

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2001 Conference Proceedings (East Lansing, MI)

Voices from Within-Homemakers as Agents for Social Change

Shu-chuan Liao

Northern Illinois University, USA

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>

 Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Liao, Shu-chuan (2001). "Voices from Within-Homemakers as Agents for Social Change," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2001/papers/42>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Henderson (1977, 1984) described a method for prediction of breeding values for traits not in the model for records. This method may be practical for animal or sire models for the case when no measurements can be obtained on any animals for some traits to be evaluated. The least squares equations are augmented with $A^{-1}ON_1$ rather than with $A^{-1}OO_1$ where A is the numerator relationship and OO_1 and ON_1 are the genetic covariance matrices for measured and for all traits.

Voices from Within-Homemakers as Agents for Social Change

Shu-chuan Liao
Northern Illinois University, USA

Abstract: This study is to document how Taiwanese women learned from participating in social action. The focus is on homemakers who are socially marginalized but are involved in private as well as public spheres and speak out on various issues which relate to their everyday lives. The findings suggest that ordinary people can be agents for social change via social movement learning.

Introduction

Taiwan became a dynamic society in the late 1980s. The lifting of martial law in 1987 uncovered the oppressed social forces which had been suppressed for more than four decades. Within social movement actors, homemaker activists were unique as a socially marginalized group under the patriarchal society. Three elements contributed to their uniqueness: 1) the role of homemaker; 2) the everyday life issues on which they focused; and 3) the grounded and creative ways with which they mobilized. "Homemakers' Union and Foundation" (HUF) was founded in 1988, a national, grassroots, environmental organization consisting of mostly female urban homemakers. It was initiated as both a women's environmental movement and an educational reform movement and it further evolved into a consumer movement. Its first well-known action was protesting McDonald's expensive and low-nutrition hamburgers as well as wasteful packing that produced lots of garbage. HUF's goals were to "organize the women for practicing social justice, enhance the living quality, promote harmonious gender relationships, and improve the living environment" (Newsletter, 1987). It emphasized both education and action. Although homemakers, as a group, are socially marginalized, HUF participants do not look at themselves as disadvantaged or oppressed. On the contrary, they look upon themselves as proactive actors who are able to make a better society through learning and participating in social action.

Methodology

The phenomenological approach was considered for this study. It allowed me as a researcher to compare my own experience of the phenomenon to that of the participants-co-researchers; therefore, I could better understand their perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of conducting

the phenomenological study is to describe the phenomena that the participants subjectively experienced.

I chose HUF's homemakers as my research participants. The reasons for selecting them as my co-researchers were two-fold: first, since I am a HUF member sharing the common culture with my co-researchers, my experiences helped me understand their meaning-making processes. Secondly, as a socially marginalized group, the ways homemakers participated in social action were very specific and grounded compared with other social movement actors.

My data came from four primary sources: 1) interviews: I interviewed 23 participants who considered their participation significant and meaningful. The interviews were conducted in Taiwan and used native languages to allow the interviewees to fully express their ideas; 2) archives, including newsletters that HUF issued, articles about HUF, and HUF's publications; 3) participant observation; and 4) my personal experience as a HUF member.

Phenomenological analysis was used to analyze my data. It started with me drawing themes from my personal experience as a HUF member. Using the same process, I drew themes from the experiences of my co-researchers. Then I integrated both themes together to represent the group as a whole (Moukastas, 1994). Triangulation, member checks, peer examination, including English-Chinese and English-Taiwanese translation consultation, were used to increase internal validity for this study (Merriam & Simpson, 1995).

Findings

Four major findings emerged from the data: 1) the homemakers were movement initiators; 2) motherwork was highly valued and became a force and the justification of the movement; 3) they primarily used participatory research in the projects they conducted; and 4) personal transformation occurred through reflection and action in social learning.

Movement Initiators

First, HUF members were movement initiators in the environmental, educational and consumer issues. The reason they initiated these movements was because they encountered problems that threatened their everyday lives and they wanted to make changes to eliminate the threat. The environmental movement emphasized 4Rs (refuse, reduce, reuse, and recycle). They brought about the vision of "We Want Health, Taiwan Wants Beauty" to encourage people to work together for a safe, healthy and beautiful environment. The environmental movements they initiated were "Sorting Waste/Recycling Resource," "Reusing Shopping Bags," "Using Recycled Paper-Save the Forest," and "Bring Your Own Utensils."

Wang Pao-tze, one of HUF's founders, described how she initiated sorting waste/recycling resource movement in her community in 1988.

Wang Chao-mei lived across from me and drew a good picture. Yu Jin-ju was a good writer. I had good ideas. We worked together. We publicized the posters to notify the community about our project. Chao-mei and I started to talk to residents

about the meaning of sorting waste/recycling resources. We had 81 households. Ten residents attended the meeting each time. Some did not come over to the meeting; we went to their homes to explain our project and demonstrate how to sort garbage. We wanted to make sure everybody got the information and knew how to do it.

When Wang Pao-tze and her community residents started to conduct this project, "every night we went to community entrance where people brought their waste," she said. Wang Pao-tze explained the environmental education process. She said that each family's garbage was weighed at the beginning. After recycled articles were removed, she weighed again to demonstrate how much the waste was reduced. Then families realized the importance of sorting and recycling waste. During the sorting process, "we sold the resources, such as paper and soft drink cans to the recycling company. Part of the money we got was given to our janitor, part became the community environmental funds," Wang Pao-tze said.

In the educational reform movement, HUF promoted "education normalization" by rejecting what they considered a distorted educational system. The major movements they initiated were "Make a Sound Parents Committee" to urge parents to get involved with their children's school, and "family math," a program which helped parents assist children with math homework. They encouraged parents to participate in school activities and work together with schools to create a democratic and friendly learning environment for children. In the consumer movement, HUF members initiated a "cooperative buying" movement where consumers and producers as a whole combined to provide safe, healthy and contamination-free foods. According to the HUF Newsletter (Wong, 1993), the ultimate goals of cooperative buying movement were to create consumer's subjectivity, to care about earth resources, to preserve farmers' and workers' health, to support the disadvantaged, and to unite community forces.

Critical pedagogy in social movements as Dykstra and Law (1996) proposed has three dimensions: social consciousness, imagination and dialogue. HUF, as a grassroots organization of education and action, applied this pedagogy for raising environmental consciousness through discussion and creativity. The characteristics of HUF homemakers played a major role in initiating and continuing these movements. These characteristics were persistence, assertiveness, positive thinking, reflection/action, down-to-earth attitudes, pragmatism, responsibility, a rejection of power and titles, and a strong sense of social justice. HUF's pedagogy of mobilization included giving lectures, writing articles, lending their voices in the media, and going to communities, schools, churches and study groups to share their experiences and encourage their members to participate. For the major social issues such as anti-nuclear power, saving the forest, and educational reform, HUF formed coalitions with other groups and built a network to mobilize more people to participate.

Motherwork

The second finding was that they highly valued motherwork and put the family first. Motherwork-"a living and working with children" (Hart, 1995) was the central work of HUF's mothers. The roles of wife, mother, and homemaker were their collective identity. Their primary responsibility was at home. Huei-jen said,

For so many years, no matter what I am doing, I have to come back at a certain time. I do whatever work I have to do. You have to get consent from your family members who are willing to share the household. I believe every family member has one's own role. You have to play a proper role to maintain a harmonious family. You have to fulfill your role at home before you go out.

HUF's major goal was to create a pollution-free, safe, clean and healthy society for families and children. For instance, HUF stood for anti-nuclear power because their slogan was "For Children, We Are Against Nuclear Power." They worried that a nuclear disaster could irrevocably hurt the environment. Environmental actions such as sorting waste/recycling resources and other waste reduction activities were to create a positive environment for the next generation. Involvement in the educational reform movement was to create a cooperative, friendly learning environment for children. The cooperative buying movement was for the health of family members. Motherwork thus became a force and reason for them to further participate in public affairs, and even became involved in the process of policy decision-making.

For a homemaker, family was the first place where she wanted to practice her actions. Convincing family members to take environmental actions was the first step. The family understood what she was doing so they supported her actions. Consequently, the family was not confined under a patriarchal system; on the contrary, it was transformed into a powerful base that supported the member's actions. Motherwork was also a strategy that became HUF's major approach in mobilizing the movements. Members accepted their social role as a homemaker and accomplished it; and then they went beyond their homes to the community and the school to play their role as homemakers or mothers transforming the society to an improved, higher-quality environment. Mothers confronted patriarchy when it was brought up as a family issue; however, they were reticent to discuss "gender" as a concept because mostly they did not experience male oppression at home. Many HUF participants played important roles in their families, or at least, their voices could be heard in the households.

Participatory Research

The third finding was related to their inquiry. Participatory research (PR) was commonly adopted as the learning process when they participated in social actions. PR was used as both a concept and a method that matched HUF's philosophy—a belief in collaborative thinking and learning. Collaborative thinking began when anyone brought ideas or issues to HUF and invited other participants to respond to their interests. Through the discussion, the idea(s) might evolve into a feasible project. Everyone was a planner as well as an agent for action. They collaborated in order to accomplish the project.

Tandon (1982) states, "Participatory research is a learning process for those involved. The process begins with people's concrete experience and situation and moves to include both theoretical analysis and action aimed at change" (p. 2). PR is composed of three interrelated processes—collective investigation of problems, collective analysis and collective action. Two cases from HUF actions served as examples:

Case one: family math program. Many mothers had the problem of teaching their children mathematics. Math had been a common nightmare to them and they decided to work together to eliminate it. These mothers came together using the book Family Math as a tool. Through collective discussion and analysis in their first meeting, they agreed on a time and place for meetings, a schedule for the mother-presenters, and the on-going process. They took notes on the problems that happened during the action process. After each session, they collectively discussed and modified the plans when necessary. They also invited university professors to work together with them. The professors acted as co-researchers by providing theories, strategies, and approaches as solutions when necessary. Through the learning process, most mothers successfully overcame the fear of math and developed better relationships with their children. HUF expanded this program into schools and other communities to help more mothers and children. In 1999, they were invited to design the family math program in Wen-shan Community College. HUF mothers not only solved their own problems, but also became family math instructors through their participatory research learning.

Case two: cooperative buying movement. The problem started from the awareness of HUF participants when they promoted environmental movement. They realized that environment and consumption are two sides of one issue. They then got together to discuss and analyze the problems and found out that "green consumption" was one of the best ways to solve the garbage problems by following the 4R principles: refuse, reuse, reduce and recycle. Furthermore, friendly environmental products were beneficial to both human beings and nature; consequently, the action they would take would slow environmental deterioration. They considered an alternative to the present consumption in which basic foods were commodities controlled by the market instead of consumers and producers. They then took action by studying and attending conferences to get more information. In 1993, HUF started a movement initiating cooperative buying with rice and grapes. By the end of 2000, there were more than 300 items carried and 6000 members in their cooperative buying. In the movement, the PR three inter-related processes were systematically adopted to investigate the action.

Frierean's concept of praxis was taken up during the PR process. Reflection and action interacted as the homemakers became involved in the movements. Members acted as both knowledge consumers and producers. Gramsci's concept of organic intellectual manifested itself when they conducted their projects. For Gramsci, all human beings are potential intellectuals able to produce knowledge. These homemakers had potential leadership. They chose to be organic intellectuals and worked for the disadvantaged and the underprivileged. They were creators of social change and history. The concept of colearners (Cunningham, 2000) as the practice of collaborative learning in HUF contributed to PR in the process of producing knowledge.

Personal Transformation

The fourth, and final finding centered on personal transformation that occurred when members participated in learning activities. They found learning was meaningful through interaction with group members in which they modified their ideas through reflection and action (Blumer, 1986). Lin-ju said,

I feel I make big progress. My thoughts have been changed a lot. As I said before, I learn from others, from books. I modified myself all the time. From this aspect, I find HUF is very lovely. Many people enter, and many people go out. You don't have to do a lot in order to stay. I feel very comfortable and warm. I don't think I did a lot. I come over [to HUF] whenever I have time.

Personal transformation brought about organizational transformation. Hsiu-chiaw, one of the founders in Taichung, said, "I see HUF is transforming. At first, those who had few friends in HUF, now have become the most popular." She talked about how those who were rejected earlier in HUF because of their strong political stance were later accepted and became the core members. "Ten years is short and long, one way or the other. Time changed the core members and HUF's central idea. I think that because the group members' value system was changed, the nature of the group was changed accordingly," she said.

Social transformation happened after their long-term work in the community. Yu-lin's personal transformation occurred through both participating in study circles and social interaction with group members and community residents. She saw her personal transformation bringing about social transformation. She said,

" I have many opportunities to go out and promote environmental stuff. I am happy to find out that some community mothers want to form study groups but they don't know how to do it. I share with them our experience of learning in study group. After I went there [the community] for about two times, the beginning of study group then emerged. I feel great for such a group of women who are willing to work in the communities and create better ones. I think it is a "dot-line-plane expansion" [a mathematics concept]. I think if I could do something here and make some amount of change, it would be great. I feel great."

Conclusion and Discussion

HUF created a space for the homemaker's voice. They, as a socially marginalized group, became movement initiators and actors. Three conclusions were drawn from the findings. First, social movements were learning sites (Finger, 1989; Foley, 1999; Holford, 1995; Spender, 1995; Welton, 1993, ,). Nonformal learning happened when participants were engaged in social action. The learning occurred in the group discussions, preparing a lecture, working the picket lines, in the communities, and through other social actions. Homemakers became movement initiators because their life-world was threatened. They countered the threats by naming them and changing the content. They did what they thought. For them, nothing was too small to do. The movements they created were bottom-up and grounded from their roots. Confrontation was used sparingly and only when necessary.

Second, motherwork was a platform for expanded practice for social justice. They demanded to create a better environment and society for their children. The issues on which they focused-environment, education and consumption-were all tied to everyday life. For homemakers, the family was not an oppressed place under the patriarchal system but a positive sphere that supported them in reaching their goals. Families and their members became the strength of these movements. They expanded family value and motherwork to the community and further to the

society. They looked at the society as a family in which they were able to create a harmonious, safe and healthy environment.

Third, HUF was unique in its non-hierarchical structure. Everybody had an opportunity for participating in the decision-making process. Collaborative thinking was the culture of the organization. Discussion and dialogue became necessary in the decision-making process. Every participant joined the committees in which she was interested. They brought in their ideas, participated in planning and became project implementers. Kai-jen said, "Here, everybody is a master." Since everyone was subjective, everyone could give voice and be involved in the decision making process. PR became a method for them to reach agreement; thus, action became possible. Nobody would take orders, unless she joined the discussion and then understood the whole process and knew what her role was.

Implications

HUF provided homemakers a place to learn and work together. Nonformal learning occurred in the study circles, street demonstrations, communities, environmental investigations, and public hearings. It promoted a paradigm shift for members by creating a positive and assertive image for homemakers in Taiwanese society. With their creativity and continuing participation in social action, the movements they initiated and promoted have either become policies or socially acceptable. What we can learn from them is threefold. First, HUF created a learning culture that is inclusive regardless of age, social status and education background. Everybody was a learner and encouraged to bring ideas to share. From my observation, those who continued participation were life-long learners. Secondly, learning opportunities were everywhere. The majority of in-house lectures and workshops that HUF participants gave were open to the public. They also attended meetings and spoke from the homemaker's perspective. All these activities needed great preparation. From my observation, they not only learned from participation in actions, but also prepared well for each action. Thirdly, bottom-up leadership was well used in HUF. When I interviewed them, I did not hear "I led" but "I shared," "we promoted," and "we pushed from back." Homemakers in a behind-the-scene role positively used it as the main force in the movements. Ultimately, their empathy and passion for both the deteriorated environment and the underprivileged in human society drove them to become activists of social justice.

References

- Blumer, H. (1986). *Symbolic interactionism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chiu, Y. (1996). *Women's participation in the community movement and modern motherhood's practice*. Unpublished thesis, National Ching-hwa University, Hsin-chu, Taiwan.
- Cunningham, P. (2000). A sociology of adult education. In A. L. Wilson & R. Hayes (Eds.), *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* (pp. 573-591). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Dykstra, C. & Law, M. (1994). Popular social movements as educative forces. *35th Annual Adult Education Research Conference Proceedings*, (pp.121-126). University of Tennessee.

- Eyerman, R., & Jamison, A. (1991). *Social movements: A cognitive approach*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Finger, M. (1989). New social movements and their implications for adult education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 40, 15-21.
- Foley, G. (1999). *Learning in social action: A contribution to understanding informal education*. New York: Zed Books.
- Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gall, M. D., Borg, W. R., Gall, & J. P. (1996). *Educational research*. White Plains, N.Y.: Longman Publishers USA.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. New York: International Publishers.
- Hart, M. (1992). *Working and educating for life*. New York: Routledge.
- Hart, M. (1995). Motherwork: A radical proposal to rethink work and education. In M. R. Welton (Ed.), *In Defense of the Lifeworld* (pp. 99-125). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Holford, J. (1995). Why social movements matter: Adult education theory, cognitive praxis, and the creation of knowledge. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 45(2), 95-111.
- Hsu, C., & Sung, W. (1990). *Taiwan new social movements*. Taipei, Taiwan: Big Stream.
- Merriam, S. B. (1988). *Case study research in education*. San Francisco : Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B., & Simpson, E. L. (1995). *A guide to research for educators and trainers of adults*. Malabar, Fla.: Krieger.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- Stanage, S. M. (1987). *Adult education and phenomenological research*. Malabar, Fla.: Krieger.
- Tandon, R. (1982). *Participatory research*. New Delhi: Society for Participatory Research in Asia.
- Tandon, R. (1988). Social transformation and participatory research. *Convergence*, 21(2/3), 5-15.

Welton, M. (1993). Social revolution learning: the new social movements as learning sites. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 43(3), 152-164.

Wong, H. (1993, February). How to do the cooperative buying. *Homemakers' Union and Foundation Newsletter*, 69, 8-9.