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Pragmatism, Postmodernism, and Adult Education: Structure and Agency in the 21st Century

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Abstract: *This paper develops a theory that interprets the philosophical schools of American Pragmatism and Continental Postmodernism as important, complementary resources for understanding the effects of structure and agency on the possibilities for learning and meaning-making. This type of theory building can provide for practitioners and scholars a useful framework for negotiating the limited battle between self-determination and structural determination.*

Introduction

In the context of planning theory, Cervero and Wilson have clarified the problems the dichotomy of structure and agency creates for Adult Education theory (1994). They say, “Traditional planning theories, with their emphasis on either self-determination or structural determination, have failed to clarify what Giddens refers to as the ‘essential recursiveness of social life, as constituted in social practices;’” by which they mean the way that structure and agency are interdependent and mutually constituted. In addressing the recursiveness of social life, their discussion of planning theory is directly relevant to the more general concerns of my paper. They continue,

“Therefore, planning is not solely scientific, as the classical viewpoint purports. Nor is it simply a matter of situating the planner within a context, as the naturalistic and practical traditions suggest. Nor does the critical viewpoint provide a complete understanding, with its emphasis on the confluence of structural forces. What is required is a theory of human action that integrates agency and structure.”

The formulation of planning practice elucidated by Cervero and Wilson suggests a need for adult education theory to reach beyond its traditional conceptual terrain to provide resources for an integrative theory of human action and structural forces. This paper proposes that the anti-foundationalist and non-dualistic lens provided by the philosophical traditions of American Pragmatism and Continental Postmodernism can help provide such resources.

I understand the theoretical contribution of this paper to follow the tradition of Paulo Freire’s notion of “naming the world” (1970), a notion that through its emphasis on dialogical conscientization makes a profound gesture toward integrating structure and agency. By building on Freire, these two philosophical traditions can help fill a theoretical void in the Adult Education field – the same theoretical void that Cervero and Wilson discuss.

Adult education is, in part, about developing human agency. The lens through which agency has been understood has for too long been oversimplified, under-theorized, and inaccurate; characterized as either a decontextualized, ahistorical, autonomous subject, or as a predetermined, automaton controlled by structural forces. Contemporary philosophical literature can contribute to a more nuanced lens by circumventing the structure and agency dichotomy: American Pragmatism as seen in William James’ radical empiricism (1977), John Dewey’s individualism and democratic faith (1984), and George

Herbert Mead's social behaviorism (1934); and Continental Postmodernism as seen in Jacques Derrida's deconstruction (1979), and Foucault's genealogy (1988) provide the conceptual tools for adult educators to build on Freire, Giroux, Horkheimer, and Adorno by further illuminating a rich human agent who is embodied, contextualized, and historicized. These philosophers and the philosophical traditions emanating from them constitute a profound challenge to the subject-centered, Cartesian, modern philosophy that is at the heart of adult education's traditional notions of human agency.

If we take our task as educators and researchers to be equipping learners for engaged citizenship and deep democracy, we must be clear about the problem to be addressed. Our first step – and one of our most important steps as well – is the analysis of human suffering at the hands of enlightenment rationality put forth by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. According to their argument, we are unwittingly complicit in the demise of democratic public spheres, the resistance to the democratic production of knowledge, and the evaporation of broad human agency. Walker Percy – novelist and philosopher -- argues that this degradation is the result of alienation. His argument in support of Horkheimer and Adorno leads him to characterize humanity's self-understanding as twofold: 1) Humans can be understood as organisms in an environment, a sociological unit, an uncultured creature, a psychological dynamism endowed genetically like other organisms with needs and drives, who through evolution has developed strategies for learning and surviving by means of certain adaptive transactions with the environment; and, 2) Humans are also understood to be somehow endowed with certain other unique properties which he does not share with other organisms—with certain inalienable rights, reason, freedom, and an intrinsic dignity—and as a consequence the highest value to which a democratic society can be committed is the respect of the sacredness and worth of the individual (Percy 20).

Per this description, and to connect Percy with Horkheimer and Adorno's dialectic of enlightenment, critical pedagogy, and, consequently, the dialectic of human agency and social structure, humanity's self-understanding is both universal and particular (as Horkheimer and Adorno would understand those terms) and, indeed, it is this apparently incoherent proposition that constitutes the roots of humanity's alienation. *A person is an individual, distinct and unique, yet that same person is understandable, biologically and scientifically, only to the extent that he or she is the same as everyone else.* Science, medicine, biology, and technology – for example -- cannot speak to the individual, if they are to live up to the standards of enlightenment rationality. As the pure research of scientism took command of the modern mind, the individual was silenced; the individual --the particular-- is absorbed in a world that is fabricated and, consequently, is made impotent by an artificial integration with the universal. This kind of identity thinking turns concrete human individuals into abstractions, constituting a subtle yet powerful kind of violence that numbs and desensitizes our most humane capacities.

As the laws of the marketplace take precedence over the laws of the state as guardians of the public good, politics is increasingly removed from power. The state offers little help in mediating the interface between the advance of capital and its rapacious commercial interests, on the one hand, and those non-commodified interests and nonmarket spheres that create the political, economic, and social conditions vital for critical citizenship and democratic public life on the other. Within the prevailing discourse of neoliberalism that has taken hold of the public imagination, there is no vocabulary for political or social transformation, no collective vision, no

social agency to challenge the privatization and commercialization of schooling. . . . In the midst of this concerted attack on the public, the market driven consumer juggernaut continues to mobilize desires in the interest of producing market identities and market relationships that ultimately appear as, Theodor Adorno once put it, nothing less than ‘a prohibition on thinking itself’” (Giroux 2001, xxii).

Giroux describes with appropriate urgency the overwhelming evidence that our collective sense of agency is greatly impoverished by our current social structure. The ideology of technical and enlightenment rationality becomes oppressive as our options for human agency in the early 21st Century become limited to consumerism as opposed to creating meaning through non-commercial values such as empathy, compassion, love, and solidarity.

Learning is a non-dialectical process

While providing a powerful critique of the contradictions of enlightenment rationality and an accurate analysis of its negative effects on human agency, critical theory and dialectical, immanent critique is limited in its effectiveness for creating an epistemological structure that can empower agency and meaning-making. John Stuhr argues that, while the endeavor toward and spirit of identity thinking is damaging to human relations and agency, the doom predicted by Adorno as the result of identity thinking is less pronounced because the nature of the human encounter with the world is actually non-dialectical (Stuhr 2003). Percy’s alienation, the net result, is ultimately the same, but the ways we understand the possibilities for melioristic work and positive change, i.e. agency, are very different. The best of what we know about how humans learn, and, thus, make meaning and become effective agents tells us that subject and object, immanence and transcendence are not actually part of our lived experience, but are, instead, conceptual fabrications that we impose on our experience after the fact. John Dewey refers to this tendency as “the philosophical fallacy”. In truth, our learning is much *more* contextual than even a dialectical structure allows; meaning that the opposites of subject and object, immanence and transcendence are always already part of each other within a given situation-act, i.e. subject and object do not constitute non-identity (the essential ingredient for a dialectical relationship), but, instead, constitute different senses of a unified conceptualized situation-act. In this way – and in the tradition of Piagetian genetic psychology, Deweyan/Jamesian radical empiricism, Merleau-Ponty’s non-dualistic materialism, and Nietzschean/Foucauldian Genealogy – *knowing is part and parcel of acting*. Moving to a non-dialectical structure of thought – a postmodern and pragmatic, i.e. *post-metaphysical, anti-foundational, and anti-representational structure of thought* – opens doors for emancipation and agency that were not previously there.

We Understand the World by Changing It

The common thread of knowing being part and parcel of acting fundamentally shifts the way we should understand structure and agency: agency framed this way, as part of knowing, is no longer simply in a reciprocal relationship with structure, but is now in a mutually-constitutive, reciprocal relationship. We find ourselves in a place where knowing is no longer about *certainty* – as it has been since Greek thought surmounted Hebrew philosophy/theology – but is, instead, a kind of action/agency; knowing is both a product and producer of action. As Chris Hoadley says about Design-Based Research,

“Design-Based Research boils down to trying to understand the world by trying to change it” (2005).

Knowing framed this way *is* postmodern and pragmatic: it becomes a kind of contextualism that is post-metaphysical, anti-foundational, anti-representational and enables a kind of meaning-making and meaningful perception that saturates language and tools while, at the same time, that same meaning-making and meaningful perception seeps through and constitutes perception. Being post-metaphysical – deeply imbedded in context, anti-foundational – deeply sensitive to historical and sociological shifts, and anti-representational – deeply constructed by human interaction, agency and meaning-making are much more creative than they are alienated. Moving towards a notion of learning that is transformative and focused on meaning-making, we can recognize that the modern epistemology informing notions of agency does little to help us understand this process. Modern epistemology is split between the empiricist and the rationalist camps, but the only *real* difference between them, as is also true of the difference between behaviorists and cognitivists, is whether the world or the mind makes the larger contribution to knowledge. The fruits of the interface of pragmatism and postmodernism, and the best of contemporary research into how we learn, tell us that the actual nature of our experience is anything but dualistic. Our learning is more like a gestalt than memorizing a vocabulary list. Additionally, it becomes clearer that rationality and meaning develop *within* a situation rather than in the dialectical movement between the separate parts of this dualism. The upshot of this anti-metaphysical, anti-foundational epistemology is that “action” gets us very close to the “emancipation” of critical pedagogy and the “reconstruction of experience” in American Pragmatism.

What does it mean for rationality and meaning to develop within a situation?: because we are living, breathing creatures, we cannot be understood as existing in a distinct way apart from our environment. For John Dewey, human nature is part and parcel of nature in the broader sense, i.e. we live *through* our environment. As he says in *Experience and Nature* (1958): “[A] living organism and its life processes involve a world or nature temporally and spatially external to itself but internal to its functions” (212). We cannot function, we cannot be who or what we are, without these things that are external to us participating in our lives in an internal way. We cannot, for example, chew without food or become human without other people. *Experience, then, is simply what happens when we function. The catch is that our functioning cannot be understood unless we recognize the initial unity of transaction between human nature and the rest of nature. It is only upon reflection, upon analysis and abstraction, that we can discriminate between organism and environment.* This initial non-dialectical unity is the foundation of activity theory and human meaning-making.

With this non-dualistic understanding of experience and situations, Dewey has bound the self up with the possibilities within objects and situations. Quite literally, meaning is created only by the *transaction* of one with the other. They cannot be understood apart from each other and it is only by virtue of the initial transaction that we can subsequently discriminate between organism and environment. Within the transaction, within the binding up of self with situation, of human nature with nature, experience is primarily a qualitative event, not reducible to easily digestible and easily calculated bits of sense-data. It is characterized by a certain *quality* which is *felt* before it is engaged cognitively. Emotions and intuition direct our attention and thus control the

participating elements of an experience. Our rational tools engage the situation only after we have intuited the quality of that situation and only after our emotions have directed us to what is most interesting in that situation. (Dewey, 1960). In other words, the qualitative nature of experience, the intuitive and emotional element of experience, controls the learning situation – what is learned and how we learn it – to a greater extent than any rational process or internal cognitive structure or stimuli in the external environment. Moving us beyond the contradiction at the heart of the alienation and enlightenment rationality, Dewey does profound justice to the irreducibly human characteristic of learning. Even more profound than this, though, is how the pervasive moral element bleeds into the entire process. Learning can never be value neutral because it is socially constructed. Our natural laws and our truths – the very things that we seek to learn – are the products of the learning process. There is, for example, no gravity that is not already *somebody's* gravity. Within experience, within the transaction, cognitive meanings emerge when reflection goes to work on precognitive activities and feelings. We learn when we can reconstruct experience to make a backward and forward connection between what was done, putting one's finger in a flame for example, and what was suffered as a consequence of that doing, the pain suffered after the burn. This reconstruction of experience is shot through with social and political influences, and we can reconstruct experience in a way that facilitates growth or we can reconstruct experience in a way that leaves our actions uncoordinated.

In separate papers written for the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, John Stuhr and Charles Hobbs frame knowledge in a way that circumvents the traditional structure and agency dualism by building on emergent themes in pragmatism and postmodernism. When we move beyond the spectator theory of knowledge to a more contextual understanding of knowing that is more about the mutual constitution of knowledge within the situation-act (mutually constituted within the act of perception, by the perceiver and the perceived), agency is liberated from the need to transcend the immanence of the “dialectic of enlightenment” and instead becomes something like William James’ “will to believe”/“Nietzsche’s will to power” in which we quite literally create the world in which we know-act by the way we conceptualize the situation-act. What we have is agency constituted *through* the speech-act, not *by* the speech-act. In other words, the important thing is not the simple fact *that* the speech-act happened, but that as the speech-act happens, we are changing-knowing the world. Again, this is a kind of contextualism that is post-metaphysical, anti-foundational, anti-representational and enables a kind of meaning-making and meaningful perception that saturates language and tools while, at the same time, meaning-making and meaningful perception seep through and constitute perception.

Akin to Freire’s “naming the world” and “conscientization,” this holistic understanding of learning is not a new perspective. Peter Sawchuck makes this point while arguing for a different understanding of technology training for workers: in his research,

“[w]e see that the apparent problem of a technological underclass is less a reflection of the availability of equipment or people’s cognitive abilities than a matter of their access to stable cultural communities that recognize and build upon the social standpoints of their members, which in turn provides a voice, opportunities and, power for these communities” (2003).

Based on his research, Sawchuck sees training problems within a community of workers as a lack of meaning-making mechanisms rather than as a problem of tools, intelligence, or capacity. The problem is not one of structure, nor one of agency; instead, the problem is one of misguided activity. Building on the non-dialectical social theory above, this theoretical foundation is a kind of social constructivism, some of the best of which is currently being researched as “activity theory,” but takes as its source and inspiration the philosophies of John Dewey, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Foucault.

We are not spectators; we are participants who must care for the future because we are formed, created, and constructed by that future, and therefore we *should* act so as to secure the best possible consequences. In every experience, every transaction, we are bound up with our environment, and can, thus, shape the outcome of that experience even as we are shaped by that very same experience. In denying the dualistic assumptions of the cognitivists and the behaviorists, the fruits of the pragmatists and postmodernists point us toward an understanding of learning that makes us accountable for the quality of the world in which we live. Keeping in mind the important analysis offered by the Frankfurt School and supported by Percy’s notion of the human alienation, the theory of human action evident in the intersection of pragmatism and postmodernism, and clarified more in activity theory, presents a useful integration of agency and structure; an integration that could fulfill this ethical vision of learning, meaning-making, and empowerment.

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