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Habermasian Theory and the Development of Critical Theoretical Discourses in Adult Education

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Abstract: This paper begins with an overview of Habermas's background, discusses some of his theoretical contributions, explores ways his ideas have been interpreted and utilized by adult educators, and briefly notes some of the critiques of his work.

One of the most influential thinkers who has impacted upon the development of critical theoretical discourses in adult education is the European social theorist and philosopher, Jurgen Habermas. Since Mezirow (1991) first introduced many adult educators to the work of Habermas, his theories have captured the interest of a number of critical theorists (Collins, 1991; Hart, 1992; Newman, 1999; Plumb, 1995; Welton, 1998) who have been intrigued by his innovative synthesis of social, psychological, and linguistic theoretical traditions. In a world beleaguered by violence, poverty, civil strife and destruction, Habermas's focus on communicative forms of action and the advancement of civil society offers a resolutely steadfast and hopeful analysis that asserts human potentiality for learning, problem solving, and advancement. This paper makes a modest effort to begin to explore some of the theoretical suppositions of Habermas's work, beginning with an examination of the theoretical context from which Habermas's work emerges. I then overview his theory of communicative action, briefly explain his framework of system and lifeworld, and explore how these concepts inform critical adult educational discourses. This is followed by an explanation of his more recent work on civil society and the impact of this on the adult education field. In the final section of the paper I examine some of criticisms of Habermas's work and examine the implications of this for the development of critical adult education discourses.

Background

The European critical theoretical tradition emerged from the Frankfurt School, an educational institute in Germany that was established in the early part of the twentieth century. When World War II loomed, most of the intellectual leaders of the Institute fled overseas to the United States. Some of the well known members of the Frankfurt School included such prominent thinkers as Theodore Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, and Max Horkheimer. The term "critical theory", according to Bronner and Kellner, was coined as "a type of code" that served to "veil their radical commitments in an environment that was hostile to anything remotely associated with Marxism" (1989, p. 1). The ideas generated by these thinkers still impact upon the work of adult education theorists today, such as Stephen Brookfield's (2001) recent papers on Herbert Marcuse.

These early critical theorists were interested in studying how modern society had developed from the time of the Enlightenment. The development of Enlightenment thought "set itself against "magical" thinking", challenged traditional ways of looking at the world, and in the process, decoupled culture from nature (Fleming, 1997, p. 17). The rise of the industrial revolution was characterized by a corresponding development in the widespread usage of scientific approaches to knowledge in which technical rational reasoning was privileged. In their dispirited text, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) focus on the darker side of the Enlightenment, arguing that in modern society, reason has been eclipsed by this instrumentalized orientation. The initial euphoria over scientific and technological

developments dimmed as these early critical theorists probed the problems created by the narrowly constructed, “one-dimensional thought” identified by Marcuse (1964), where humans accept the status quo and fail to recognize human potentiality as a form of resistance to repressive changes brought about through modernity.

Jurgen Habermas is a second generation thinker of the Frankfurt School. Mentored by the first generation of critical theorists, over the years this German theorist has both drawn upon the work of his early teachers and critiqued it. Fleming (1997) writes that Habermas challenged the pessimism of his mentors, arguing that they wouldn't be capable of posing their criticisms of the narrowness of technical-rational thought if they weren't capable of a different kind of reasoning. His life's work has involved exploring these different alternatives.

Theory of Communicative Action

In two massive and intensely complex volumes, Habermas (1981; 1987) outlines a comprehensive theory of communicative action that has been broadly debated. Drawing upon a wide range of psychological, sociological, linguistic and philosophical theory, Habermas's work has a scope and depth equalled by few other contemporary thinkers.

Habermas weaves together the diverse work of sociological thinkers like Durkheim, Parsons, and Marx who were concerned with the larger social, political, and economic structures of Western society to discuss his concept of the *system*. The system can be seen as the existing structure that coordinate many of the functions of everyday life, through the “media” of money and power. The *lifeworld* is a term Habermas draws from the field of phenomenology, where everyday understandings of how the world operates are examined to construct a theory that emerges from grounded experience. The lifeworld is a place where people interact in the everyday, sharing ideas and communicatively shaping values and beliefs. It is situated in the homeplace, local community, and civil society organizations.

With the rise of modernity, Habermas (1987) argues that the system has increasingly colonized the lifeworld, causing a breakdown in traditional communicative linkages. This disjunction between the lifeworld and system threatens to “pathologize” the lifeworld. Drawing upon Durkheim's and Weber's work, Habermas discusses how worldviews develop which “offer a potential for grounding that can be used to justify a political order or the institutional framework of a society in general” (1987, p.56). A normative consensus develops, whereby the status quo is maintained. He argues that

What is of primary interest in analyzing the interaction between normative consensus, worldview, and institutional system, however, is that the connection is established through channels of linguistic communication (1987, p. 56).

In order to disrupt or challenge repressive system structures, people need to develop their capacity to communicate as rational human beings to explore alternative viewpoints and perspectives. Communicative forms of action can serve to challenge the dominance of “system imperatives” that diminish the effectiveness of the lifeworld.

Communicative action is also important for the socialization and development of each individual. Habermas argues that “communicative action provides the medium for reproduction of lifeworlds” (1981, p. 337). According to Habermas, communicative action is necessary to maintain a healthy and productive society. The role of adult educators, then, would be to assess ways to foster communicative action, and in doing so, sustain the lifeworld.

Impact on Critical Adult Education Discourses

Jack Mezirow was the theorist who first helped to achieve widespread recognition of the value of Habermas's theory of communicative action within the field of adult education (Connelly, 1996). Although he has been critiqued for offering a more "psychological theory of adult learning" rather than a critical social theory of learning (Plumb, 1995), his work introduced Habermas's distinction between instrumental and communicative forms of learning, and drew upon Habermas's concept of ideal speech situations in order to develop his own theory of transformative learning. Habermas's influence encouraged Mezirow to carefully analyse the role of dialogue and how it shapes perception. He noted the importance of dialogue as a means by which other individuals become aware of other ways of making sense of the world. Mezirow gives the example of consciousness raising, where "women come to recognize that what they thought was their personal problem is in fact a widely shared problem of sex stereotyping (1991, p. 209). Through dialogue new meanings and interpretations of the world emerge, leading to a transformation of individual perspectives.

In his book, aptly titled *In Defense of the Lifeworld*, Michael Welton (1995) writes passionately about the goals of critical adult education, arguing that we need to challenge narrow and constrictive approaches to education defined by "instrumental" rationality and to sustain the types of education that are supported within the realm of the lifeworld. In his early work, Habermas (1975) argues that there are three approaches to knowledge; technical, practical, and emancipatory. Despite some controversy over his concept of knowledge-constitutive interests, Welton (1993) argues these categories provide insights into different approaches in education. The technical approach focuses on knowledge needed to understand and manipulate the environment, while the practical approach examines how people construct and exchange meaning. Emancipatory knowledge "derives from humankind's desire to achieve emancipation from domination" (Welton, 1993, p. 83). Technical approaches are most evident in the positivist approach to rationality, the practical approach is most closely related to the hermeneutical or humanistic sciences, while emancipatory knowledge is the basis for developing critical theoretical analyses.

Welton is concerned that influence of the system has had a deleterious effect on the lifeworld, as evidenced by the increasing commodification of education. The effects of the mass media and culture can be seen in how "the newly inflated roles of consumer and client channel the influence of the system to the lifeworld" (Welton, 1995, p. 147). Welton (1995) believes that the erosion of the lifeworld will have tremendous costs for humanity. The potential for emancipatory approaches to education and the expansion of critical pedagogy is weakened by this influence of the marketplace in adult education.

Similarly, Michael Collins (1991) critiques what he terms the "cult of efficiency." Collins (1995) argues that under the current guise of androgogy, self-directed learning becomes commodified and the educator is transformed into a facilitator, creating a consumer mentality within an educational framework. Collins warns that this leads to an objectification of the learning experience, diminishing the intersubjective nature of communication which Habermas envisions.

Donovan Plumb (1995) argues that the commodification of culture has served to undermine the previous reliance of the system upon the lifeworld for social integration and symbolic reproduction. This has created a disjunction that will endanger the sustainability of critical adult educational practices.

In her assessment of learning in relationship to workplace learning, Mechthild Hart argues for the need to develop communicative action. Hart (1992) discusses how Habermas's distinctions between instrumental and communicative rationality reveal insights within the adult learning context. Instrumental rationality involves using the correct means to achieve a desired end result, and strategic rationality is an informed decision making process consistent with values, such as seen in adult education

programs where the objective is to find the best “fit” between the program and the client. In both cases, rationality is characterized by objectivity. Hart states that “in contrast to purposive-rational action, communicative action is characterized by a relationship of complementarity and mutuality among the participants” (1992, p. 142). Norms are guided by the intersubjective structure of interaction, and the moral/practical knowledge, such as is seen in social institutions, is determined by the value and belief systems of that particular society in that particular time frame.

Civil Society

In his recent work, Habermas (1996) explores how the renewal of civil society may help to foster communicative action and work to sustain the lifeworld. Michael Newman (1999) discusses how civil society may be viewed “as providing an alternative means of representation and action to the ‘system’” (1999, p. 153). Civil society stands apart from government and economic organizations within the marketplace. It includes grass roots organizations which may mobilize for social change such as environmental groups, peace activists, anti-poverty coalitions, and feminist organizations. de Oliveria and Tandon argue that civil society is characterized by “the values of diversity, of tolerance and pluralism, of peace and justice, of solidarity and responsibility” (1994, p. 11). It provides a forum for communicative forms of action and the development of active citizenship. Welton holds that “socially responsible adult education is not simply about ‘social change’” (1998, p. 368). He asks us to assess the following learning challenges engendered by globalization: the deprivation of meaning (which confronts consumerism as surrogate god); the depletion of solidarity (which confronts possessive individualism and social fragmentation) and the destabilization of the personality (which confronts many pathologizing tendencies in society).

Considering the destabilizing aspects of a world characterized by the speed of change, he argues that in some ways civil society must preserve essential communicative values that help to conserve the lifeworld. Welton argues that the institutions of civil society “have the task of enabling us to learn what it means to be competent, active persons in our particular world” (1998, p. 369). This is an essential aspect of adult learning for active citizenship, a means through which education can foster democratic forms of social learning.

Criticisms

In understanding the impact of Habermas’s work on developing critical adult education discourses, it is also significant to note those who have challenged or who have not taken up his work. Both postmodernists (Peitrykowski, 1996) and feminists (Fleming, 1997; Meehan, 1995) raise serious questions about issues of inclusion, challenging the European modernist tradition that informs his work. Critics of Habermas are leery of his attempt to construct a universalistic theory in a world that seems to be increasingly fractured and characterized by difference. His analysis of the system/lifeworld divide has tended to emphasize social class and power differences linked with the development of the market economy, but has been challenged for not adequately addressing other axes of power linked with gender, race, culture, sexual orientation, and ability. For instance, feminist scholar Seyla Benhabib (1996) points out one of the difficulties of Habermas’s assertion that everyone should be free to enter into discourse in the public sphere, noting that there are gendered imbalances in power that often serve to silence women. Nancy Fraser worries that “Habermas’s categorical divide between system and lifeworld institutions faithfully mirrors the institutional separation in male-dominated, capitalist societies of family and official economy, household and paid workplace” (1995, p. 27). In previous work I have challenged the way in

which Habermas's conception of the lifeworld/system divide does not adequately address power imbalances that begin in the lifeworld. I argue that these can be seen as a reflection of the corruption of human values, instead of always being indicators of pathological influences of the system. I dispute the notion that our main goal as educators and citizens should be to defend the lifeworld - questioning instead whether our focus should be to assess and restructure it (Gouthro, 2002).

Despite these challenges and the seriousness of the questions that have been raised by critics, Habermasian theory provides a comprehensive and provocative analysis of modern society that has served to inform and expand critical discourses in adult education. His insightful efforts to synthesize and analyse Western social theory has been matched by few, if any other scholars. As Brian Connelly states, current adult education theory within the Western world is increasingly influenced by the writings of Jurgen Habermas" (1996, p. 241). In assessing his work, Cohen argues that even Habermas's most determined feminist critics are unwilling to dispense with key categories of his thought: they make use of the concepts of communicative action, public space, democratic legitimacy, dialogic ethics, discourse, and critical social theory (1995, p. 57).

Throughout his academic career, Habermas has engaged with and responded to his critics in his writing, thus demonstrating his own commitment to communicative forms of learning. Since Habermas's work is very complex, it requires a commitment of serious and sustained reflection from educators who wish to develop a full appreciation for the contributions of his work. Although there are serious criticisms of Habermas's work that need to be addressed, his theory has served to advance a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of some of the complex social processes at work in our world, key to informing the direction of future critical adult education theoretical discourses.

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