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Memes and their Meaning for the Study of Adult Learners: Civic Engagement in Chilean For-Profit Graduate Education

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Keywords: Spiral Dynamic Theory, civic engagement, entrepreneurial education, Chile, ^vMEMEs

Abstract: The civic engagement commitment and mission among the growing number of for-profit higher education enterprises remains empirically unexplored. Spiral Dynamic Theory (SDT) is proposed as a theoretical framework to examine levels of civic engagement in complex contexts associated with private for-profit, graduate-level education.

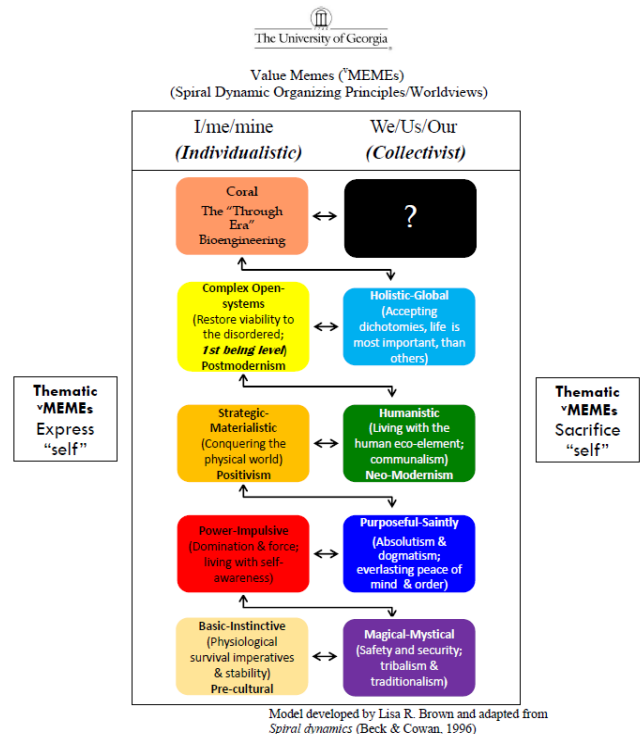
The Context

Adult Education is undergoing a memetic¹ shift in response to globalism that requires adults to become more civically engaged. Advocating for social justice while simultaneously embracing diverse ways of knowing and being in the world (Brookfield & Holt, 2011), has introduced new complexities, particularly as it relates to how adults learn and negotiate their lives. However, the healthy adult brain has an unlimited capacity to direct adaptive changes (Beck & Cowan, 1996; Graves, 2005) in response to such life conditions that require new thinking and behaviors.

Possible Theoretical Response

Spiral Dynamic Theory (SDT) is useful in examining human changes over time as its framework is specifically structured to address the complexities of adult development on the micro, meso and macro levels. SDT applies biological constructs from the natural sciences to the study of the social sciences in the form of memes.

In biology, the gene pool has a mechanism for change that functions through a process of replication, variation, and natural selection. This mechanism is mirrored in the “meme pool”, as Dawkins (1989) describes memes as behavioral units of culture that are imitated from person to person. SDT holds that human beings are social creatures and learn through a process of imitation. Graves (2005) found in his research a pattern to human nature where thinking, values, and ontologies continuously develop from the simple to the more complex throughout adulthood (Beck & Cowan, 1996). Each conceptual unit (i.e., ^vMEME) within the SDT cyclical typology contains a worldview that oscillates between themes of autonomous “self-expression” and collectivist “sacrifice-of-self” (Cowan & Todorovic, 2000). These value memes and their relationships are depicted in Figure 1.



Memetics, then, is a powerful theory owning both supporters and critics due in part to the diversity of definitions and conceptualizations associated with what exactly constitutes a meme. Blackmore (1998) agrees with Dawkins (1989) adding that memes are specifically passed through non-genetic forms such as imitation. Aam's (1996) chief critique of memetics as a science was its lack of a standard taxonomy as is commonplace the fields of biology and anthropology. However, the emergent classifications offered by Graves (1970), further developed by Beck and Cowan (1996), as well as Cowan and Todorovic (2000), have provided the scaffolding in the development of what is arguably a taxonomy of \forall MEMEs present in Spiral Dynamic Theory.

Application to the Study of Adult Learners' Civic Engagement

Grave's (1970, 2005) emergent cyclical levels of existence theory served as a precursor to Spiral Dynamic Theory (SDT) which offers a potential comprehensive lens through which to examine the intricacies associated with both civic engagement levels among adult learners and the complexities of entrepreneurial, for-profit graduate education. Application of SDT within the context of Latin American graduate study in South America may prove especially fruitful, due in part to the fact that in Chile, the educational systems have been private for-profit for over 40 years. Moreover, since August of 2011, civic unrest reflected in student opposition to entrepreneurial for-profit education has spawned protest marches throughout the country. Protesters have commandeered educational facilities demanding a return to free and open education for all citizens. Bearing this in mind, does SDT have transferability to the Chilean context? Can civic engagement be empirically studied within the structural organization of SDT?

Literature shows that college students attending not-for-profit schools evidence more sacrifice-of-self notions in the form of higher levels of civic engagement as they advance in their education (Lopez & Elrod, 2006). Entrepreneurial for-profit education would find place within the SDT Orange \forall MEME (see above figure), which focuses on competition, being strategic, and materialism. Students attending private for-profit schools might evidence lower levels of civic engagement. Higher levels would be expected among collectivist Green and Blue \forall MEMEs characterized by humanistic and communal worldviews. Sullivan (2000) suggests that adult learning in for-profit education is focused on autonomy and competitiveness, when he describes it as a "program of instrumental individualism" (p. 22). The primary goal of for-profit education is strategic with the intent to grant marketable degrees to adults with immediate value toward careers in business and technology (Jez, 2011; Millora, 2010). The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012) argue in opposition to a prevailing dialogue that limits the mission of higher education to workforce preparation and training while marginalizing modes of academic learning that are vital to a civically engaged democracy. Criticisms about the redirecting of graduate education and degree outputs under the for-profit schema have also been raised by scholars in Chile, South America (Bernasconi, 2005; Valverde, 2004; Waissbluth, 2010; Simonsen, 2012).

Chile's educational system has been primarily private for-profit following the 1973 Augusto Pinochet military coup d'état (Bernasconi, 2005) operating a primarily market-based educational schema. Using SDT to research in this context can provide models to assist adult educators and policy makers in other contexts who are likewise interested in the phenomenon of entrepreneurial higher education and civic engagement among adult learners in graduate school.

Note:

¹The theory and study that holds mental contents of cultural operate analogous to Darwinian evolution.

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