negotiate the power, knowledge, and conflict that are an integral part of their learning.

Educators, whether community based or institutionally situated, can benefit from looking closely at the integration of poststructuralism and narrative as a way to understand further how females learn. In reading the data with an eye to knowledge, discourse and power, the emphases afforded by a post-structuralist perspective, the educator gets a more complicated and helpful view of how females learn. They begin to attend to societal and cultural factors influencing learning, as well as to the actual learning, which is often non-formal and not infrequently spurred on by a disorienting dilemma or difficult situation.

Significant in this reading is how the effects of a disciplinary institution (a board) can cause dividing practices. Like the other disciplinary institutions that Foucault names such as hospitals and prisons, the board technologies of power effect a categorization of good and bad board members, causing resistances of various sorts. This is especially notable since the boards use the discourses of inclusion. Likewise, in educational centers we need to be aware of the effects of this discourse and how it creates categories of included and excluded women, often because of self-discipline or self-regulation.

As well, this research shows that narratives can be used to do a poststructural reading of learning at the community level. There can be a useful interplay of these methodologies provided that the researcher understands that all narratives are partial truth and that it is in the reading that meaning is created for the reader. Poststructuralism offers proponents of narrative an opportunity to view learning through a complex lens and to analyze the story in terms of the categories of knowledge, discourse and power. This augments the narrative reading and necessarily complicates the data in ways that are illuminating for scholars, practitioners and others with an interest in learning.

Now you have heard some of their stories. "Don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now" (King, 2003, p. 60).

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