

Kansas State University Libraries  
**New Prairie Press**

---

Adult Education Research Conference

2006 Conference Proceedings (Minneapolis,  
MN)

---

## Destabilizing the center, disrupting the flow: Culture, mobility, and learning in the construction of female identity

Barbara Sparks  
*University of Colorado at Denver*

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

Sparks, Barbara (2006). "Destabilizing the center, disrupting the flow: Culture, mobility, and learning in the construction of female identity," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2006/papers/50>

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](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

# **Destabilizing the center, disrupting the flow: Culture, mobility, and learning in the construction of female identity**

Barbara Sparks  
University of Colorado at Denver

Keywords: Women in adult education, critical social geography, life history

**Abstract:** This study looked at how women experience the destabilizing effects of change when the flow of their lives is disrupted, either intentionally or unintentionally? The life histories of four women reveal themes of opportunities for re-forming identities, cultural aspects of the self which create meaning for the self and one's place in the world, and historical factors and positioning within temporal parameters.

## **Introduction**

Immigrants move from one country to another uprooting families for economic, political, religious and social reasons, often leaving family and history of place behind never to return. Migrants traverse landscapes, continuously on the move, following agricultural growing seasons often retracing steps over and over again yet never settling in one place, but many places. The new nomad may have a place called home, from which one travels back and forth, a home-base of sorts where family are embedded and one returns to on occasion; or, alternately, moves from place to place in search of satisfying work, landing in one location for several years at a time, only to pack up and relocate again for another assignment, before continuing on to yet another place. And, there are those who are displaced because of natural disaster or political conflict. Such situations often strain family ties breaking apart enduring and foundational relationships, upsetting ways of being in the world, disrupting cultural understandings and challenging one's values. Physical movement from place to place creates a myriad of disruptions and new adaptations. Geographical movement, however, is but one way that mobility plays out. People also move along metaphorical social and cultural pathways through the entire social fabric of everyday life with shifting spaces and landscapes both internal and external (Zelinsky, 2001). Unexpected life events or structural shifts, often disrupt economic stability, social relations or political alliances, yet, it is the internal shift in sense of well being and identity that is often profoundly thrown into question. The purpose of this study is to understand how dimensions of mobility, spatiality and movement influence learning and identity construction of diverse women. How do various women experience the destabilizing effects when the flow of their lives is disrupted, either intentionally or unintentionally? How do they make meaning as they relocate from one place to another, from one life stage to another?

## **Conceptual Framework**

The work of critical social geography suggests that location, or place, produces personal, psychological and political subjectivities based on who we consider ourselves to be (individually and collectively) and local, or geographical, knowledges based on material conditions and ways of life, structures of feelings, memories and histories, ideas, loyalties and other nonmaterial aspects of life (Harvey, 2001). Harvey states that these distinctive spheres are dynamic; people

shift perceptions and allegiances, reinvent traditions and create new formations. There is a flux and flow of space, place and relationship.

Feminist geographers continue to construct the geography of women making the distinction between private and public space; “the seemingly banal and trivial events of the everyday bound into power structures which limit and confine women” (Rose, 1993, p. 17) and aspects associated with the private space; emotional, relational and embodied. Thus, a landscape is not a given, a piece of reality that is simply there, but an effort of imagination, even resistance, an ordering of reality from different gendered angles, a combining, objective and subjective in the mind’s eye and thus both internal and external (Overing, 2001). Overing goes on to say “we map our world, our spaces and places, with our bodies, even as our body is inscribed by them” (p. 341). Individual strategies are influenced by, and in turn influence, the wider socio-economic system in which they are spatially and temporally positioned. The private space of women, from white middle-class feminist perspective, entails nurturing relations embodied in the female body and extended into the public arena with a feminine type of subjectivity “feelings of relations with others” (Rose, 1993, p. 28). From this perspective, one must take into account experience and subjectivity in gendered identities, for spaces and places are not seen as simply sets of material social relations but as cultural objects (McDowell, 1996). While more recent feminist geography deals with shifting definitions of private and public as it varies among cultures, historical periods and places, the difficulties of mobility and access (to such things as housing, work, social relations), in other words, the boundaries between genders, continues to be of concern. Women through a variety of experiences find ways to renegotiate or escape the confines of the domestic location often creating sites of resistance or transgressing boundaries. “Gender is a cultural performance – the effects of a set of contested power relations based in defining institutions” according to Duncan (1996, p. 5). Race and ethnicity are intrinsic to and compound how gender is constructed and thus cultural performance in public and private landscapes.

The dialectic of physical landscape and political positioning, begs the question, to what extent are landscape and identity bound together and what magnifications occur with movement across spaces. In other words, how do identities shift as diverse women traverse various landscapes and how do these shifts influence the landscape? There is a reciprocal dynamic where the self, (subjectivity and identity), is continually refashioned as one moves from one place to another, from hearth to cosmos, margin to center, home to travel, wilderness to civilization (Veness, 2001; Overing, 2001; O’Connor, 2002; Flannery, 2000). As one moves across spaces, certain aspects of the gendered and ethnic self are carried, transported from one time to another, one space to another. Constructing and reshaping of identities, then, is bound up with mobility as it is with a sense of place. Movement can create anxiety, or identity angst, and subsequently a fragmented self (Clark, 2005) and/or multiple selves. (This is similarly addressed in the “border crossing” work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Aida Hurtado and others.) For example, a new mother who feels confused about her role of caretaker, or no longer identifies with her previously held identity of career woman. She experiences her new environment, the landscape of motherhood, in contradictory and complex ways. Jones (2001) talks of these experiences as “the lost moorings of selfhood” (p. 124). What of the single mother on welfare who moves from a state of poverty to secure employment or educational opportunity? What cultural motifs does she carry along the pathways to counteract effects of such dislodging? Which are abandoned or set aside? What uncertainties exist for these women that call for re-solidifying identities?

### **Research Design**

A life history approach was used to collect women's understandings of learning experiences at various points in their lives and the influence of gender, culture, and race as well as the social, political and economic factors on that learning. While a retrospective life review implies that impressions change over time and that the narrator has her own agenda (O'Connor, 2001), she is, nevertheless, affected by subsequent events. The oral life history requires discussion of developments over time and elicits information on the subjective interpretation of a life (Yow, 1994). Furthermore, when the subject is female, gender moves to the center of the analysis requiring the investigation to focus on the discontinuities and omissions as a counter to the continuities and dominant male images and interpretations. Graduate students enrolled in my women's learning and development courses in 2001 and 2003 collected eighteen individual in-depth interviews. Interviews were individually coded followed by collaborative discussions in class to begin the interpretative process of the data. Each student reported her findings and conclusions. From these collected transcripts, themes were identified which helped characterize women's learning and development in more general terms. Four of the transcribed interviews were reconsidered using a feminist geography lens. The cases reviewed include diverse women of the southeast U.S. including two African Americans, a Mexican American, and a White Appalachian woman. Two of the women are educators, one is a supervisor at a textile factory, and one is an attorney. As I reread the transcripts, dimensions of mobility including spatiality, movement, dislocation, destabilization and recombination emerged whereby learning intersects with mobility, culture and gender. An alternative post-structural reading of difference, attentive to the deceptions of surface appearances, and the discursive processes by which gendered identity is constructed and performed over time, is thus possible.

### **Findings**

The individual women's stories vary across multiple dimensions of race, class, age, and occupation; and they all moved both geographically and economically from their childhood environments. They experienced shifting of identities during adulthood, and gained insights about different worldviews through formal and informal learning practices.

#### *Marisela*

Marisela, a Mexican American woman from Texas, experienced a good deal of discrimination in her urban city, "even though there were a lot of us [Hispanics]" as she recalls. Moving to rural North Carolina where her husband worked in the meat packing industry, she found the community welcoming. White business owners seemed to like the hard working efforts of Hispanics over those of the African Americans. Being part of the recent Hispanic movement to North Carolina, Marisela was not immune to differential treatment however. She relates stories about walking into stores with her children and "people staring at them just because they're Hispanic. When you get to talk[ing] to your children, knowing that you know English, then you feel a little bit more comfortable." She talks about how her husband felt he was discriminated against when his supervisor position was taken away when a new white manager came in and demoted him. Yet, she also tells stories of how she is treated more fairly in her small rural county than when she was in the large city where there was a lot of "favoritism." She finds opportunities in her new community to get involved in different programs related to her children and families who are not fluent in both Spanish and English.

Marisela, from a family of twelve siblings, watched her mother take care of the children while her father worked in the citrus fields of Texas. They insisted that the children attend school and most graduated from high school. The hard work of picking crops and moving during summers to bring in more money shifted family responsibilities. When school was out for summer vacation, the family migrated from state to state and everyone worked in the fields. As Marisela said, "The reason we migrated was to help our parents with getting money. My parents never had money or the education. So, they always waited till school was out so we could value education, how important it was for us to get an education to get a better job." Even though Marisela's mother didn't have much education, she related that she taught her children "to continue with education and continue to go for their dreams not to just let it end but continue what was right to do." She pushed her children to work hard for what they wanted and appreciate and value what they had. Working hard long hours, Marisela watched her parents perform their roles in the house and in the fields, yet they always had time to spend with family playing around and talking. She learned early that her role as a mother meant she should be there for the family. According to Marisela, "We had to not depend on men but try to do things on our own. In our culture, it is the women who are in charge, providing everything that the children need." Marisela is an independent woman, like her mother, so she does a lot of things on her own. She said, "I don't depend on people to help me. I have a husband but I don't depend too much on him."

### *Grace*

Grace began her teaching career in the southeast U.S. during desegregation. A light skinned African American, Grace reported she was hired as a "white" teacher because others in her building would not work with a "black" teacher. The principal of the school, while calling her "white," was sure to fill out affirmative action forms by designating her "black" to fill his quota. According to Grace, "But I never put it in the forefront of my mind what these parents are white and they're not going to want me to teach their children." Eventually, the other teachers got to know Grace through a circle of white and black women who regularly got together; during their four years of getting to one another they even ended up working on community projects together. In Grace's words, "It was an eye opening experience for all of us."

Grace grew up in a small rural undeveloped community in North Carolina on her extended family's farm where she said she continues to retreat to "sit on the porch and talk with her aunts and uncles listening to them talk about cultivators, combines, turning cows, holding up the pasture and whether or not you're going to rotate or harrow a row. They speak in a different language." Although her father died when she was seven, her life was fairly stable, if not hard, with the extended family looking out for her. She attended the same school for 12 years.

Her mother would hold scrabble tournaments in the summer, according to Grace, "so we would each be helped out with our words." Grace's educational career also had help from her high school guidance counselor who assisted her in getting into a small black college. She went to historically black colleges for both her undergraduate and graduate degrees. Grace relates, "As a black person, I always went to the front of the classroom, because whether you were in a white classroom or not, it would eventually get back that you were black, even though I have fair skin. Many black students tend to want to sit in the back, but I always sat in the front. I was interested in learning and I wasn't there for the other things. You always have it in the back of your mind that you are a minority; sometimes all eyes are going to be on you." Grace also believes her

years at the black colleges were beneficial in that “You get that sense of pride at a black school, they get to know you on a personal level.”

Grace’s mother was a significant role model for Grace. Her mother remained active in the PTA until her first grandchild entered first grade and then went back to school after the age of sixty. Grace’s grandfather wouldn’t let her mother go to college because she was needed on the farm and he feared her leaving home. Her grandfather had completed college, making Grace a second-generation college graduate. Another significant strategy that supported the importance of education in Grace’s family is what she called a network. She had a lot of cousins who went off to college. Grace says the same thing continues to this day. “When one went off, you’d go down and visit that one, going onto campus, seeing the campus, going to things on the campus. My mother always encouraged that. With my daughter, her younger nieces and nephews are going to visit her as sort of a network” she says.

After graduating from high school Grace’s mother sent her off to New York for the summer to work as a “chore girl” which she continued to do each summer through her undergraduate schooling. She had never left her home before that first trip; when her mother took her to the train station she told her, “Now look, those two girls right there they look like they know where they’re going, so you just follow them. They got off in Washington, D.C. so I had to go on to New York by myself.” She worked for the founder of Smith Barney and later for the Borden’s, being exposed to the culture of wealth as well as the culture of a big cosmopolitan city. “I learned a lot from these families”, she relates, “a lot about culture and a lot about living.”

As a retired teacher who has gone back to teaching Grace says, “My mother taught a single thing but to be the best, if you’re gonna do it get in there and you work hard and if you fail, you’ve worked hard. She always told us that we could do it, and she would help us in any way. When you know that, you go ahead.”

### *Sheria*

Sheria, an African American from a poor military family where her father was gone a lot, untangled mixed messages from her mother about being a black woman. She found she was “learning how to behave in a somewhat dishonest manner to get what you want, leading men to make certain decisions” and realizing that the self-esteem of many, so-called, “strong African American women” comes from a defensive position. Sheria related a series of stories about “leading men on,” “setting up circumstances where you would get what you wanted,” “behaving in a somewhat dishonest manner.” As Sheria puts it, “All I remember is a bunch of mixed up messages,” because the women around her, i.e., mother, sisters, grandmother, were not weak or ineffective women. They did things indirectly. She also related how the movies she watched and the books she read reinforced these same strategies. “So I think I learned how to be a woman from a lot of the wrong places, quite frankly”, she said. In terms of becoming a black woman, Sheria, remembers lots of messages about representing the race. According to her, “You had to behave well because you were representing your whole group of people. So if you had an opportunity to do something, you wanted to do it very well because it reflected on the whole group. Any kind of negative behavior would reflect badly. It didn’t seem problematic or a burden too heavy to bear – it was just the expectation.”

Part of Sheria’s understanding of differences dates back to her high school days in a small town. She remembers, “We were having a lot of racial tension at school and I was taking a lot of college-prep classes. I was in classes where there was only one other or no other black students. And, some of the black students felt I was some sort of turncoat because I was taking

those classes.” Sheria’s parents expected her to go to college but taking the college-prep courses meant there was a barrier between her and other black students. She continues, “There is nothing more uncomfortable than feeling like people who look like you are rejecting you and you haven’t done anything. Especially where you’re a teenager, it’s impossible to understand the frustration that they are working from. All I was, was hurt.” During the Civil Rights movement there was the expectation to aspire to more. As an attorney, Sheria advocates for social justice and is learning Spanish to help her in her work.

### *Cindy*

Cindy moved from the poverty of her Appalachian home to a manufacturing town where she completed her GED as an adult and worked her way up to supervisor in a textile plant. Little did she know, one of her responsibilities would be to train college educated interns who would one day either own businesses of their own or supervise her work. As a self-proclaimed “mountain ignorant” it took some time to turn her thinking about the situation.

Cindy grew up in Wild Cat Hollar in the Blue Ridge Mountains between Deep Gap and Boone. Schooling for mountain children was by rote learning, with little communication between teachers and students. Cindy said, “You figured it out or you didn’t, they didn’t go into any detail to explain why something was the way it was.” For Cindy, “education sets the basics of learning until you get out and put the basics to work to get the experience.” Cindy learned through experience. She learned to count by threes in the tobacco fields at the age of five. As she recalls, “You had to string tobacco and put three leaves to a string, then flipped flopped. You knew there was 27 leaves on a stick of tobacco. You had to do it hands-on to really learn what you were doing.” She left school after the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and at the age of 24 got her GED, the first female in her family to complete high school. Cindy left Wild Cat Hollar to work in the textile mills of the furniture industry in the city. She started out working a quilting machine. As she recounted she “just barely had enough education to work in there.” After eight years her boss encouraged her to go up for supervisor. Continuing, she said, “I could do all that he wanted done but I just didn’t have the education to back it up. It’d make you mad, ‘cus I was judged by lack of education instead of the knowledge of the experience of the job.” Cindy told about the interns that were at the plant each summer and how she had to train them the basics of being a supervisor. She felt used but learned that if she didn’t teach others there was no way to advance. That was the hardest thing for her to see, “‘cus you really don’t want to teach people what you know; people call it job security.”

### **Discussion**

Three major themes can be discussed related to the four women: Cindy, Marisela, Sheria and Grace. The first theme is opportunities for a recombination, or re-formation, of identity after dislocation and destabilization. Movement across landscapes, “moving on,” often creates insecurity along with dislocation; yet, provides opportunities for recombination of self and identity. The degree to which either fragmentation or multilayered, multisegmented understandings of identity occurs varies among individual women. Another theme can be thought of as cultural aspects of the self which create meaning for the self and one’s place in the world. Cultural expectations, from rituals to role responsibilities to loyalties to structures of feelings create internal and external pressures on women as they move from one location to another. When the flow of life is disrupted it creates a space that causes one to reconsider, evaluate/reflect, modify, and accommodate cultural beliefs, values and behaviors. Destabilization

can occur. How people adapt or adjust depends on the landscape in which they find themselves and the demands of performance. According to Ferdman (1990) changes would imply a shift in the person's way of thinking about herself in a social context. The third theme is historical factors and positioning within temporal parameters. Several historical factors mark the landscape of constructing identity. Familial patterns and structures set not only role behaviors but also expectations as girls grow into women. Political climates such as civil rights and desegregation or agricultural migrant patterns and worker policies create sets of values that mark both time and people. Migrations of groups from one enclave into another disrupts existing power relations; such as Blacks into higher education disrupted the dominance of Whites, and Hispanic movement into the southeast disrupted the flow of White/Black relations. Aspects of cultural self-identity and historical placements, or situatedness, provide the foundation with which to navigate diverse terrain. As Grace found herself labeled "a white teacher" by a school principal who needed to fill a color quota during desegregation, she was tossed about in a new landscape of the south. Her experiences as a "chore girl" in New York traveling with wealthy whites to other cultural worlds and living spaces prepared her to cross through and travel in this unfamiliar territory. She had done so in the past and successfully. She had gained a degree of confidence and independence, perhaps even autonomy, during her young adult life that mapped out possibilities for her future. Her ability to improvise in this new environment, similar to her ability to figure out how to navigate New York City, provided her an opportunity to build bridges across the landscape and bring Blacks and Whites together.

#### **Implications for Adult Education Theory**

Understanding how women's learning and identity are constructed and reconstructed through movement, how identities shift through space, place and time provides an opening for adult educators to rethink how educational programs for women are designed. Research on women's development and learning needs to consider how one makes meaning of the shifting self-identity and how this understanding effects the construction of self and identity.