Social Care in Adult Education: Resisting a Marketplace Agenda

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Abstract: This paper describes a research study about the experiences of adult educators wherein the stories of three of the participants were central in developing a beginning theory of social care in adult education. It proposes that the adult educators with a social care orientation in this study acknowledge the importance of and work to provide for human needs, care, and social justice.

Purpose of Study
The purpose of this study is to elucidate the ways in which the notion of social care relates to adult education theory and practice. In what ways is social care present in the stories of adult educators? How can social care enhance the practice of adult education? How does it relate to adult education theories? These questions arose during a narrative inquiry research project exploring the experiences of adult educators. The importance of caring arose in an interview with one community educator, prompting a re-analysis of all interview data through the lens of social care. This paper will explore a theoretical framework of social care as relates to caring and adult education theories, discuss how the data helped inform my application of social care to adult education, and argue for the ways in which an emphasis on social care can enhance adult education’s social justice orientation.

Theoretical Framework
Learning that is tied to economic outcomes, such as formal education and job training, is often privileged in today’s western society. Gouthro’s (2005) work on the homeplace highlights the need to contest this marketplace agenda to instead value and support “learning that does not focus primarily on profit, on bottom-line accountability and on corporate needs” (2005, p. 16). In a related argument, Hart (1992) discusses the complexities within which our society largely values commodity over subsistence production. She defines subsistence production as “directly oriented towards life - its creation, sustenance and improvement” (p. 95) and states that subsistence production (i.e. caring) is not valued and neither are those engaged in it.

Wood (1994) focuses her argument on the need to make caring practices central to our cultures at individual and social levels and argues for the benefits of using social care as a basis for interacting with others. Similarly, Noddings (2002) states, “A caring society will be sure that all its people have at least adequate housing, material resources, and medical care….it must ask how it can best encourage the kind of encounters that will support the development of competent, caring, fully alive, and interesting people” (p. 299).

Tronto (1995) also subscribes to the notion of political social care, discussing “the ethic of care as a framework for moral and political judgment” (p. 141). She explores complexities of care and the fact that care is not a panacea. “Nonetheless,” she states, “a society based on care would perhaps be less violent, rageful, and unhappy than many current societies are” (p. 148). She contrasts a work ethic and a care ethic, claiming that in the former there is “a desert claim…that people are entitled to what they have because they ‘earned’ it. The care ethic posits a very different set of standards for desert: people are entitled to what they need because they need it” (p. 146).
When the market, individualism, and competitiveness are privileged in “capitalist societies [we] commodify human activity by subjecting all aspects of peoples’ lives and social relations to market requirements” (Nesbit, 2006, p. 173). Social justice based on caring does the opposite, changing the frame from which we view the world. For instance, environmental advocates protesting at Clayoquot Sound (Walter, 2007) valued communitarianism and nature above individualism and profit. Some spoke “of their commitment to their children, grandchildren, and future generations in explaining why they were willing to risk intimidation and arrest that summer” (p. 257) to not only save the forest but to help educate others about the implications of clear-cutting for humans, nonhuman animals, and the earth. Their work highlights how an orientation towards caring and social justice can induce societal change.

**Research Design**

The research discussed in this paper is based on a reanalysis of interview data from a research project exploring the narratives of 29 adult educators from various contexts (see Taber, Abbey, Howard & Watson, 2008, for a preliminary discussion of the first 14 of these interviews). Using a narrative approach as described by Clandinin and Connolly (2000) and Rossiter and Clark (2007), open-ended interviews were conducted asking participants to describe their journeys in adult education and to relate stories about their experiences that they considered significant. Analysis then proceeded along two lines as discussed by Polkinghorne (1995): “narrative analysis” based on plot and “analysis of narratives” for themes. In searching for themes (the focus of this paper), several similarities arose in the ways in which the 29 participants discussed issues such as engagement with learners, reflective practice, and organizational constraints. During the analysis phase, a statement by one participant seemed particularly salient. This participant discussed the need to care for each other, the community, and the planet. She stated it was a “big essence” of adult learning that does not get appropriate attention or funding due to the difficulty in “proving” it made a difference. Caring had not emerged as a main theme in the overall research, but this perspective prompted a reanalysis of the data with the aim of searching for stories of social care. Was the notion of social care present in the other interviews? If so, how? How might social care be defined as relates to the practice of adult educators? This research was not focused on examples of interpersonal caring practices, nor such as is evident in a nurturing perspective (Pratt, 2002), but on social care (Wood, 1994; Tronto, 1995) and an “orientation to needs rather than profit” (Hart, 2005, p. 68).

I therefore crafted an initial definition of social care in adult education as an explicit orientation to needs and caring rather than profit or specific educational outcomes. During the early stages of analysis, I had seven interviews which I considered might qualify as having an overall focus on social care. However, in my ongoing analysis, I realized that four of them told stories about caring for others, building trust, valuing understanding, improving individual quality of life, and/or environmental concerns, but did not contain a societal critique. It was then that I realized that social justice was a vital aspect of my perspective on social care in adult education and that my initial definition did not make this adequately explicit. Working back and forth, from the data to the theory, with theory informing my analysis and my analysis informing my application of theory, I refined my definition of social care to incorporate these considerations.
To qualify as focusing on social care, participants had to speak of human needs (for food, shelter, belonging), of care (working from an ethical, affective orientation as opposed to a rational justice orientation), and of social justice (a power analysis focusing on marginalization and oppression in a capitalist society). I was searching for social care not as a minor theme among others, but as an embedded, overriding perspective and approach in the stories participants told. I engaged in a detailed analysis of transcripts centred on themes arising from my social care definition that would help inform my understanding of social care in the practice of these adult educators.

Findings

Social care was found to be a prevailing message in the stories of three of the 29 participants. These participants discussed their lives as they engaged in paid work with the justice system (Lisa), volunteer work with a community education organization (Fran), and paid work at a food bank (Jessica). (All names are pseudonyms.) Notably, none of the participants in post-secondary education, corporate training, health education, or coaching spoke of social care, although many of them did speak about interpersonal caring practices and some about power relations.

I will discuss my findings in terms of the three themes in my social care definition. Although each of these themes was present in each interview, they were present in varying degrees and with varying emphases. The themes necessarily overlap as they relate to the larger notion of social care, so my delineation of them into three separate categories is somewhat artificial; the themes interconnect throughout.

Human Needs for Food, Shelter, Belonging

Lisa’s discussion of human needs focused on belonging, respect, dignity, and decency in the justice system. She stressed the importance of “communicating and dialoguing and building relationships” in order to meet offender needs, but that there was a struggle between “meeting learner needs with institutional needs and negotiating” them. To “de-contextualize their [offender’s] lives is very much encouraged [by the institution]…. An inmate is an inmate is an inmate, and to be treated as such so that the place runs smoothly and so the process is set up fairly.” However, this practice is “contradictory to the notions of respect and dignity” which leads to “de-humanize” offenders. Lisa also discussed the importance of discovering each offender’s own context and what they needed upon their release in order to prevent recidivism. “I’ve always tried to get people to sort of figure out where they are…where they want to go, and what is it that’s keeping them from getting there.”

Fran’s focus was on needs for belonging, care, learning, and health. She said that, in her work at the YWCA,

helping people be fit was an important thing, but then you realize gosh, you got this group of women together and they had babies and kids that had to be cared for. Well then we had to kind of tear up the downstairs and find somebody to help us out and make a daycare.

Her work changed and expanded based on her observations of the needs of the women at the centre which led her to engage in a feminist critique (linking to the theme of social justice). She began “doing some programming around interests of women…and this is in the…early 70’s where there was…an awareness by women without naming it, the feminist interests.” Fran stressed that adult education was about “the whole well-being of people, it’s not just literacy
issues here.” She discussed the human need for connections and friends, to be engaged, and to learn from and about each other.

Jessica discussed how it was relatively easy to get people to relate to people’s basic needs for such necessities as food, but that she would often hear donors say,

“well, I believe in feeding people but I don’t believe in changing welfare because if we give people more money…we’re just keeping them on the system.” So a lot of the work that we did was “okay, but you try to live for $520 dollars a month and see how that works out for you.”

She recognized that the needs of people using the food bank go beyond food; their need for food is connected to their needs for shelter, health care, employment, and self-worth. Furthermore, their lives are affected by government policies, as she stated that people are “living welfare” and “immigration policy every day.”

Jessica emphasized the requirement to engage in “participatory action” to “start where [people are] and try and figure out what people need before you go in there and save them.” Fran also made a similar comment, critiquing the ways in which some adult educators “think of it [helping others through education] as doing it for that person over there who missed out and I’m concerned about them and therefore, you know, I’ve got this missionary approach that I’m gonna go help them out.” Adult education should, in her mind, always centre on the needs of the learners themselves, not on what the educator thinks they need. Lisa also stressed the importance of focusing on each person’s own needs and context as discussed above.

Care as Working from an Ethical, Affective Orientation

Lisa’s focus on caring centred on “trying to understand where people were coming from” and to treat people in humane ways. She stated that her perspective on her work “involves ethics…understanding people [and a]… willingness to look at yourself.”

Jessica emphasized the importance of understanding the experiences of others, hearing their stories, and supporting them in non-judgmental ways. She gave the example of one client who was “openly gay and was living in a residence that was very homophobic” who kept returning to the food bank because “he knew I was gonna be there so he kept coming back” to talk and for support.

Fran’s interview was interlaced with references to caring in community for children and adults, both within her own family (her son when he was a child, her now aging mother) and for others (women at the Y, their children, adults in the community, and seniors). “It’s that sense of caring for each other…which stretches out to caring for the community which goes on to caring for the planet, right?” At another point she asked, “How do we stay engaged in what that [important] learning is in relation to ourselves, so that we put it in the context of ourselves, our family, our children, our parents, in terms of our neighbors…?” She also mentioned a 99-year-old peace activist whose friends had organized “a roster” to care for and stay with her comprising of a “different person …staying all night at [her house] so she’s not alone…. It’s that community connection.” For Fran, caring is central to adult education practice.

Social Justice Power Analysis

Caring for each other led into Fran’s critique of government funding and programs that are solely based on measurable outcomes. She stated that caring is:

very much a big essence of adult learning, but it’s the part that doesn’t get the funding and the big bucks and the attention, because what gets attention...is workplace training…
one of the only fields that gets formal funding programs and so on in comparison to the community-based stuff which is not seen as hardcore enough...how do you prove it makes a difference?...that it improves people’s health for themselves and for their family and for their community?

Fran also said that “if we were an entrepreneurial organization we’d be getting all kinds of money, but because you’re community-based and you’re working with...people without a voice, then you also don’t have money.” You “don’t get a bloody cent.” Fran also explored issues of class and access to resources over a lifetime, stating:

the whole recognition of lifelong learning, you work with these very little ones who are coming from these advantaged families and dysfunctional families, and right from the start they haven’t got a hope in hell unless there’s some way that they’re given that leg up. And that’s the most important part of lifelong learning, from my point of view.

Lisa discussed how she tries to “understand the big picture” as an “advocate” in seeing “structural barriers” as they affect women in particular and offenders in general. In her work with offenders, she discussed the “combination of allowing people to...voice...the injustices done to them, while at the same time having to accept responsibility for where they were.” She discussed the difficulties of designing programs for offenders that were based on “behaviourism” and that “must in our market economy have measurable outcomes.” She stated there was a need for class-, gender-, and race-based analyses but that “people become very uncomfortable with having to name certain things and...seeing our own role.”

Jessica related how her experiences at the food bank, helping not only feed people but running programs to “increase voter turnout for low income people,” had “opened my eyes to the lived experience of poverty.” She also discussed the lack of funding for community groups: “A lot of community organizations are doing an incredible amount of work without any money....it’s incredible to me.” Jessica also discussed white privilege and middle-class guilt, recognizing her own role in a society that marginalizes those who are poor and of colour. She concluded that “it’s okay for you to be an ally and speak out as long as you know what your role is, right?” This statement echoes Lisa’s comment about the same issue. They see the importance of examining their own privilege while working for social justice.

Discussion and Implications

The stories of Lisa, Fran, and Jessica can help to provide a foundation to explore the notion of social care in adult education. Their experiences are based in varying contexts with varying emphases on the three aspects of social care as I have described them: needs, caring, and social justice. These aspects are intertwined and interdependent, forming together to demonstrate social care.

It is telling that, in the larger research study, no participants from post-secondary or workplace education discussed social care; although several had one or two of the themes, only the three participants discussed here had all three. This is not to say that there might not be others subscribing to social care in these contexts, as my data is focused on 29 participants only, but it raises the question of why social care was present in the stories of Lisa, Fran, and Jessica but not the others.

Interestingly, the other themes not directly related to social care in these three interviews were similar to those of the other 26 participants (i.e. engagement in learning and reflective practice). Several participants also discussed power, but this theme was not always connected to social care; however, all those with a social care lens discussed power. The three participants
with social care widely varied in age, from mid-twenties to mid-sixties. They did have higher levels of education, but so did several others in the initial research. Although all three currently live in the same province, two have lived in other provinces. One is a mother while two others are not. Two work in non-profit and one in the justice system. All three are white and middle-class, which is representative of the larger group. In short, there doesn’t seem to be a contextual reason for their focus on social care that differs from the other participants. What does seem central and common to these three and not the others is that each of them link the daily lives of those with whom they work (with concrete needs for food and shelter and abstract needs for belonging) to societal power issues. This understanding engendered a sense of caring based on emotions and ethics; what people need is what they should get, regardless of notions of competitive merit or monetary return on investment. This commonality was only explicit in the stories of Lisa, Fran, and Jessica.

A beginning definition from the literature and the interviews analyzed here would therefore suggest that those subscribing to social care have an “orientation to needs rather than profit” (Hart, 2005, p. 68), a vision of a caring society that supports the subsistence needs of its citizens, a resistance to a market orientation, and a belief in the ways in which education with a critical analysis of power can enhance social justice. By drawing from the literature and the stories of these three participants, perhaps we as adult educators can learn to better support concrete and abstract human needs through caring and critique in our research and our practice.

References
