Subsistence Learning: an Artful Look into Motherwork as a Site of Learning

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Abstract: This paper explores the learning and knowledge creation that takes place within the lived experience of motherwork, through art-informed inquiry. Using storytelling and creative writing that includes poetic narrative as well as reflective poetry, I examine motherwork as a site of subsistence learning.

Women, throughout the world, do a disproportionate amount of motherwork (Waring, 1988, Miles, 1996). At the same time, patriarchal society has subordinated women, institutionalized motherhood and mandated that only mothers should do this work. Yet women’s lived experience of mothering often contradicts the mainstream notion of what this work “is” or “should be” (Rich, 1986). This contradiction continues to subordinate women and is recognized in the increasing discourse regarding the work of mothering among the social sciences (Eichler, 1997, Thorne, 1992). However, motherwork as a site of learning, where subsistence work takes place, remains largely overlooked by theories of adult education and learning (Hart, 1992, 1995).

Adult Learning as Change

Adult educators link learning to change and transformation for individuals as well as for society. At the personal level, change involves a cyclical process that includes experience, reflection, conceptualization and action (Kolb, 1984). Personal transformation often begins with a disorienting dilemma, which subsequently evolves. This process includes critical reflection, self-examination, and a reorientation that results in action (Mezirow, 1991). In order to effect change in society, adult educators also recognize that goals of transformation are embodied in the day to day lives of people who challenge existing oppressive structures of society (Youngman, 1996). Therefore, a pedagogy of change must link personal agency to public effectiveness (Maher, 1987).

Research Design

This paper explores self-identified moments of learning that take place within lived experience, through art-informed inquiry. The focus is on moments of change in women’s lives that involve their work as mothers. Research questions include: What are the epistemological foundations of the lived experience and learning within motherwork? What knowledge creation takes place within this work? In what ways can the knowledge creation that takes place within this work contribute to hope for the future? How can I present my work and findings in ways that are reflective and mindful of the arts and capture the emotions of readers?

Through self-inquiry and women’s storytelling, I explore turning point moments that take place in the intensive work of providing primary care to children. In exploring the processes and the products of learning, women’s experiences are examined in the context of their positions within society, taking into consideration interlocking issues of gender, race and class.

Currently, art-informed methods of research, including creative writing and poetry
are becoming a recognized part of ethnographic data analysis. In addition, feminist poets have made a convincing link between poetry and its relationship to women’s lived experience, oppression and subordination (Lorde, 1984). Because of its truth telling nature, poetry and creative writing have the capacity to convey meaning to readers that is intuitive, powerful and prophetic (Denzin, 1997). In order to present research findings in ways that honour the wholeness of women’s stories, capture their intensity, and appeal to the emotions of readers, I represent findings in art-informed ways that include poetic narrative, which builds on what Glesne (1999) identified as poetic transcription. To do this, the words and phrases from the original transcripts are woven into poetic pieces in an effort to maintain storytellers’ voices, while representing the work as creative writing.

**Self-Inquiry**

To begin the research, I conducted an extensive self-inquiry into my own experience as a mother. In keeping with feminist research practices, this experience assisted me to gain a greater level of self knowledge, to empathize with the experience of research participants, and to work towards reducing the hierarchical relationship between myself and participants (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). I shared both my experiences and the poetic representations of my self-inquiry with research participants. Here is an excerpt of one of the poetic narratives that resulted from this self-inquiry project. I use a right hand margin to show how this experience caused me to push against the boundaries of what I had understood the work of mothering to require of me.

*Excerpt from: My Homework*

...my fear was
sexual abuse
of little girls....
I felt I was bad
confronting authority figures.
I’d been thinking
teachers and schools
were there to benefit
children.
I felt bad
like
God will get me.

*Art-Informed Representation*

Following the self-inquiry, I met with research participants to hear their stories. Here are excerpts from two of the women’s stories, written as poetic narratives. The women describe self-
identified moments of learning and significant change that resulted from their work as mothers.

*Rita’s Story*

Rita is a 43-year-old immigrant woman who describes herself as Mulatto. She is the mother of seven children. After 25 years in an abusive marriage, her husband left and returned to Trinidad. It was at this point that Rita and two of her teenage sons experienced the painful realities of the Canadian legal system. In this excerpt from Rita’s story, I centred her words in columns, to show the many ways in which she learned to centre herself as an individual and a woman, as a result of her experiences.

*Excerpt from: Courtroom Heartbreak*

Now, isn’t life funny? that man sitting there on his high throne, like he’s God.  
My older boy got jailed It’s hard to fight them, because the first time they get all the perks... for something he didn’t do.  
they know all the ropes,  
The second time when he really was there, and you’re just at the bottom... he got off.  

No, life is not very nice and it’s less nice for women,  
Now, my younger son got off ‘less nice still for single mothers;  
The first time, when he was there, ‘even less nice for vulnerable children, 
and the second time and children of colour.... 

when he knows nothing of what happened 
they jailed him.  

You’re just at the bottom of the heap!  
It’s the justice system.  
It’s so messed up.  
I’m wondering if it needs a strict overhaul....  

If I met another woman in a similar situation,  
I would tell her everything!  
Well, the only part I wanted to do I don’t want to see this happen 
something about to innocent people.  
was that judge, judging me.  
That really took me.  
It was when he said:  

I’d say,  
“Take notes.  
Try to call for a mistrial!  
Go for Freedom of Information: 
try to get records of 
what was said.”  

“Odd, she’s a single mother with And I’d say, 
seven children.  
“Oh, she’s a single mother with “Fight for him,  
seven children.  
That’s the problem with these single moms.  
They have to work and then 
they can’t look after their kids  
And then their kids knock about....”  

And then their kids knock about....”
These men, judging women....
They don't know anything about
What it's like to be a single mom.

Well, it's made me realize, the world is not
such a nice place, after all.

This is serious stuff.
And it just keeps niggling away
at the back of my mind...

fight tooth and nail.
Fight the system, tooth and nail!
Do everything you can!
Don't sit back and take it!
Because they'll walk all over you!

Kate’s Story
Kate is a white, 40-year-old mother with two children. When Kate left her marriage (where she had been the primary caregiver) and came out as a lesbian four years ago, she had to redefine what motherwork meant for her. Again the right hand margins indicate Kate’s struggle in pushing against the boundaries of societal expectations of her as a woman and a mother.

Excerpt from: Reclaiming Motherwork

What I have discovered in almost four years of being a mother who’s not there, is that mothering in this culture is all wrapped up with being there...

The can fall back on me in their crises and know that I’ll give them heck For doing wrong things....

But I’ll be the first to pat them on their backs for doing well. If other women with routine and custodial every day stuff.

“I keep going. Sort it out moment by moment.

And to reclaim the fact that I’m still an advisor, a sort of guide person. You can’t decide the whole picture at the outset.

But be true to yourself and in the end

I am the person who cares,
who listens you will have the reassurance that
who backs them up
and is willing to share, ‘This is really what I am,
...reminding them this is who I am
where their boundaries are. And I feel it to the core.’”

To What End?
This study contributes to the growing feminist discourse that seeks to make visible the still too invisible value of motherwork. In support of Hart’s (1992, 1995) notion, research findings indicate that the women who do this work, develop knowledge that is grounded first and foremost in life preserving, life affirming practice. Collectively the women identify the development and maintenance of the relationship with those being cared-for as key to their learning. Further, the women report that it is the life affirming work of caring for and advocating on behalf of children who face life’s struggles, that motivates them to develop increased self trust (in the face of societal expectation of women’s long suffering silence), to learn to take action, and to fight for justice.

In support of the views of Hart (1992) and Ruddick (1989), this research study presents a strong case that the learning and practice of motherwork at its best, is of great significance to the future of life itself, and that if this work, and the principles that arise out of it, were to be generalized to the greater society, this could contribute to the sustenance of the earth and all of life.

Further, in the current economic climate, where technology is replacing much of the “work” that was formerly done by “workers”, and economists are predicting that the world of work, as we have known it, is rapidly disappearing (Aronowitz & Cutler, 1998), motherwork, the work of subsistence, care and nurture of life, is here to stay. In fact, due to the destruction that is being brought about by war and a profit driven economy, this work is becoming more crucial than ever. If we, as adult educators are to play a part in providing hope for the future, we will do well to ask ourselves, along with the women in this study, “to what end?” In other words, in what ways do the processes, products and learning we promote contribute to the promotion, affirmation and sustenance of life?

Reciprocal Learning through Motherwork
To conclude this paper, I share one last poem. I asked interview participants what they had learned from their children. This piece represents the collective responses of research participants, using a combination of reflective poetry and poetic narrative. The women’s responses support the notions of Noddings (1984) and Ruddick (1989), who indicate that part of the reciprocity in the care giving relationship is manifest in the way that caregivers also receive care and learn from those cared-for.

Children: Our Greatest Teachers

Collectively, We learned
we watched a depth of loving
our children grow, and emotion...
and through
Attentiveness and care, of a love freely given,
we learned.... unselfish,
without judgment,
We learned to filled with forgiving:
Stop worrying, bearing no conditions.
To love living... And through our mothering,
To be filled with we grew
Optimism and hope.... in the knowledge
We learned that instead of merely
teaching our children,
To live and let live... as we had once imagined,
To let nature the children had become
Take its course, having found that children
having found that children are not owned and
are not owned and cannot be controlled.
our greatest teachers.

References:
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