Racializing the Discourse of Adult Education

Stephen Brookfield, College of Education, University of St. Thomas, Minneapolis, MN, USA

ABSTRACT

Adult education scholarship has been racialized through the lens of Eurocentric theory and research. Theoretical paradigms such as Africentrism struggle to gain academic legitimacy as discourses of transformative learning, critical thinking and self-direction - all grounded in the European Enlightenment tradition of the individual pursuit of rational self-knowledge - hold sway. This article reviews the way that repressive tolerance serves to broaden the field of adult education by including racially based perspectives on adult learning, yet simultaneously ensures that they are always seen as an exotic alternative to what is clearly the mainstream Eurocentric perspective. It reviews the way that discourses of criticality can be reinterpreted from the perspective of the African American lifeworld and explores in detail the work of Lucius T. Outlaw Jr. and Cornel West. Both scholars draw partly from the tradition of European critical theory in their attempts to use its central analytical categories (such as alienation, lifeworld, objectification and hegemony) to understand the African American experience. The piece ends with a consideration of how the dominant Eurocentric perspective in adult education can be critiqued and challenged.

Keywords: Adult Education, Africentrism, Critical Theory, Eurocentrism, Repressive Tolerance

1. INTRODUCTION

Adult education as a field of academic study in the United States has been characterized since its inception by an unproblematized Euro-centrism. Given that the same could be said of almost every other branch of educational theorizing, this is, in a way, unremarkable. Yet in this very unremarkability lies the potency of Euro-centrism. An unproblematized Eurocentrism reflects the racial membership of ‘official’ knowledge producers in the field (Apple, 2000) and results in an invisible, unaddressed theoretical politics of race (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2000). This politics ensures that the natural theoretical center in the field – the generation of self-directed, critical adult learners in a democratic environment – is “shrouded in whiteness and invisibility” (ibid. p. 148). Implicit to this politics is the belief that all thoughtful adults, if education could somehow free them from distorted perspectives and erroneous reasoning, would agree that the creation of a liberal democracy is a social project to which all reasonable people could subscribe. Race scarcely figures into this vision of rational people engaged in democratic dialogue. In Juanita Johnson-Bailey’s (2002) view this ‘color-blind’ perspective – “a stance...
that does not acknowledge race or that views all racial issues as inconsequential when not expressed as part of any classroom or curriculum equation” (p. 42) – is by far the most dominant in adult education texts.

In the Eurocentric view of teaching and learning processes, and in its vision of the social significance of adult education processes, certain generic understandings of how adults learn, and what constitutes educational progress for adults, have remained prominent. These understandings have been derived from Eurocentric epistemology, which itself is grounded in the Enlightenment’s belief in the ultimate perfectability of people and systems through the systematic application of reason. Privileged in Eurocentrism are “individualism, dualism, a deep belief in the power of objectivity, analytic thinking, and universal truths” (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2003, p. 127). The Eurocentric ideal thus posits the development of independent, critical thought as the process to which adult educational energies should be devoted. Central to this ideal are notions such as self-directed learning, critical reflection and transformative learning. In the Holy Trinity of Enlightenment rationality Europeans position liberty, equality and fraternity as roughly equal. Consequently, Eurocentrism informs Socialism and Communism as much as it does Capitalism.

In the United States, it is liberty that is privileged above equality and fraternity and this gives Euro-American thought a distinctively anti-Socialist cast. Within the discourse of American adult education, the emphasis on liberty results in the valorization of independent, critical rationality. A critically alert adult, ever skeptical of unsupported knowledge claims and engaged in a constant process of self and social transformation, is deemed to be the most adult of learners in this discourse. The end point of development in this discourse is to reach a relatively undifferentiated, generic state of autonomous grace in which adult learners stand apart from society, skillfully detect ideological distortions visited upon them, and devote themselves to self-directed, self-actualization. This is the tone exhibited in many of the studies surveyed in Taylor’s meta-analyses of transformative learning research (Taylor, 1997, 1998, 2000).

White Euro-Americans within adult educational theory and practice perpetuate an unproblematized Eurocentrism that is, to use Lucis T. Outlaw Jr’s term, racialized (Outlaw, 1996). To Outlaw, racialization is an important, and unavoidable, social fact. It describes the way people’s racial histories and identities inform how they “organize meaningfully, give order to, and thus define and construct the worlds in which we live, our lifeworlds” (Outlaw, 1996, p. 5). Racial identity, ethnicity and gender “are constitutive of the personal and social being of persons … they make up the historically mediated structural features of human lifeworlds and inform lived experience” (ibid. p. 174).

To take a racialized view of something is to view it through the distinctive lens of a racial group’s experience of the world, and to view that experience of racial membership as a positive constitutive element of a person’s identity. Racialism (to be distinguished from racism) is the positive recognition of how his or her lifeworld, positionality and sense of cultural identity comprise a set of pre-conscious filters and assumptions that frame how one’s life is felt and lived. A field of practice is racialized when its dominant conceptualizations, and the mechanisms it has in place for the production and dissemination of knowledge, are grounded in one particular racial group’s experiences (in the case of American adult education, white Euro-Americans) and the forms of thought that flow from these. Moreover, a racialized view is one in which these dominant conceptualizations are judged to rest on positive valuations of the constitutive elements of racial identity. For example, it is the struggle against racism that comprises a crucial element of African American raciality, while the project of creating a liberal democracy is an important part of Euro-American raciality.

In Outlaw’s view raciality is a positive phenomenon and he stresses that “racialism neither is nor need become racism” (1996, p. 8), though keeping the two from conflating is
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