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# The Quest for a Better Life in a Better World: The Role of Adult Education in Advancing Inclusion of SMGV Learners and Citizens

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Key words: sexual minority and gender variant, transnational homophobia, queer critical pedagogy

**Abstract:** This paper investigates the space of SMGV (sexual minority and gender variant) learners in lifelong learning and constituent adult education from transnational perspectives. It discusses the ongoing fiction of adult education as globally inclusive social education. It highlights the construction of a limited social as adult education is taken up in exclusionary contexts where interest groups frequently marginalize sexual orientation and gender identity as power relationships.

In a contemporary change culture of crisis and challenge, adult education as a core constituent of lifelong learning ought to consider diverse contexts, ultimately seeing learning as encompassing educational and cultural work for social transformation (Allman, 1999; Grace, 2007). Indeed lifelong learning should be about learning for all of life, which positions it as “inherently untidy” (Schuller & Watson, 2009, p. 23). However, inclusive lifelong learning as critical action remains enigmatic in many quarters. Burke and Jackson (2007) conclude that latter-day lifelong learning remains a narrow and inadequately contextualized field of study and practice that is not broadly committed to inclusion and justice for all learners including “women’s groups, or groups for other marginalized people, such as gay and lesbian groups, Black and minority ethnic groups and so forth” (p. 9).

Within the politics and culture of neoliberalism, such sidelining of the social has been widespread. Much of the Global North has experienced a pervasive neoliberal policy consensus that stresses the value of a knowledge-based economy, technology and skill development, and a learning society in which participation in cyclical lifelong learning is an expectation (Grace, 2006, 2007). Drawing on Foucault to frame this consensus within a politics of control, Fejes (2008) asserts that neoliberal lifelong-learning policy aims not only to construct learners (technologies of control), but also to have learners construct themselves (technologies of the learner). Social learning for cultural transformation goes against the grain of this politics of control that not only conflates being a competent worker with simply being a skilled worker, but also isolates training and development for workers from broader social and other contextual considerations (Grace, 2006). This de-centering of the social is worrisome, especially in relation to those whom mainstream lifelong learning fails. Schuller and Watson (2009) speak to this in positioning learning in relation to improved well-being in the UK *Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning*: “Sometimes it has little or no effect; sometimes it can even have negative effects, overall or for some groups” (p. 23). Indeed social cohesion has been of little or, at best, secondary concern. “It is in this sense, among others,” as Freire (2004) asserted, “that radical pedagogy must never make any concessions to the trickeries of neoliberal ‘pragmatism,’” (p. 19). For example, consider the case of a homeless contingent of urban gay-male youth who subsist through sex work that makes them vulnerable to possible brutality at the hands of police or the johns who solicit their services. Neoliberal pragmatists would tend to react to their plight in a “fatalistic manner, always in favor of the powerful—‘It is sad, but what can be done? That is what reality is’” (Freire, 2004, p. 58). Even worse, neoliberal pragmatists would likely place sole

blame on these youth, these walking wounded, for their predicament, suggesting that they had brought it upon themselves. They would ignore or downplay how systemic issues and destructive cultural forces like heterosexism—the presumption and privileging of heterosexuality—and homophobia have socially ostracized and damaged these youth, making their recovery and moves toward resilience most challenging processes (Grace, 2009). Indeed blaming sexual minorities for the troubles in our lives and miring us in helplessness and hopelessness have been commonplace in heteronormative culture and society.

Against this backdrop in this paper, I investigate the space of sexual minority and gender variant (SMGV) learners in lifelong learning and constituent adult education from transnational perspectives. I discuss the ongoing fiction of adult education as inclusive social education. I highlight the construction of a limited social as adult education is taken up in exclusionary global contexts where interest groups frequently marginalize sexual orientation and gender identity as power relationships in framing learning for life and work.

### **Queer Eye for Lifelong Learning and Constituent Adult Education**

The sting of cultural homophobia and the violence it begets are evident in the everyday experiences and frequent tragedies that mark the lives and work of SMGV persons (Janoff, 2005). Instances of physical violence against us, which include a spectrum of criminal acts like assault and battery, rape, and murder, are well documented (see, for example, a Canadian account in Janoff, 2005). As well, we commonly encounter incidents of symbolic violence, which include shaming, harassment, name-calling, and rightist politico-religious denunciation. Perhaps the most common representation of symbolic violence in our everyday lives is the homophobic graffiti—for example, gay pornographic images and words like faggot and cocksucker—scrawled on ordinary and visible surfaces like school-locker doors or the doors of public-washroom stalls. This graffiti is a poignant and constant reminder that debasement and defilement are norms in our queer everyday.

Replicating this sad state-of-affairs, SMGV persons regularly, albeit more subtly, experience ignorance, fear, violence, silence, and exclusion in lifelong learning and constituent adult education (Hill & Grace, 2009). This reality of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, queer, and other persons across the spectra of sexual orientations and gender identities is testament to the fiction of lifelong learning as globally inclusive education. A trek through the literature shows that there has been little focus in contemporary lifelong learning and adult and higher education on sexual orientation, gender identity, and their variations and expressions (Hill & Grace, 2009). This is another example of an assault on the social in framing and engaging in lifelong learning in neoliberal times.

Despite this exclusion in mainstream spaces, SMGV individuals do engage in learning. In both developed and emerging nations, they have always created learning spaces within the heteronormative lifeworld. Production, exchange, and distribution of knowledge of same-sex rituals and traditions, cross-gender role expressions, and non-heteronormative sexualities have historically contributed to a process of subaltern lifelong learning that is actually more common than is often recognized (Grace & Wells, 2007; Hill, 1995). In many locations such lifelong learning has been minimized or erased within repressive heteronormative and queer-phobic narratives—both secular and religious—that the purportedly righteous tell one another and use to indoctrinate others. To counter this exclusion in the future, international organizations dedicated to lifelong learning have to engage in vital educational and cultural work for social transformation so sexual and gender minorities are recognized, accommodated, and respected.

This work has to be learner driven so those on the margins can set the terms of their own self definition to counter the dismissal and defilement that have historically accompanied their disenfranchisement. Such engagement requires inclusive lifelong educators to take up a key role as public intellectuals on the international scene. In this role they can help to establish the conditions that enable SMGV learners everywhere to “see themselves” and self-articulate their identities and how they wish to represent themselves. As this cultural work proceeds, those marginalized because of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression will be able to claim a history, a spectral community, and a self that is free to be, become, belong, and act. However, for now, the hegemony of heteronormativity as a hidden yet assumed conceptual framework in lifelong learning and adult education has restricted SMGV inclusion in these educational domains. Moreover, it has limited possibilities for social learning in the knowledge-culture-language-power nexus where learners could engage sexual orientation and gender identity as visible and visceral relationships of power (Grace & Hill, 2004).

### **Building Queer Critical Pedagogy for SMGV Learners**

To counter paralysis of the social common in neoliberal forms of lifelong learning and constituent adult education, we ought to conceptualize lifelong learning as an organic enterprise that conducts learning for work and advancing economies in tandem with learning for life. This conception would be the basis for more encompassing queer critical pedagogy that meets the instrumental, social, and cultural needs of citizens as learners, workers, and persons. Such pedagogy would constitute lifelong learning as critical action, employing an ecology of learning and work that enables citizens to focus on the self, others, and the life-and-work environments they inhabit as they mediate lifelong learning as a lifewide process. (Grace, 2006, 2007). Citizens would begin by discerning how they are positioned in relation to others and the complex culture and society in which they live, learn, and work. This focus on building self-knowledge is a crucial component of an ecology of learning and work. Self-knowledge informs mediation of the difficult social and economic circumstances in which issues of recognition, access, accommodation, disposition, contexts, and relationships of power have import (Aronowitz, 2005a; Grace, 2007). For SMGV learners, building self-knowledge involves exploring historical systemic deterrents to developing self-confidence and self-esteem in tandem with strategizing to engage in educational activities and cultural work that counter manifestations of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia in individual and community contexts.

As pedagogy particularly focused on the locatedness of minority individuals and our inclusion in learning for life and work, lifelong learning as critical action would entail creating what Aronowitz (2005b) calls *space for the new*. As minorities learn how to make space for the new and advocate for a recognized and respected place in communities, educational settings, workplaces, and other sociocultural spaces, local needs would be nested within larger national and transnational considerations in addressing dislocation and disenfranchisement in learning and work. Lifelong learning as critical action would be concerned not only with the present, but also with the future so minorities could move forward as global citizens with rights, privileges, and responsibilities in both economic and civil contexts. As praxis, it would counter the fatalism of neoliberal pragmatism that blames minorities for their predicaments and requires passive acceptance [and not Freirean (2004) just ire] in the face of systemic oppression.

### *A Stonewall for All*

These days, SMGV persons reject our historical exclusion from mainstream forms of lifelong learning and adult education in local, national, and international contexts (Hill & Grace, 2009). We have grown justly angry with the silence, exclusion, and symbolic and physical violence that heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia have perennially provoked in culture and society, and in education as a key replicator of the heteronormative status quo. Indeed there has been fervent and intense expression of that anger as sustained sociopolitical action since the Stonewall rebellion in New York on June 28, 1969. The result has been a growing global movement for rights and freedoms for SMGV citizens. Hari (2009), speaking within a politics of hope and possibility, reflects on the state of the queer quest for freedom: “Everywhere it goes, it wins, in time” (p. 23). Let’s hope so since the struggle is far from over as so many embattled queer people continue the fight for human and civil rights in many nations. As Hari indicates: “There are three great swathes of humanity still untouched by the spirit of Stonewall and terrified, terrorized gay people there are screaming for help. In the Caribbean, majority-Muslim countries, and most of Africa, being gay is a death sentence, yet many people who should be showing solidarity choose not to see it” (p. 23).

Caribbean homophobia and the terror it causes in queer lives is quite pronounced in Jamaica, which Hari characterizes as “Taliban Afghanistan for gay people” (p. 23). In that country, the sentence for gays and lesbians who get caught is ten years hard labor, though it is more likely they would be lynched for the way they love others. Drawing on cases documented by Dr. Robert Carr of the University of the West Indies, Hari provides this recent example of the extreme violence marking queer life in Jamaica: “A father found a picture of a naked man in his 16-year-old son’s rucksack, so he produced it in the playground and called on the boy’s classmates to beat him to death – which they promptly did. No one was ever charged” (p. 23). This murder of a Jamaican youth is but one example of youth, often under the age of majority, being monstrously targeted by homophobes who may even be their parents or friends. In another example of the heinous forms homophobic targeting of youth can take, 16-year-old Mahmud Asgari and 18-year-old Ayaz Marhoni were blindfolded and publicly hanged in Iran on July 18, 2005 (Moore, 2010). While the facts of the case remain unclear, one story suggests they were put to death for an alleged crime involving homosexual intercourse; it is also possible that they were executed simply for having consensual gay sex (Kim, 2005). Under Iranian law, engaging in homosexual activity is a capital offense punishable by execution. What adds to the horror of murdering human beings for purported same-sex crimes is the fact that the victims were youth. Their executions were in violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which ban the execution of minors (Kim, 2005). Iran is a signatory to both agreements intended to protect youth (Kim, 2005).

In another recent example that assaults the integrity and endangers the lives of SMGV persons, the Ugandan Parliament is planning to pass the *Anti-Homosexuality Bill of 2009*, which would increase the punishment for homosexuality from the current seven years in prison to death by hanging (Johnson, 2010). Moreover, the bill recommends prison sentences for anyone—there are no exemptions for parents, pastors, and counsellors of youth—who does not report homosexual activity to the police (Ford & Pomfret, 2009). Canon Gideon Byamugisha of the Uganda Anglican church believes that passing this bill would sanction “state-legislated genocide against a specific community of Ugandans” (Ford & Pomfret, 2009, p. 1). Under pressure from Britain, Canada, Sweden, and the United States to modify the legislation, Uganda is considering

changing the death penalty for homosexuality to a lesser but still draconian punishment: life imprisonment.

The *Anti-Homosexuality Bill of 2009* came about because three visiting American evangelists – Scott Lively and ex-gays Caleb Brundidge and Don Schmierer – incited Ugandan politicians to introduce the despicable legislation. In what amounts to an imperious US evangelical infiltration, Lively, Brundidge, and Schmierer have placed the lives of Uganda’s sexual minorities in jeopardy by preaching a politico-religious gospel of hatred that assaults the gay movement as “an evil institution whose goal is to defeat the marriage-based society and replace it with a culture of sexual promiscuity” (Moore, 2010, p. A12). Describing this hatemongering message intended to contain homosexuality, Moore (2010) asserts, “Lively, Brundidge, and Schmierer trade in the homosexual equivalent of the Jewish Blood Libel: the notion that gays recruit, spread disease, molest children and actively conspire against family and society” (p. A12).

Nevertheless, the Evangelical hate messengers had willing listeners since, as Canon Byamugisha relates, there is a “traditional and cultural abhorrence to same-sex relationships” in Uganda (Ford & Pomfret, 2009, p. 2). Indeed homophobia and intolerance toward sexual and gender minorities are norms on their way to being institutionalized in that country. For example, Johnson (2010) relates that Yoweri Museveni, the Uganda president, has long been telling his country’s youth that European homosexuals are recruiting in Africa. Johnson also relates that Ugandan sentiment accuses the West of attempting to bully Africans into accepting homosexuality, which they see as an un-African way of life.

In the end though, we ought to remember that homosexuality and transsexuality are global conditions. SMGV persons are everywhere and thus the battles against homophobia and transphobia must be fought everywhere. Wherever there is injustice as exemplified by the preceding examples, lifelong educators should seek transformation of educational and cultural practices and social relations that variously subjugate, dismiss, defile, or erase SMGV citizens as learners, workers, persons, and citizens. Indeed, in light of the homophobic and dangerous milieu for sexual and gender minorities in countries like Jamaica, Iran, and Uganda, lifelong educators ought to help in advancing a Stonewall for SMGV Blacks and Arabs. Not to do this work while ignoring the positive impact that Stonewall has had on many White sexual minorities around the world would be “real racism” (Hari, 2009, p. 23) and a victory for uncivil Black and Arab homophobes who continue to try to reduce homosexuality to a Western construct and import.

### **Concluding Perspective: SMGV Social Learning**

Lifelong educators including adult educators should be willing to strategize and engage in the political, pedagogical, and cultural work necessary to make a better world for sexual and gender minorities. To engage in this work as critical action, exclusionary policies and practices in education, culture, and society have to be exposed; communication in the intersection of the moral and the political has to be enhanced; and the state of the struggle, the extent of transformation, and the need for further social and cultural action have to be monitored (Allman, 1999; Grace, Hill, Johnson, & Lewis, 2004). Collectively, this work will enable recuperation of SMGV persons as we and our allies engage in social learning, open dialogue, critical questioning, resiliency building, and cultural work for social change (Grace, 2009). In sum, these efforts transgress lifelong learning as travesty for sexual minorities. They help constitute lifelong learning as critical action.

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