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Sherri K. Lawless
University of Georgia

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Walking Against the Grain: A Case Study of Catholic Women's Social Justice Discourse, Practice and Spirituality in Post-Katrina New Orleans

Sherri K. Lawless
The University of Georgia, USA

Keywords: Adult educator activists, Anti-poverty activism, Catholic social thought, Catholic women, Critical theory, Economic inequality, Homeless People, Katrina, Poverty, Spirituality, Social activism, Social justice, Social justice discourse, Systemic injustice

Abstract: This qualitative study explored the relationship between Catholic women adult educators' understanding of social justice and their engagement in anti-poverty activist practice with Hurricane Katrina survivors, in the context of a religiously-affiliated organization. While the privilege discourse was predominantly used by the eight activists interviewed, analysis also revealed that they understood social justice in multiple and layered ways. Specifically, these adult educator activists' enacted practice has a complexity that does not conform neatly to traditional conceptualizations of social justice.

Introduction

The significance of anti-poverty activism cannot be denied in relation to the United States' current socio-economic landscape. This nation's economic inequalities are considered to be the most disparate among the wealthiest nations of the developed world. Subsequent to the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster, the city of New Orleans, Louisiana has come to symbolize the ethnic geography of suffering for those in society who are socially and economically marginalized due to systemic injustice. While social justice has been historically considered one of the adult education field's core missions, scholars have articulated differing, and sometimes conflicting, conceptualizations of social justice's meaning. Many prominent adult educators have participated variously in social activism and some of these adult educator activists have expressed deeply held religious and spiritual beliefs. A strong association between spirituality and social justice is well-established in the adult education literature, what is lacking has been a discussion of how adult educator activists expressing their spirituality understand social justice.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the relationship between Catholic women adult educators' understanding of social justice and their engagement in anti-poverty activist practice with Hurricane Katrina survivors, in the context of a religiously-affiliated organization. Based on an analysis of the literature, I note that social justice has been conceptualized in three ways. One of the study's key findings, however, is that these adult education activists understand their practice in multiple and layered ways.

Theoretical Perspectives

This study's methodology was conceptually informed by three theoretical perspectives. First, the study was influenced by adult education scholars (Baumgartner, 2006; Brookfield, 2005; Cervero & Wilson, 2001; Foley, 2001; Holst, 2009, 2010; Cunningham, 1998; Horton & Freire, 1990; Johnson-Bailey, 2006; Newman, 1994; Quigley, 2000; Tisdell and Taylor, 1999) who have identified societal hegemony and align with radical or critical-emancipatory

approaches to social change. These scholars describe and deconstruct the systemic and structural dynamics of power and privilege, those who benefit and those who are marginalized.

As the second perspective that informed this study, Catholic social teaching both reflects and challenges radical-critical theories such as feminism; this study focused on the meaning and practice of Catholic women engaged in an area of consonance, social justice activism for those who are economically marginalized and silenced. A primary tenet of Catholic social thought is a preferential option for the poor. The selection of this study's practice setting reflects Heyer's (2008) argument that "Catholic social thought does not merely consist of what gets authored by popes or emphasized by bishops, but also by what is lived by communities of hope and faith" (p. 10). This study represented an effort to move beyond the preferential option tenet and examine how Catholic adult educators working on behalf of those who are poor understand social justice and poverty, and how these understandings align with their chosen practice.

The third theoretical perspective is the social justice discourse framework as outlined by Choules (2007). Choules describes how individuals express their understanding of social justice on one of three discourses, charity, human rights and privilege, identifying the privilege discourse as the one that clearly speaks to systemic and structural causes. This discourse framework was used as a prism to situate study participants' social justice understanding and as a reference to align their practice to their verbal expression.

Research Design

This study's research design was a qualitative case study that blended elements of narrative and critical discourse analysis, creating a method for understanding these participants' discourse and the way they enacted these understandings in practice. Three research questions guided this study: (a) What is the social justice discourse of Catholic women with a sustained commitment to social justice?, (b) How does the social justice discourse of Catholic adult educator women align with how they describe their activist practice?, and (c) How does spirituality influence the meaning of social justice for Catholic adult educator women engaged in work with the poor?

The study's setting was a multi-service day center serving homeless Katrina survivors, those chronically homeless, and those seeking employment in a low income corridor of New Orleans, Louisiana. Four Catholic service ministries collaborate to run this day center and offer a range of services including meals, personal hygiene facilities, medical care, and legal assistance at a single location; one collaborator constructs houses for first time home owners and also offers classes in financial and mortgage literacy. The unit under analysis was women's narratives; purposeful sampling was used to recruit and select the participants, eight adult Catholic women who had been engaged in their paid or volunteer work at the center (as members of a religious order or lay) for at least one year and engaged with the poor for a minimum of two years. Participant ages ranged from early twenties to over 65 with the five participants over the age of 50 having 13 to 37 years of experience in anti-poverty work. Semi-structured interviewing was the primary data collection method; participant observations were also conducted. Elements of narrative and critical discourse analysis were used to interpret the data.

Critical discourse analysis "questions the relationships between power relations evidenced in social formations and that of everyday statements" (Thomas, 2006, p. 70). Rather than investigate detailed discursive features such as textual superstructure, style, classification schemes, meaning relations, and temporal order or grammatical structures as outlined by Thomas

(p. 95), my focus was on identifying participants' ideological representations of social justice and poverty. Central to each of the discourses outlined by Choules (2007) is an ideological expression about societal power and privilege. I blended thematic narrative analysis with the macro-sensibility of critical discourse analysis, identifying themes embedded in participants' social justice discourse. Using a critical discourse lens, I uncovered implicit or explicit expressions associated with positioning the poor and the privileged with regard to power relations. I situated these expressions onto one of the three social justice discourse platforms.

Key Findings

The key findings were: one meta-theme—(a) predominance of the privilege discourse—and seven themes with associated dimensions: (b) eyes opened with the two dimensions of people overlooked and injustice exposed, (c) acknowledging privilege with the two dimensions of unblamed and made and kept poor, (d) struggling together, (e) getting clean, (f) finding teachable moments, (g) called to walk against the grain with the two dimensions of touched emotionally and physically and sharing stories, and (h) tempered activism.

The first research question aimed to identify the social justice discourse used by Catholic women with sustained commitment to social justice; indicated by the meta-theme and the first three themes above, my analysis revealed these activists predominantly used the privilege discourse. In this context, the privilege discourse considers socio-economic disparities in terms of the power relationships and societal structures benefitting those in power. Beneficiaries acknowledge their privilege and are compelled to take collective responsibility, understanding that addressing societal injustice effectively requires a shared commitment. I considered how participants' social justice discourse was conveyed specifically, through the themes, as well as more generally, through broader perspectives, examples, or even words that occurred in their conversations and sometimes evident in other themes. Thus, social justice discourse was not exclusively relegated to specific themes and dimensions, but is indicated in the way participants generally expressed themselves. As a meta-theme, Predominance of the Privilege Discourse embodies both ideological and sensory components and subsumes all other themes and associated dimensions. The theme of Eyes Opened evokes the visual expressions and words like seeing, blindness, and exposure, a type of revelatory awareness, that participants, referred to by pseudonyms, used when describing the images and impressions they recalled as witnesses to Katrina's immediate aftermath. This theme's dimensions include seeing or understanding New Orleans' socio-economic conditions—"Our city was so dark. I guess again I never realized that it could be so dark"(Nanette)—and more general observations concerning participants' initial awakenings to the pervasiveness of poverty and injustice, "Katrina really let me see the poverty. . . because people were reduced to absolutely nothing materially" (Eliza). The themes of Acknowledging Privilege—"If I were to lose my job, I can go home to my family" (Rose) — and Struggling Together— "if the poor are suffering, we all suffer" (Eliza)— also indicate predominance of the privilege discourse. When participants explained their work, they revealed internal struggles between belief and practice, referencing societal barriers, marginalization, and needs for advocacy and legislative change. Further, while these activists' social justice discourse was predominated by privilege, descriptions of their practice were peppered with the language of the charity and human rights discourses as described by Choules (2007).

The second question was an inquiry into how social justice discourse aligned with the ways these activists described and understood their practice; analysis revealed that their discourse did

not align neatly with their practice. The Getting Clean theme represents simplicity of practice and mission referring, in part, to center guests taking showers, having their clothing laundered, and attending to fundamental hygienic and physiological needs. It also refers to those first and necessary steps in addressing injustice —“If you’re hungry or you don’t have an ID to get in the shelter, the basic needs aren’t met. Nothing else happens!” (Dragonfly). However, this does not mean participants had not struggled with the idea of accomplishing simple charitable works in the face of systemic injustice. Finding Teachable Moments illustrates that participant practice entails informal education although classes in mortgage and financial literacy are offered. While the privilege discourse predominated, the realities of how these activists describe and understand their practice does not neatly align with the social justice privilege discourse. Instead, they understood social justice in multiple and layered ways.

The final research question sought to determine how these activists’ spirituality influenced their understanding of social justice; I found that Catholicism and Catholic social teaching, in particular, had a direct influence on participants’ understanding of social justice. The themes and dimensions of Called to Walk Against the Grain — “I call it a ministry and a calling. I had no plan ever in life to deal with chronically mentally ill clients much less homeless” (Dragonfly) — and Tempered Activism, represent a complex relationship between a spirituality within a Catholic frame, that calls these women to practice and likewise continuously influences their spirituality. Tempered Activism is so named because participants are like tempered activists, working for organizational change from within by balancing their individual perspective of what needs to be changed with the prevailing organizational culture. In this case, prevailing culture relates not to one organization but to society and the Catholic Church’s seemingly rigid strictures with its endemic social justice issues. For these women activists, adherence to the faith they profess is not blind acceptance to the Church as institution but love for Church as people sustained by a deep spirituality, informed by Catholic social teaching. This is achieved, in part, by committing subtle acts of resistance. For example, one of the women religious chose to have her 50th celebration as a sister not at the next-door church, a collaborator, but at the center because she viewed her practice environment with service recipients and staff, the people, as her spiritual sustenance and church.

Conclusions and Discussion

The first and most significant of the study’s three interrelated conclusions is that Catholic women adult educator activists’ enacted practice has a complexity that does not conform neatly to adult education conceptualizations of social justice as described in the literature. Participants expressed a critical analysis of their practice but one that does not draw on formal theoretical sources; they frequently referenced power and privilege often without explicitly naming them. Briefly, and building on frameworks from Griffin (1987), Quigley (2000), Sleeter (1995), and Choules (2007), I offer a simple metaphor to illustrate this. Envision a three dimensional social justice matrix as a house with nine rooms each having a length, width, and depth (height); each room’s dimensions represent adult education social justice ideals, social policies, and discourses. Consider the three vertical columns of the social justice house matrix as the social justice ideals have been conceptualized in the literature as conservatism, liberalism, and radicalism (Sleeter, 1995) and the rows as the social policy models of market, liberal-welfare, and social redistribution (Griffin, 1987; Quigley, 2000). Movement across or down the house’s axes illustrate philosophical perspectives that can be approximately aligned with the historical and political

ways of conceptualizing social justice, along a continuum that begins at a conservative pole of individual/citizen responsibility, continues with collective action for social change and development of human potential and agency, and ends at a radical or emancipatory pole that challenges dominant systems of power and privilege. Social justice discourse as charity, human rights or privilege (Choules, 2007) provides each room's depth. Now imagine these activist practitioners walking through this metaphorical social justice house where any of the nine rooms may be described by its specific location. In our own residences, we may have a favorite room but go to the kitchen for nourishment, to the laundry room for utilitarian purposes, to our den for leisure activities, and to our bedroom to rest. Sometimes we wander about the house, alighting in the place suiting our emotional state while at other times, we do not have a true choice as to room destination such as when we are satisfying a physiological need. Similarly, the study participants are aware of societal barriers and systemic injustice and understand a need for restructuring while also understanding that a charitable act may be required in any moment or for a sustained time. It seems the social justice house these activists reside in while engaging in practice is one with identifiable spatial locations but without visible walls.

The second conclusion is that Catholic women adult educators stress that their engagement in anti-poverty activist practice results in their own significant informal learning. These activists expressed having developed a world view that was more compassionate and, as evidenced by their privilege social justice discourse, critically systemic. This may be because they have been intimate witnesses to and actors in the daily struggles unique to homeless individuals like bandaging swollen feet covered with infected blisters from walking in worn, ill-fitting shoes or convincing a mortgage lender that a low income, first time home buyer is well prepared to assume the financial responsibility of a new, modest home.

The third conclusion is that an iterative relationship exists between Catholic women adult educator activists' spirituality and their practice that informs what social justice means to them that, in turn, has shaped their spirituality. This may be described as a process whereby they are called to serve within a Catholic frame; are then touched emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually; adopt a critical perspective; integrate this into how they choose to enact their faith; and are sustained in their commitment by the way their practice touches them.

While this study suggests several implications for adult education practice, the essential question is do our theoretical formulations of social justice practice fully grasp the interrelated and fluid nature of those engaged in social justice practice outside the academy? As this study indicates, acting on radicalism in a way that challenges societal barriers is difficult when, in the moment, you are faced with someone who is in immediate need of food, shelter, or legal advice. Conceptualizing social justice differently, in a way that goes beyond the three conceptualizations, becomes possible when our understanding of adult educator activists is broadened beyond the acknowledged spaces of higher education classrooms and organized community activism. In an effort to more fully develop a suggested theory, future qualitative research is needed to confirm the possibility of and more fully develop a fourth way to conceptualize social justice, one that mirrors the understanding of those adult educators, in this case several outside the academy, who engage in activism.

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