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Talmadge C. Guy
University of Georgia

Lisa R. Merriweather
University of North Carolina, Charlotte

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Historical Memory and the Construction of Adult Education Knowledge: The Role of Selectivity in Majoritarian Narratives

Talmadge C. Guy
The University of Georgia

Lisa R. Merriweather
University of North Carolina, Charlotte

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Abstract: Adult education historical narratives tend to reflect a majoritarian view in which the theoretical formulations of African American and other persons of color tend to be minimized or forgotten. Drawing on the concept of counter narrative and Ricoeur's concept of "happy forgetting", we argue that selectivity in constructing adult education historical knowledge overlooks scholarship in the past 20 years that highlight the theoretical and programmatic contributions to adult education of African American adult educators. We offer two examples for discussion and propose that challenging majoritarian narratives involves conscious and critical reflection on historical method and the re-telling of counter narratives as a step toward reconstructing adult education historical knowledge.

Adult education historians, with rare exception, have found themselves on the margin of adult educational discourse and debate (e.g., Carlson, 1980; Stubblefield, 1991). Apart from a flurry of scholarship in the 1980s and early 1990s, historical research remains on the periphery of educational research. With a concern for addressing educational needs and an interest in change, adult educators are quite understandably focused on the present and the future. Stubblefield (1991) each reminds us that the development of the field of theory and practice depends in part on historical narrative to identify the field and its core values and concerns. Historical knowledge allows adult educators to expand perspective and deepen judgment about contemporary issues and debates. The main advantage to studying the history of the field is, as Law (1988) says to "read history to make sense of the world we live in today" (p. 37). We contend that historical memory, itself the product of historical research, is vital in framing adult educators' understanding of the field and its development.

Counter Narratives and "Happy Forgetting": Critical Race Theory and Paul Ricoeur's Theory of Historical Selectivity

We draw on two theoretical traditions to frame our discussion, critical race theory and the concept of counter narrative as well as Paul Ricoeur's work, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004). Critical race theory scholars have emphasized the important role of telling counter narratives, that is for the marginalized to tell their stories of discrimination and the impact of oppression on their lives. Counter narratives function as a sort of antidote to majoritarian narratives which seek to rationalize social inequality in ways that mask the working of oppression. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) outline how counter narratives serve to produce oppositional knowledge that challenges and undermines dominant (or majoritarian) narratives.

Paul Ricoeur's work, *Memory, history and forgetting* (2004) argues that some historical events are more prominent than others. Ricoeur directs his attention to broad historical events but his argument has implications for the construction of historical narrative in adult education. In particular, Ricoeur's concept of memory as forgetting is central to our claim that to represent the field adult education majoritarian narratives must "forget", as it were, marginal narratives.. In other words, majoritarian narratives constitute "happy narratives" in the sense that they celebrate the experiences and ways of knowing of a dominant group rather than reveal the internal contradictions and conflict inherent in unequal social relations. Historical selectivity, then, is constituted in the act of forgetting. We may ask, then, whether any of us who do historical work in the field are ever remembering accurately or completely. The challenge for historians of education is daunting in this respect.

Resisting the problem of selectivity (in Ricoeur's sense of "forgetting") is challenging for educational historians. On the one hand, the research task facing historians is perhaps not as straightforward as in other forms of research where transparency in methods reveals much about the outcomes of research. Selectivity in historians' choice of topics, historical sources, and prioritization of themes is tied substantially to the historian's own values. Carlson (1980) made this clear when he said that "Historians interpret the past by sifting through the available relevant evidence and by mixing this information with their own values and philosophy" (p. 42). We see the evidence of such selectivity through the historical evolution of the educational study of the field. Despite the growing number of studies about black and female educators, the narrative that seems to define the field, at least in the US context, is the narrative of Franklin's Junto, the Mechanics institutes, the Lyceums, the progressive movement, Carnegie, Ford, liberalism, and professionalism. To the extent we steer away from this narrative, the focus is still too circumscribed—Highlander, Paulo Freire, Habermas, and Foucault frequently dominate.

While we recognize that selectivity and subjectivity permeate historical writing and narrative, we are not of the view that this is *ipso facto* a bad thing. All research subscribes to a point of view and historical research is no different. We do argue that historical research acknowledges its point of view. This is especially the case for what we term majoritarian narratives of adult education. No, we do not say that there is a high ground of historical knowledge from which the range of adult education historical knowledge can be surveyed. That is too sophomoric. Instead, we are concerned that not enough history acknowledges its point of view and as a result substitutes general claims for what are actually partial views of the field. Having understood this, however, we might recognize that assessing historical narratives is also a subjective exercise. Recognition of selectivity and subjectivity should not lead to the despair of relativism but rather to the emancipation of historical scholarship from prevailing conformities. Despite having a range of new histories that detail the educational experiences of Blacks, women and other communities whose experiences are outside the mainstream, we are left with an overly fragmented or excessively partial view of theory and practice.

Educational Histories and Representation

Why is this important? Educational histories go beyond the mere telling of chronological narrative. Historians of education usually write in a way that reflects a style of thinking, a way of understanding or knowing about a field in its depth and breadth. Because of the tension between history of education as a study of the past and the contemporary press of educational problems for educators, educational historians frequently strive for a discursive balance by writing both about the past while addressing pressing current issues. They do so by emphasizing historical

study and knowing (Donato and Lazerson, 2000). It is this fundamental role of historical research, to help adult educators see issues more clearly and critically that requires educational historians to reject what Chase (1996) has referred to as ‘scientific historical scholarship’ (p 56) in favor of a more critical analysis of educational development.

If we consider the foregoing in light of what we are calling the dominant narratives of the field, we should say what we regard as those dominant narratives. There are three primary phases:

1. The early studies of adult education in the U.S. primarily were devoted to documenting and promoting the acceptance of adult education as a legitimate field of theory and practice. (e.g., Knowles, Grattan, Cartwright)
2. The later histories (1970s-1980s) of adult education focused primarily on emerging radical perspectives, primarily feminist, critical theory, or Marxist-inspired analysis. (e.g., Brookfield, Rockhill, Scheid, Hellyer, Carlson).
3. Recent histories have generally focused on narrowly framed questions such as identifying the contributions of particular individuals, particular historical issues or adult educational programs or organizations. (e.g., Baumgartner, Brookfield, Colin, Easter, Merriweather)

Telling by re-telling: A critical assessment of historical narratives of adult education

The critical tenor of American adult education history reached its zenith in the 1980s and 1990s. Historical narrative influenced by neo-Marxist (Hellyer, 1989), feminist (Thompson, 1975) or Afrocentric (Colin, 1989) theoretical lenses adopted a revisionist view of American adult education—one that sought to challenge the earlier celebrationist histories that were predominate in graduate study (e.g., Knowles, 1977). History told from a “majoritarian” (Yosso, 2005) perspective ignores fundamentally important issues of structured inequality, power, privilege and domination that shape the educational experiences of adults. Dominant narratives conceal or reframe discordant social relations in ways that produce mythic narratives of development, progress, and social good. Histories of subordinate groups, by their very telling, undermine and otherwise contradict majoritarian histories. Delgado (1989) explains that “The stories of outgroups aim to subvert that ingroup reality” (p.2413). Majoritarian narratives serve to justify, or celebrate, the world as it is instead of examining underlying tensions and oppositional narratives. The celebrationist narrative of the G.I. Bill that opened opportunity to a whole generation in the areas of lifelong education, for example, masks the underlying inequity experienced by persons of color in the administration and delivery of services sponsored by the G.I. Bill. While the story of how Blacks or women have been discriminated against have circulated through the black community via community media and narratives grounded in other disciplines such as Black studies or Women’s studies, majoritarian narratives continue to assert and preserve “the prevailing mindset by means of which members of the dominant group justify the world as it is, that is, with whites on top and browns and blacks at the bottom” (Delgado, p. 2413).

Over the past three decades or so adult education historians have begun to re-tell the stories of marginalized groups in order to extend adult education knowledge and experience (e.g., Colin, 1989; Peterson, 1996; Schied, 1993; Burnette, 2008). This re-telling remains a

marginal discourse in terms of the development of the field and its major ideas. The literature recognizes the importance of experiential learning, critical reflection, radical education and popular education as part of the broad critical educational discourse. Yet the literature virtually ignores (“forgets”) the intellectual contributions of scholars such as Du Bois (Guy & Brookfield, 2009; Du Bois 1984), Booker T. Washington (Denton, 1994), or Carter G. Woodson (2000). The “forgetting” represents a critical omission because the historical memory of what the field is that constitutes its central core and identity. Despite the emergence in the literature of critical and counter narratives, the dominant adult education narrative remains rooted in a Eurocentric majoritarian frame.

A Selection of Historical Examples

W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington are well known in educational circles for their contributions to education. While each has been researched in the history of adult education literature, neither is frequently cited with respect to their general theoretical contributions. In what follows below, we provide a brief overview and description of their work and important ideas as they relate to the field of adult education.

Du Bois and socialist adult education

W. E. B. Du Bois was a complex and dynamic figure whose life reflects an ongoing analysis and adjustment to the evolving American racial, political, and economic scene. Most well known for his *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois actually formulated a statement to serve as a foundation for adult education in the mid 1930s (Guy and Brookfield, (2009). This recently introduced statement is well known in Black Studies circles but is virtually unknown in adult education circles.

In 1933 and 1934, a period in which he was seriously reformulating his ideas about race, democracy, and justice, he began writing a major piece titled ‘The Negro and Social Reconstruction’ which reflected the influence of Marxism on thinking. By 1935 he had clarified his own thinking regarding a concrete plan for race progress and equal justice for Blacks through political activism, group solidarity, and community involvement through education. The timing was perfect for the invitation extended to him by Alain Locke to contribute to the Bronze Booklets series.

Central to his plan was his idea of a Negro creed that would be used by adult education groups in the black community to critically analyze social and economic conditions in the depression era that affected Blacks. In *Dusk of Dawn* Du Bois (1984) writes “that economic program of the Negro which I believed should succeed, and implement the long fight for political and civil rights and social equality which it was my privilege for a quarter of a century to champion” (p. 319). In the paper, Du Bois detailed the conditions of the Black community under the New Deal programs. His intention was to give a detailed account of social and economic conditions from the perspective of Marxist theory.

This essay included eleven statements that comprised a program for racial and economic justice and which included the important role of adult education groups among Blacks to accomplish this purpose. While the paper was never published in the curriculum series commissioned by Locke, the statement remains a significant statement of adult education for social justice commensurate with the ideas of Myles Horton. . Eschewing integration and political activism Du Bois made clear the framework for his thinking arguing that “a co-

operative Negro industrial system in America can be established in the midst of and in conjunction with the surrounding national industrial organization” to elevate the material conditions of the Black community. Central to Du Bois’s idea was the matter of self-determination and local control over community economic and political organization. Only then could “Negro workers ... join the labor movement and affiliate with such trade unions as welcome them and treat them fairly” (p. 321). For Du Bois, social change is grounded in collective action and community determination of both need and process. Du Bois’s neo-socialist philosophy modified by a racialist analysis of society linked educational form and process to a succinct analysis of power to assert the potential and limits of education to mobilize for change.

Washington and a communitarian andragogy

Booker T. Washington advanced an extension-based demonstration model of adult education. Washington, a former slave, and race man of the late 19th and early 20th century is best known for his Tuskegee Institute model of industrial education. Denton’s historical analysis provides ample detail of the way in which the Washingtonian model of education was conceptualized in a way to respond to the specific needs of rural, black poor farmers in the Jim Crow South following reconstruction in the 1880s and 1890s. Starting with virtually nothing Washington built a post secondary institution of higher learning was a 19th century example of what later came to be popularized as “andragogy”. In his autobiography, Washington wrote that adult education “had to be done for the benefit of the whole community” (p. 7).

Educational innovations such as the Jesup Wagon and the Movable School were advances in distance learning, experiential and demonstration methods, though Washington is rarely credited in the literature in these fields for his contribution on this matter. The development of the demonstration method and extension in Washington’s Industrial Model preceded by nearly 20 years the institution of extension in the Smith Lever Act in 1914. But a more central point is that Washington’s “andragogy” is one that is situated with a communitarian frame instead of an individualist, humanist frame as is that popularized by Knowles. The literature is virtually silent on the development of a model of adult education and learning owing to Washington’s work at Tuskegee that shares a conceptual link to many of Eduard Lindeman’s ideas about adult education and learning which themselves are precursors of Knowles.

Discussion

Twenty years ago it might have been said that little formal research existed in the field to allow for the integration of black historical narratives, that is no longer the case. Nevertheless, knowledge of Blacks is frequently forgotten or ignored. Historical selectivity continues to reflect the racially neutral terms on which adult education is produced. This is ironic given that contemporary debates often center on the way power relations shape adult education and learning. However, few references exist in authoritative texts that acknowledge the adult education knowledge from within a Black socio cultural and historical frame. Numerous examples could be cited and Washington and Du Bois are but two among many figures that might include Nannie Helen Burroughs, Fannie Coppin, Septima Clark, or Carter Woodson whose contribution to both theory and practice are worthy of examination in adult education. Research approaches that attempt to reveal, understand, and respond to unequal power relations benefit from what has been traditionally viewed as knowledge bases of African Americans. Yet, the literature seems not to acknowledge this tradition even as more research reveals the range of

experience and theory in adult education.

A first step in contesting what Ricoeur calls “happy forgetting” is to continually remind or re-tell. The very notion of counter narrative calls into question the process of “happy remembering”. In addition to the process of “re-telling” the conduct of literature searches should be made in a way that intentionally and critically questions the act of remembering and forgetting. Reliance on documented sources for constructing a narrative of an idea, process, or issue must be accompanied by the question, ‘whose experience and knowledge is being remembered; and whose is being forgotten. This is an important step in re-constructing majoritarian narratives.

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