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Examining Interpersonal Dynamics Among Adult Learners Through the Lens of Place

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Abstract: Drawing on critical geography literature and the concept of place, this paper analyzes interpersonal problems among learners in three family literacy programs. The findings suggest that interpersonal tensions cannot be reduced to individual factors such as personality. Rather, distinctive spatial and community contexts powerfully shape learners' identities and interpersonal relations.

Although individuals enrolled in adult basic education classes often form friendships, conflicts also arise. Since the quality of learners' relationships influences their sense of belonging, ability to learn, and program persistence, we need to better understand what contributes to interpersonal tensions. The few studies which have examined interpersonal problems among adult learners (e.g., Beder & Medina, 2002; Canaff & Hutto, 1995) suggest that classroom composition and differences in learners' identities (e.g., race, age) often produce conflicts. Few studies, however, have linked social interaction in the classroom to such external factors as local history and social inequalities (Prins, in press). Accordingly, this paper analyzes interpersonal problems among learners in three family literacy (FL) programs, identifying how these tensions were connected to place, or distinctive community contexts. The study links micro-level interactions to contextual factors, showing how social, economic, and geographical features of the region shaped learners' relationships.

Theoretical Framework

The critical geography literature offers a useful way to examine how interpersonal tensions among students are shaped by the places we inhabit. *Place* refers to the particular geographic and social spaces in which all human experience is rooted (Gruenewald, 2003). Conceptually, place "highlights the weaving together of social relations and human-environment interactions" (Adams, Hoelscher, & Till, 2001, p. xiv). Gruenewald (2003) contends that "places *teach* us about how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy; "produce and teach particular ways of thinking about and being in the world;" and "shape culture, identity, and social relationships" (pp. 621, 627, 628). Adult learners' cultural, racial, class, and gender identities and their social relationships, therefore, are spatially and geographically produced, inextricably bound to the particularities of specific places (Adams et al., 2001; Harvey, 2001).

Critical geography also examines how spatial relationships express and reproduce inequitable social and economic relations, resulting in "uneven geographical development" (Harvey, 2006). Capitalist development reorganizes places through economic restructuring (e.g., deindustrialization), which entails shifting patterns of investment and resource extraction. These processes create social distinctions and hierarchies between community groups, social classes, and geographic regions and nations (Harvey, 1996, 2001). Uneven development helps explain the spatial organization and fragmented socio-political relations in Pittsburgh, one of the case study sites, and the settlement of new immigrants in Pennsylvania's small cities and rural areas, patterns which shaped social relations among FL participants and in the surrounding areas.

Methods

This paper is based on data collected for a larger study examining the organizational practices of three FL programs in Pennsylvania. The paper answers the following research questions: What kinds of interpersonal problems arose among students in the programs? How did place and community contexts shape these interpersonal dynamics? A case study approach permitted in-depth examination and comparison of differences and similarities among the programs (Patton, 1990), which were chosen to achieve maximum variation across geographic region, rural-urban location, and participants' demographic characteristics. Three program administrators and six Penn State personnel planned and implemented the case studies.

¹ Data collection was also integrated into instruction (e.g., student writing and discussions).

My interest in interpersonal problems was prompted by a project conference call in which the program coordinators discussed tensions among students in their respective programs. The primary data sources for this paper are interviews with four coordinators or directors, focus groups with teachers in each site, notes on monthly project conference calls, a summary of a student discussion regarding community characteristics in one site, and fieldnotes on community contexts and interpersonal dynamics, written after site visits. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Students' views on interpersonal problems were not elicited because the larger study's main purpose was to explore organizational practices, not social interaction per se, and because insufficient time and funding precluded gathering additional data.

Interpersonal Tensions Among Adult Learners

“Sometimes It's This Territorial Thing of Where They Live”

Located near the site of the 1892 lockout of workers at Homestead Steel Works in Pittsburgh, the Monongahela (pseudonym) FL program primarily served teenage African-American (and a few White or Asian American) mothers, including high school students, dropouts, and adjudicated women in a shelter.² The coordinator (Cathy) described student conflicts as a “territorial thing,” based on their identification with their neighborhood and their negative views of people from other areas of the city. For example, students frequently refer to what “area” someone is from. Territoriality was especially a problem in the shelter program because women from many neighborhoods lived there. When a student who is “very territorial” enrolls, Cathy explained, it affects how everyone interacts. For instance, in late 2005 the program had “a lot of problems with attitude” and respect; the staff described the students as rough, confrontational, and “really hard to deal with.” Learners from distinct communities were attending classes and whenever someone new came in they exhibited very “teenage behavior”:

We had some terrible fights with these girls, because the girls from [Community A] were coming and the one girl was really pretty, and they were really on this girl...and the others were from [Community B]. And so sometimes it's this territorial thing of where they live. The other thing is...there were some kids who hadn't even been down here [to a nearby entertainment area which replaced Homestead Steel Works], let alone go to downtown Pittsburgh, which will take them 20 minutes. You know, so they are so tied to their neighborhood.

Cathy gave several other examples as evidence of Pittsburgh residents' strong ties to their sharply demarcated communities. She explained these social and spatial boundaries as follows:

I think they feel very secure in that neighborhood. They know it. I think that the lives of a lot of our students have not been broad. They have lived in that community or they have lived up and down the [Monongahela] River in communities....I don't think they really have a broad perspective of what is out there and what is available to them.

These observations echo research showing that poor and working-class persons' “bounded networks” constrain opportunities for geographic and social mobility (Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

¹ The personnel were Dr. Ian Baptise, Dr. Beth Grinder, Peggy Grumm, Dr. Esther Prins, Barbara Van Horn, and Drucie Weirauch. All but Dr. Baptiste are affiliated with the Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy.

² I identified this location because Pittsburgh's urban history is both renowned and a key to understanding interpersonal relations among participants. All personal names are pseudonyms.

Cathy attributed territorial conflicts and limited geographic mobility to Pittsburgh's history of industrial development: "Years ago when they first built up the steel mills, they were fractured communities all along the Mon River....And I think Pittsburgh is the way [it] is probably because of that. There [are] these very tight communities." Scholarly analyses of Pittsburgh's history support this explanation. In the late 1800s, steel mill owners built towns for workers, thereby establishing socially, politically, and spatially independent, fragmented communities (Villela, 2000), and dividing employees from each other and from management (Muller, 2001). The region also included socially distinct "residential suburbs, mill towns, small satellite cities, and hundreds of mining patch towns" (Muller, 2001, p. 70). As Lubove (1989) puts it, the 19th century solution to group relations "was to organize space in a way which reduced contact and thus friction between potentially antagonistic groups" (p. 299). Local topography (hills, valleys, rivers, and infrastructure) facilitated spatial and ethnic divisions which persist today (Bodnar, Simon, & Weber, 1982). In sum, the expansion of industrial capitalism molded European immigrants and Blacks "not into a unified working class but into a segmented mass with deep fissures running along occupational, neighborhood, racial, and cultural lines" (Bodnar et al., 1982, p. 263).

Pittsburgh's history powerfully illustrates how identities and social distinctions are geographically produced, how spatial organization upholds dominant interests, and the spatial, civic, social, and economic consequences of uneven development (Harvey, 1996, 2001). Cathy's description of conflicts among learners reveals that attachment to particular places shaped their identities and ways of perceiving and interacting with others. Secondly, extraction of profit from the mills and control of workers depended on the creation of isolated communities. Although the steel industry collapsed, contemporary Pittsburgh is still considered a "polarized region" (Villela, 2000, p. 56). In this light, conflicts and routines of interaction among learners from distinct communities reflect wider social fissures: They are, in part, a vestige of the socio-political and spatial fragmentation and inequality tied to 19th and 20th century industrial development.

Perceptions of Immigrants

The Johnsonville program is located in a rural, sparsely populated, predominantly (98%) White county. Most FL participants are White, low-income mothers and children, and a few immigrants attend separate ESL classes. For the case study, FL students used a map to identify important aspects of their community and to discuss how features affected their lives. According to my conference call notes, a staff person reported they "had an unexpected but frank discussion that brought out a lot of prejudices regarding racial and ethnic differences [and] outsiders coming into the community" (as well as a comment about teen pregnancy). A staff person later noted, "Some of the beliefs in this county [are] that there are no jobs and the jobs that are here, the Hispanics take the jobs. No one talked about, well, would you work for that income?" After this "stressful" incident, teachers talked to students individually and in class, commending them for honestly expressing their ideas, yet emphasizing the need to respect differences and to be "aware of what you say" and how others perceive it. In response to statements about immigrants, teachers planned a unit on cultural diversity (e.g., students researched their own ethnic ancestry).

A critical geography lens brings into focus two features of this case. First, the class discussion illustrates the social construction of place—specifically, learners' perceptions of who does or does not belong in their region—and the presumed causes of local economic problems, specifically, unemployment. The way learners imagine the spatial and social boundaries of their community is important because it shapes the context of reception for immigrants, including

those who may later join their program. Negative comments about immigrants illustrate the “exclusionary component” of *topophilia*, or affective attachment to place (Duncan & Duncan, 2001, p. 43). Like the exclusive New York suburb Duncan and Duncan studied, “discursive resistance to newcomers” (p. 44) in this economically struggling county reveals that immigrants threatened the imagined community to which longtime, White residents were attached. Few newcomers were needed to occasion concern: The county’s foreign-born population increased 239% from 1990 to 2000, but they comprised only 1% of the population (n=234). Similarly, the percentage of county residents who spoke English less than “very well”—63% of whom spoke Indo-European languages—rose by 133%, yet represented only 3% of the population (n=546).

Secondly, learners’ views of immigrants may be seen as a response to structural changes which altered the local economic and human landscape. The economic and social burdens of uneven development are unequally borne by rural counties like this one. For instance, learners noted they had to leave the county to find well-paying jobs, and the county’s largest employer, a poultry processor, paid only \$9 per hour, regardless of years of service. Spatial settlement patterns—and thus the people adult learners encounter—are also linked to uneven development: Immigrants were pushed out of their home countries by economic decline, and pulled to rural U.S. communities by economic policies and labor practices that have eliminated higher-wage jobs and encouraged employers (including the county’s poultry processor) to hire foreign workers and illegal immigrants for low wages (Kandel & Cromartie, 2004). This case illustrates how uneven capital investment and “spatially ordered (often segregated) social distinctions” produce “difference” and “otherness” (Harvey, 1996, p. 295), such as immigrants who take jobs. Capitalist growth renders both longtime residents and immigrants in rural areas vulnerable to economic exploitation, while also producing conflicts between them (Harvey, 1996, 2001). From this perspective, immigrants’ arrival in this area and the way adult learners perceived them were rooted in the economic decline of both developing countries and rural America.

Cultural and National Identity

Lowell, a small city located in a metropolitan county, has also attracted new immigrants: From 1990 to 2000 the foreign-born population increased 182%, to 2014 persons (4.9% of the population). Consequently, the FL program serves mainly Latina and Southeast Asian mothers and children. The coordinator noted that “flare-ups” among students are often based on culture and nationality, as when a Latina student made a derogatory comment about another Latin American country. Students also “have different opinions on what is appropriate behavior and what is appropriate in the classroom.” For instance, an Asian student who began sitting in the back of the room told the teacher she “was afraid of some of our students from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic because they were very loud and they would yell at each other. They didn’t mean anything by it; it was just their personality. When they wanted to get a point across, they would yell very loudly and she was not only highly offended by that, but she also said that she was afraid of these students.” In both cases, teachers resolved the conflict by talking to students individually and discussing in class cultural differences in communication styles.

As in Johnsonville, spatial changes in economic and labor market structures in the U.S. and developing countries have pushed and pulled immigrants to Lowell, where some encounter each other in the FL program. The aforementioned examples also illustrate how places “make us,” molding learners’ cultural identities, national loyalties, and ways of “being in the world” (Gruenewald, 2003), including their notions of appropriate demeanor, manner of speaking, and

ways of perceiving and interacting with people from other regions or countries. Such differences may engender both interpersonal problems and cross-cultural learning.

This case supports Harvey's (2001) assertion that humans organize themselves territorially, that regionality is central to consciousness and identity formation. For example, the incident between the Latina students underscores the cultural and geographic heterogeneity and "place-bound loyalties" of Latino/a immigrants (Harvey, 2001)—distinctions often overlooked by citizens and educators. From a critical geography perspective, culture and nationality are not *individual* properties; rather, they shape and are shaped by places. In this way, "selfhood and placehood are completely intertwined" (Basso, 1996, qtd. in Gruenewald, 2003, p. 626).

Discussion and Implications

This study reveals that homogeneity in gender, social class, or race/ethnicity does not always foster social cohesion among learners (cf. Beder & Medina, 2001), nor are these necessarily the most salient vectors of similarity or difference in a given classroom. These cases suggest that overlooked differences such as neighborhood, nationality, or immigration status may produce tensions. Importantly, these dimensions of identity are rooted in distinctive geographic spaces. Interpersonal tensions, then, cannot be reduced solely to personality or other individual factors; they are shaped by particular spatial and community contexts, whether the fragmented social relations and racial/ethnic segregation produced by capitalist industrial development or immigrant settlement patterns resulting from global economic restructuring.

These case studies suggest several ways that place matters. First, place profoundly shapes adult learners' identities and social relations, structuring how they interact, their ideas about who belongs in their community, how they communicate, their geographic mobility, and so forth. As Harvey (2001, p. 124) puts it, "Our sense of who we are, where we belong and what our obligations encompass—in short, our *identity*—is profoundly affected by our sense of location in space and time. In other words, we broadly locate our identity in terms of space (I belong *here*) and time (this is *my biography, my history*)." Fittingly, it was a map-based discussion of place that surfaced Johnsonville learners' views about their imagined community, immigrants, and economic problems, and participants later used maps to trace their own cultural heritage.

Secondly, uneven development tied to capitalist investment and resource extraction has marked the communities in which the programs are located, engendering social distinctions and conflicts among residents and learners and, in two cases, prompting recent immigrant settlement. Global economic processes influence migration patterns and thus increase cross-cultural contact in adult education programs, especially those located near industries which employ immigrants. In short, interpersonal dynamics occurring in adult education classrooms are a microcosm of social relations *outside* of the program, relations which are geographically produced.

In conclusion, scholars and practitioners should examine how historical, geographical, economic, and social features structure social interaction in adult education. Using place as a category of analysis can illuminate the relationship between micro-level interactions and conflicts, local communities, and global economic and political processes, showing how the roots of interpersonal conflicts may lay outside the program. Educators would do well to make place—for example, local history, the economic changes that brought migrants to a region, learners' memories of their country of origin—a topic of exploration. In this way, learners and teachers together might discover that, in Gruenewald's (2003) words, "places teach us who, what, and where we are, as well as how we might live our lives" (p. 636).

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