

*Knowledge building in adult education has resulted in biased and incomplete understandings of adults as learners.*

## Changing Dominant Understandings of Adults as Learners

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Our beliefs about adults as learners are reflected in our theories of adult learning and development, our everyday language, our decisions about content, our teaching methods, and the related research on teaching and learning that we do and promote. Implicitly and explicitly, adult education's prevailing beliefs about adult learners have supported racism and sexism. White male developmental models have been emphasized, and theories of learning that stress individualism, linear thinking, and Anglo European values of self-sufficiency have been generalized to all adults as "universal." This chapter examines the search for universal theories in adult education as a source of racism and sexism, suggests alternatives to universality that can provide adult education with new and more inclusive perspectives on adults as learners, and outlines the implications for adult education.

### Defining Racism and Sexism

Before beginning, it is important to clarify how the terms *racism* and *sexism* are used in this chapter. Racism is the thoughts, acts, and procedures of a system that bases the power of one group over another on skin color. In this chapter, the term refers to the power of white people over people of color. Sexism is the thoughts, acts, and procedures of a system that bases the power of one group over another on gender. In this chapter, the term refers to the power of males over females.

Racism and sexism are individual and collective behaviors that are manifest in our society. They are the result of historical processes and of individual and group socialization to various ways of thinking and behaving. They shape

the ways in which people experience social relations and practices. Racism and sexism in the individual can be conscious and unconscious. Racism and sexism are "everyday" ways of thinking and behaving (Essed, 1991, p. 42). "'Everyday' racism and 'everyday' sexism are the integration of racism and sexism into everyday situations through practices (cognitive and behavioral) that activate underlying power relations" (Essed, 1991, p. 50).

The everyday racism and sexism on which this chapter focuses is the value placed on universality in knowledge building. Universality is promoted and valued when ways of understanding people, ideas, and events are seen as applicable to all. Two theoretical areas will be used to consider the everyday sexism and racism inherent in universality: adult development theory and aspects of adult learning theory.

## Universality

Universality is the search for a master narrative (Lyotard, 1984), a broad, objective depiction of universal truth. In this search, which is often referred to as the *scientific approach*, knowledge is conceived of as the objective apprehending of truth or fact. Knowledge building is the objective collection of related truths or facts about some particular phenomenon. The goal of knowledge building in the scientific approach is a whole, complete, and therefore dogmatic picture.

Two aspects of the seeking of universal truth in knowledge building are problematic: the errors of reasoning that result when we seek universal truth and the power that those who gather, determine, and disseminate these universal truths exercise.

**Errors of Reasoning.** Accepting the notion of universal truth as a norm for the construction of knowledge results in errors of reasoning that affect the application of knowledge in the teaching-learning exchange. Minnich (1990) suggests four types of errors: faulty generalization, circular reasoning, mystified concepts, and partial knowledge.

Universality involves faulty generalizations. It treats persons of a particular kind or group as the only ones who are significant, the only ones who can represent or set the standard for all humans (Minnich, 1990). Data are generalized to all. Collard and Stalker (1991) provide an example of faulty generalization: The classic work of London, Wenkert, and Hagstrom (1963) on participation and social class is often generalized to the total population, despite the fact that the sample was exclusively male.

In the process of circular reasoning, persons or theories end up where they started without recognizing what they have done. The standards of "good theory" are derived from particular theoretical works by a particular group, but they are then used as if they were generally, even universally, appropriate. For example, many North American adult learning theories distinguish between

adults and children by assuming that adult learners are independent and self-directed. This assumption has become established as an element of "good adult learning theory." This assumption and others like it are cited as neutral grounds for the judging and evaluating of appropriate "good adult learning theory." This reasoning is circular. Adult learning theory that assumes adults are *not* self-directed is judged less good, instead of merely different.

Mystified concepts is the third error of universality. They result from the preceding errors. Mystified concepts are "ideas, notions, categories, and the like that are so deeply familiar they are rarely questioned" (Minnich, 1990, p. 51). Not only do their complex cultural meanings perpetuate the exclusion of what is different, but also we are socialized to think of these mystified concepts as the gauge against which we must measure ourselves. Often we are led to think and act against our own interests and commitments without realizing that we are doing it. For example, adult development theories based on Erikson's (1978) work on the stages of man stress identity formation as necessary before the development of intimacy. This idea implies a positive evaluation of persons who have a strong sense of established identity. The resulting concept can make many women appear inadequate. Research conducted primarily with white women demonstrates that some women develop a sense of intimacy before forming an identity and that for others intimacy and identity are integrally related (Gilligan, 1982; Baruch, Barnett, and Rivers, 1983).

The fourth error, partial knowledge, results from the fact that questions are asked and answered within a tradition in which thinking is persistently shaped and expressed by the other errors. Partial knowledge encompasses only a part of what is being studied. It does not seriously take into account what is encountered as different except by defining it in relation to what is known and valued. For example, in a chapter on fostering opportunities for self-direction, Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) acknowledge that in Japan the culture emphasizes the importance of the group, but then, without any evidence, they leap (p. 187) to the conclusion that "Japan appears to be in a transitional state where the sanctity of the group is being reevaluated in terms of individual needs and wishes."

**Power Relationships.** Those who gather, determine, and disseminate universal truths exercise an exclusive power. This power is hidden by the assumption that the knowledge builders and those whose lives are being studied are interacting. It also is concealed by the assumption that anyone can participate in knowledge building. This is not the case. There is not, and has not been, mutual influence. Rather, the knowledge builders use their own lenses to determine truth. Their ways of viewing life are influenced by their own culture, values, and expectations. Furthermore, standards for the building and dissemination of knowledge by such means as publication, teaching, and speaking restrict access to knowledge building to the like-minded. This means that truth is controlled by a few, an elite. For adult education in North America,

knowledge building has been conducted primarily from the perspective and according to the standards of white, male, Western-European persons. Much of the resulting knowledge and current knowledge building is accordingly racist and sexist.

In summary, the presumption of universality results in errors of reasoning in which “only one group is being generalized from” and in power relationships where “one group speaks for, of, and to all of us” (Minnich, 1990, p. 53).

## **Results of Seeking Universal Truth**

As noted, the results of seeking universal truth are that a single group becomes significant, represents everyone, and sets the standard for behavior. In effect, proponents of universal truth value uniformity, ignore differences, and treat those who do not conform as inadequate. People and cultures are silenced, rendered invisible, treated as though they did not exist. These practices occur in everyday adult education, and their presence in adult learning theory can be demonstrated. In adult learning theory, the search for the universal has resulted in everyday racism and sexism because it has promoted the perspectives and power of a single group, whose members are white, middle-class, and often male, over the perspectives and power of others. Clearly, there is a need to move beyond the practices of racism and sexism in our everyday lives and in everyday adult education as well. There is a need to move “beyond silencing not only by listening to those who have been institutionally banished from the center to the margins, but by deconstructing [taking apart] those policies and practices that have historically encoded power, privilege, and marginality” (Weis and Fine, 1993, p. 1). In order to do this, we must first recognize the universality in theories of adult learning, and then we must engage in strategies to change the resulting biased and exclusive knowledge and practices.

## **Universal Theories in Understanding Adults as Learners: Supporting Everyday Racism and Sexism**

This section scrutinizes several works from adult development theory and adult learning theory for examples of everyday racism and sexism that have occurred in adult education as it has promoted universal theories of adults as learners. The works examined reflect the bias inherent in the emphasis that adult education has placed on the individual and individual autonomy.

**Motivational Theory.** Maslow's (1970) theory of human motivation and self-actualization is constantly used in workshops and texts. In Maslow's theory, human needs are arranged hierarchically. The highest level of this hierarchy deals with self-actualization, by which Maslow (1970) means the full use of a person's talents, capabilities, and potentialities. Maslow's (1970) studies were primarily of males. In his findings, male characteristics and values became the norm. This male bias is reflected, for example, in his description of the

need for self-esteem as “a desire for strength, for achievement, for adequacy, for mastery and confidence, for competence in the face of the world, and for independence and freedom” (Maslow, 1970, p. 45). The need for self-esteem is clearly regarded as higher and more valuable than the need for affiliation, and the need for self-actualization is even higher than the need for self-esteem. At one point, Maslow acknowledged that self-actualization was not a characteristic of women. However, he encouraged women to reach their “feminine” fulfillments and then, if they could manage, to reach further for self-actualization. According to Maslow (1970, p. xvii), “It is possible for a woman to have all the specifically female fulfillments (being loved, having the home, having the baby) and *then*, without giving up any of the satisfactions already achieved, go on beyond femaleness to the full humanness that she shares with males, for example, the full development of her intelligence, of any talents she may have, and of her own particular idiosyncratic genius, of her own individual fulfillment.”

In point of fact, women and men “have different organizing principles around which their psyches are structured” (Miller, 1986, p. 62). For women, the maintenance of the needs of love, affection, and belongingness is critically important. In fact, research has shown that many women place greater emphasis than men do on communion, that is, on the experience of living within a community of others. In contrast, men are more inclined than women toward agency, that is, concern with individual actions (Donelson and Gullahorn, 1977). Gilligan’s work (1982) further suggests that empathy, intimacy, relationships, and an ethic of caring are integral to women’s definition of self.

From these perspectives, Maslow’s (1970) theory of motivation, which emphasizes self-actualization, in which the individual personality is separated from connectedness and relationship, has little relevance for the female world. It does not acknowledge and value female life experience (Tietze and Shakeshaft, 1982). To promote this theory as universal is everyday sexism.

**Adult Learning Theory.** In adult learning theory, andragogy and theories of self-directed learning have emphasized individual autonomy as a universal value. In andragogy, long espoused as the ideal for adult education, the purpose of adult education is to enhance the learner’s personal growth as the learner determines. Fostering the adult’s capabilities for self-direction is integral to the practice of andragogy. In the literature on self-directed learning, accepting responsibility for one’s own learning is valued as a proactive approach to the learning process, and enhancing and developing the adult’s capabilities for self-direction becomes the primary objective for teaching (Candy, 1991).

Essential to andragogy and self-directed learning is the assumption that all people should, can, or want to accept individual freedom in learning. Regardless of our setting, haven’t we all said or thought, “I expected the learner to take responsibility for her learning,” “I expected her to ask for help if it was needed,” “I expected her to find a way of dealing with the conflict between

child care and class attendance." Let's ask ourselves this: Whose ideas and beliefs are these? Are they universal? Do they really represent the values of all people? Do they really represent the way in which all adults learn?

In reality, learning theories based on individualism and autonomy reflect values and attributes that are primarily Western, white, middle-class, and male (Clark and Wilson, 1991). They "tend to be found in those cultures, such as ours, where high status is obtained by competitive individual achievement" (Keddie, 1980, p. 54). Individualism is not equally valued by all groups even within our own society. The value orientations and learning processes of persons of non-European cultural background, such as Mexican Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, and Canadian Indians, tend to be based on communal and collective values (Pratt, 1988). In contrast, Hmong adults show a need for explicit teacher direction paralleling the Hmong reliance on authority and leadership (Hvitfeldt, 1986). Clearly, to continue to promote learning theories that have individual achievement as a universal goal is to continue everyday racism in adult education.

### **Implications for Adult Education**

The valuing of the universal in adult education must be changed. New perspectives must be developed to overcome the racism and sexism inherent in universal understandings of adults as learners. As adult educators, we must engage in an honest critique of our theories and our practices. First, the possibility of diverse "knowledges" must be raised. That is, there is not one "knowledge," not one single social reality, but many divergent "knowledges," each representing unique ways of understanding and experiencing reality. Among others, the knowledges of women (Hugo, 1990) and people of color (Ross-Gordon, Martin, and Briscoe, 1990; Cassara, 1990) have been missing from adult education's efforts to understand adults as learners. Second, the nature of desirable knowledge itself must be questioned. Universality is a discriminatory criterion because it extends and imposes theories on all people. It is time to move away from a unilateral construction of adult development and learning theory toward a multilayered and comparative construction of social realities. Third, if women and people of color were considered in the past, they tended to be considered only insofar as they were important for and related to white men. Women and people of color need to be considered on their own as human subjects. Fourth, in the past, adult education, tacitly assuming that there was only one culture, failed to attend to the relationships between a person's culture and a person's development and learning when considering adults as learners. This must change.

Practically, as adult educators we can do two things: We can think these issues through and become aware of the biases in the knowledge that we create and believe in, and we can plan to change our own approach to knowledge building.

## Strategies for Making Knowledge and Knowledge Building Sensitive to Diversity

As adult educators, we must become "engaged and transformative" intellectuals (Giroux and McLaren, 1989, p. xxiii). The following are offered as suggestions for beginning that process.

First, the notion that knowledge building is the right of a select group must be changed. We are all knowledge makers, not just those in academe. We have different experiences, and we have our own ways of making sense of life. That is knowledge building. We must claim our right to do this, and we must be prepared to see other individuals and groups do the same.

Second, the knowledge we and others build must be evaluated to protect against a narrow search for universal truth that in reality is biased and limited. I have found that a set of questions asked by Lather (1991, p. 84) is particularly helpful in critiquing the knowledge that I am building and the knowledge developed by others. For purposes of this article, I have combined those questions with my own.

Did I create a text that was multiple? That is, does my knowledge consider people of different gender, race, and experiences? Have I allowed differences to exist, accepting them as a valid part of reality rather than trying to place them in competition with each other? When I have not created a text that is multiple, have I clearly acknowledged that it is only about one group of people and that I do not know that it could be said of anyone else?

Have I thought through the knowledge in a way that makes sure that I haven't put my own way of thinking or believing forward as truth? Did I work at being open to see the importance of knowledge constructs different from my own? Have I included and cited such knowledge? Did I focus on the limits of my own conceptualizations? Did I include contrary experiences and ways of thinking? Have I had people with different experiences and values review my ideas for bias and limitations? How do I work through feelings of being threatened when opposing viewpoints challenge me? Regardless of how inclusive I feel that I am, do I ask people who are different from me how they perceive me? Do I have what it takes to hear what is said, or do I use reason to dismiss the feedback that I receive?

"Did my work multiply political spaces and prevent the concentration of power in any one point? Perhaps more importantly, did it go beyond critique to help in producing pluralized and diverse spaces for the emergence of subjugated knowledges and for the organization of resistance? . . . What has been muted, repressed, unheard? How has what I've done shaped, subverted, complicated? Have I confronted my own evasions and raised doubts about any illusions of closure?" (Lather, 1991, p. 84).

Does the theory promote similarities within differences? Does it value the differences while seeking common elements in peoples' struggle against oppression and exclusion?

Third, remember that knowledge is both created and transmitted in the teaching-learning exchange. Questions not unlike the ones just voiced must be asked about the knowledge that we promote in our teaching. Do we assume universals in what we teach without checking them out? To help ourselves, we can ask a three-part question: What does adult education believe about *X*? Does it imply or state that the belief applies to all people? And is it true that the belief applies to all people? Begin to answer the third question by openly reflecting on your own practice. For example, are the people in your teaching-learning experiences really motivated by self-actualization? Answer the question by reading and asking people. What is written and said about women and people of color with regard to the belief that you are questioning?

Look at your own personal behaviors in and out of the teaching-learning exchange. Do they demonstrate that you accept universal theories about adults as learners? For example, recently, I overheard one adult basic education (ABE) teacher say to another, "Oh, don't pay attention to the Hispanics in the class. They don't want to learn. They just come here to be together and socialize." The ABE teacher held a universal belief that learners who want to learn listen to the instructor and do not interact. The ABE teacher dismissed the possibility that there are other ways of learning and that the Hispanics in the class might be demonstrating their learning style—a collaborative style in which learning is accomplished by sharing and in particular by sharing personal meaningful experiences.

Fourth, work to change and broaden your own knowledge base. Attend to persons and knowledges that theories about adults as learners have excluded.

Search text sources for accounts of diverse kinds of people and experiences. For example, use Gordon Parks's *The Learning Tree* (1963) or Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1987) to broaden traditional North American perspectives on human maturation.

In your classes and curricula, listen to the missing voices. Pay attention to all people and groups. Allow them to tell the diverse stories of how and where they learn and what they value in learning.

Search out people with diverse backgrounds. Talk with teachers and learners of different races or the other gender. Work to listen and understand the "basic assumptions, perceptions, motivation, nonverbal language, feelings, defenses, basic needs, conflicts, cultural norms, and patterns of behavior common to the cultures" (Briscoe and Ross, 1989, p. 587) of women and people of color. Learn what is important knowledge for them and how they make knowledge.

## Conclusion

If we as adult educators choose to promote successful learning for all people, it is clear that we must purge all elements of everyday sexism and racism from



our beliefs about and practices toward adults as learners. To do so, we must change the valuing of the universal that has prevailed in the literature on knowledge building in adult learning. Instead, we must acquire new perspectives on adults as learners that include women and people of color. The author hopes that this chapter will be the beginning of further reflection, discussion, and challenge on this topic.

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