

Exploring the Possible Influence of Postmodernism on Adult Education

Postmodernizmin Yetişkin Eğitimi Alanı Üzerindeki Muhtemel Etkileri

Anindya Sen¹

Özet

Bu çalışmada postmodernizmin Yetişkin Eğitimi alanı üzerindeki muhtemel etkileri incelenmiştir. Bu amaçla, modernizmin moderniteye bir tepki olarak doğması ile temel ilkeleri tartışılmış, mevcut Yetişkin Eğitimi kuram ve uygulamalarının çeşitli özellikleri incelenerek postmodern düşüncenin altında yatan temel fikirlerle olan benzerlikleri analiz edilmiştir. Çalışmanın sonunda mevcut Yetişkin Eğitimi kuram ve uygulamalarında postmodernizmin etkisi olduğuna dair güçlü göstergeler olduğu tesbiti yapılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Modernizim, , Postmodernizim, Yetişkin Eğitimi

1 Ed. D. in Instructional Technology from Northern Illinois University, asen108@gmail.com

Abstract

In this paper, I look at the possible influences of postmodernism on the field of Adult Education (AE). In order to do that, I discuss the basic tenets of postmodernism (along with its origins as a reaction to modernity). I then look at various aspects of current AE theory and praxis and analyze how they have similarities to the basic ideas that underlie postmodern thought. The main conclusion of the paper is that there is strong evidence to believe that postmodernism has had a significant influence on current AE theory and praxis.

Keywords: *Modernism, Postmodernism, Adult Education (AE).*

Scholars from diverse disciplines now claim that we live in a post-modern world (Blake et al, 1998; Briton, 1996; Rosenau, 1992). The question thus arises if the above claim can be extended to the field of Adult Education (AE) also. This paper explores this idea in some depth – while it is probably true that postmodernism has had some influence on AE, it is not necessarily clear to what extent this is true.

Postmodernism is an intellectual movement and a perspective that has developed over the last century as a reaction to the perceived excesses of modernism (Racevskis, 1998). Some of the basic tenets of postmodernism are as follows:

Rejection of all supposed grand narratives (or metanarratives) that claim to represent absolute, universal truths;

1. Rejection of essentialism (the idea that any concept or message has an unchanging core essence that can only be interpreted in one fixed way);
2. A vigorously anti-foundationalist stance in relation to knowledge claims that claim to be more fundamental than others;
3. The belief that there is no objective reality (that is out there waiting for us to discover it);
4. Rejection of both scientism (especially, the scientific method) and positivism; and
5. An acknowledgement of the importance of power structures in all processes of knowledge construction (Allan & Turner, 2000; Leicester, 2000; Rosenau, 1992; Ward, 2003).

These tenets are discussed in much greater detail in a later section. In addition, the nexus between some of these tenets and AE theory and praxis will also be addressed later on in the paper.

Adult education is believed by many to be still under the influence of modernism (Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997). Some scholars make this claim because a lot of AE research is still grounded in scientific methods and a sincere belief in the possibility of progress through human rationality. In addition, some scholars claim that AE's intentions to promote the liberation or emancipation of oppressed voices leads

instead to a rejection of socially-shared responsibilities and a promotion of more individualistic tendencies (Briton, 1996).

However, a sizable body of AE scholars would contend that at least in recent years their field has embraced many of the tenets of postmodernism (including those listed above) in terms of both theory and praxis (Peters, 2000). Thus, there is a dispute amongst various AE scholars as to how deep and pervasive postmodernism's influence on the field really is.

Layout of the Paper

The principal purpose of this paper is to investigate the influence of postmodernism on AE theory and praxis. An additional, albeit secondary, goal (though, possibly difficult to attain in a satisfactory manner via a single article of this type) is to attempt to resolve any possible conflict between the two opposing claims mentioned in the above paragraph.

In doing so, I will be looking in detail at the basic ideas that underlie the postmodern intellectual movement (including a detailed discussion of all of the tenets listed previously). In addition, I will discuss the origins and history of postmodernist thought and the reasons why it was born in the first place. Any discussion of postmodernism's origins will have to, by force of necessity, address what is known as modernity and the basic beliefs associated with it. Related to that would be a discussion on how the elemental ideas of modernism and postmodernism interact with one another, thus giving rise to the intellectual conflicts that afflicts AE (and other social sciences as well).

I will then provide my analysis of how postmodernism has influenced various aspects of the field of AE. In attempting to do so, I will look at postmodernism's effects on both AE theory and praxis. I will also discuss what the implications of my findings are for future research in the field of AE.

Basic Tenets of Postmodernism

What is postmodernism? Postmodernism is a term that is widely used in connection with diverse fields and disciplines, such as art, architecture, literature, education, history, philosophy, and sociology (Harvey, 1989;

Ward, 2003). However, a straightforward definition of postmodernism is an elusive goal. For the sake of this paper, I will try to explain what postmodernism is by explaining in some detail what its basic tenets are (please see below) – however, I will desist from coming up with one all-encompassing definition of the term because I firmly believe that doing so will result in a “product” that will leave as many lacunae in coverage of the components (of the concept) as it will claim to cover.

In this regard, it is appropriate to mention that some scholars claim that postmodernism is not just a theory or a collection of ideas – instead, it is more of an attitude of looking at or a perspective from whose vantage point various concepts and claims can be analyzed. (Harvey, 1989; Lemert, 1997).

The following are some of the basic tenets of postmodernism:

- Rejection of all metanarratives (or “grand narratives”) that attempt to provide all-encompassing explanations: One of postmodernism’s signature beliefs is the rejection of all claims that purport to be universally valid. Postmodernism’s rejection of such statements is borne out by Lyotard’s (1984) famous proclamation that postmodernism can be regarded as an “incredulity towards metanarratives” (p. xxiv). A metanarrative (or a grand narrative) is a unifying narrative or story (or any claim statement) that seeks to explain how the world is— that is, a metanarrative is an all-encompassing worldview of some natural or social phenomenon (Lyotard, 1984, 1992). However, the above does not necessarily mean that postmodernists do not believe in any truths at all – postmodernists do believe in truths that are local (i.e. not universal). These are claims or statements which are limited to particular groups of people or those that are valid only for a certain period of time (Harre & Krausz, 1996; Lemert, 1997; Norris, 1996; Rorty, 1998).

Of course, by rejecting metanarratives, postmodernists have set themselves up for attacks launched by their critics – this is because their claim that there are no universal claims itself is a metanarrative (Norris, 1996; Sokal & Bricmont, 1998). Postmodernists have not come up as yet with an adequate response to this criticism.

- Rejection of essentialism: Essentialism is the idea that any object (abstract or concrete) has essences or underlying immutable properties

that makes it what it is (Leicester, 2000). Postmodernism is particularly interested in the application of the concept of essentialism to ideas and texts. When essentialism is applied to ideas, it means that any concept has an immutable core essence that can only be understood or interpreted in one way. In a similar vein, essentialism can be applied to any text and it gives rise to the idea that a text can be interpreted in only one way. Postmodernists vehemently reject this belief that any idea or text can be understood in only one way. In fact, postmodernists have come up with the idea of deconstruction to interpret texts. Deconstruction is associated with the works of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Deconstruction involves analyzing a text to ferret out all its meanings (multiple or even latent) (Norris, 1991). Deconstruction is regarded as controversial because it elevates a reader's interpretation of the text above and beyond what the author of the text might say even directly. Barthes (1970) has taken this perspective to an extreme by saying that neither the text (even in its original incarnation) nor the author is the most important thing, but it is the "destination" of the text —the reader – that is more important. He averred that when the reader, in spite of his or her subjective proclivities, is allowed to invent new interpretations, the text is liberated from the tyranny of the author's original intended meaning.

- Rejection of both positivism and scientism:

Positivism holds the view that the universe we live in operates according to immutable natural laws which can be discovered and studied by logical thinking and empirical observations. The existence of these laws makes the universe deterministic in nature -- that is, human beings (including both natural scientists and social scientists) by using the methods of science (and applied with "objectivity") can predict and control the world around us (Leicester, 2000). Postmodernists dispute the claim that empirical testing is the only means of gaining reliable knowledge (more on that appears below) and that scientists can practice their craft objectively. They claim that all empirical observations are theory-laden and so a value-free and "objective" scientific enterprise is nothing but a chimera.

Another hallmark of postmodernism is a rejection of scientism which refers to the idea that science and the systematic approach of the scien-

tific method (which advocates the empirical verification/falsification of facts and hypotheses) are universally applicable to all types of contexts -- be it natural or social or otherwise (Leicester, 2000). In other words, scientism espouses the belief that science and the scientific method are the ultimate arbiters of all types of knowledge. Postmodernists, on the other hand, think that science is only one way of acquiring knowledge about the world, especially the natural world; however, they also vociferously aver that science by no means has a monopoly on knowledge acquisition and construction of the social world (Griffin, 1988; Harding, 1998). In fact, some postmodernists (including, notably, some feminists) take the radical view that even for the natural world, the scientific method (with its heavy emphasis on empirical observations) is but one way of acquiring knowledge (Harding, 1987, 1998).

- **Anti-foundationalist stance:** Foundationalism claims that most types of knowledge claims are justified (or known to be true) based on the existence of knowledge claims that are called foundational or basic beliefs or knowledge. Such foundational or basic beliefs are beliefs that provide justificatory support to other beliefs -- this latter set of beliefs are thus derivative of those foundational or basic beliefs (Leicester, 2000). The foundational beliefs are regarded as self-evident or, more accurately, self-justified because they don't need the justification of other beliefs for their validity.

Postmodernists reject some of these foundationalist claims; instead they espouse contrary views that can be appropriately called anti-foundationalist (Leicester, 2000). Anti-foundationalist views reject the existence of so-called foundational beliefs -- as the name implies, it is a term applied to any philosophy which rejects a foundationalist approach. Similarly, an anti-foundationalist philosopher is one who does not believe that there is some fundamental belief or principle which is the basic ground or foundation of inquiry and knowledge. Anti-foundationalists believe that all knowledge is an artifact of the human mind and in a network of interconnected pieces of knowledge claims, no set of knowledge statements can claim a status of epistemic superiority by claiming to be more basic or foundational than other knowledge claims.

- **A rejection of the existence of an external objective reality:** Postmo-

modernists reject the notion of an objective reality that exists out there and that is waiting for us to discover it (by using the methods of science) (Leicester, 2000; Rosenau, 1992). From a postmodern perspective, all knowledge about any type of reality is a construction of the individual human mind. And since any such perception of reality is the creation of a particular human mind, there are as many realities as there are human minds contemplating about their existence. In other words, postmodernists believe there is no one single objective reality -- instead, there are multiple subjective realities (and all of them the subjective artifacts of human thinking).

- Power and its influence on knowledge creation: Postmodernists believe that attention must be paid to the influence of power hierarchies (and relations) that exist between human beings on all knowledge that is produced and consumed. In other words, to critique the validity of any knowledge claim, we have to look at the underlying power relations that exist amongst the various stakeholders who are somehow associated with that knowledge claim (Bagnall, 1999; Gitlin, 1989; Lather, 1991). Postmodernist scholars thus believe that it is imperative of educators and others to recognize the often insidious and invidious role that power plays in enabling or restricting and promoting or discouraging the processes that lead to the production of knowledge.

The above are some of the more prominent tenets of postmodern thoughts. There are others, but for the sake of the current paper, they should suffice.

Next, we look at some of the main criticisms that have been directed against postmodernism.

Criticisms of Postmodernism

Postmodernism, for all its conspicuous popularity in the academic and intellectual world, is not without its vehement critics. Some of its harshest critics claim that while postmodernism denies the existence of any grand narratives, its own claims (like the attributes discussed above) collectively have the appearance of a grand narrative (Norris, 1996; Sokal & Bricmont, 1998). Other critics point out that while postmodernists brand our human reasoning abilities as unreliable, they themself-

ves use the same human reasoning abilities to make their broad claims (Sokal & Bricmont, 1998).

Some other critics take issue with postmodernism's harsh criticism of science as being only one of many ways of understanding the physical world around us. These critics point to the astonishing success of modern science in explaining so much of the world around us (and resultantly producing the technological marvels that people, including postmodernists, so enjoy today) as being evidence that there must be something fundamentally correct about science and the scientific process (Bauman, 1991; Griffin, 1988; Sokal & Bricmont, 1998).

Next, we look at the origins of postmodernism and its relationship to modernity.

Modernity, the Promise of Progress, and the Birth of Postmodernism

It is an oft-heard statement that postmodernism grew out of modernity. A discussion of the origins of postmodern thus necessitates a discussion of what modernity is. So what is modernity? Modernity (or modernism) is basically a historical period in Western civilization that had its origins in the Age of Enlightenment (also known as the Age of Reason) at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century. The Age of Enlightenment coincided with the advent of science and the realization that science can help us understand how the natural world works and how it can be controlled for the betterment of humankind (Bauman, 1991; Racevskis, 1998).

Based on its faith in science, the proponents of the Age of Enlightenment claimed that with the power to control nature, human beings had also acquired the ability to make steady progress in our station in the world. In other words, two of the most fundamental traits of this period was this faith in science and the optimism in humankind's ability to use science to make progress in all spheres of human activities (be it intellectual, material, moral, spiritual, or otherwise). Nature was seen as an immensely complex (but comprehensible) system of interdependent and interacting laws that governed the physical universe (Bauman, 1991).

Since the universe operated according to rational laws, the expectation was that that was also true of human beings; this in turn led to the idea that if humans could live according to the principles of reason, then humankind could live a harmonious and productive existence with the rest of the universe. Allied to this belief was the idea that if people had the freedom to act in a rational manner, then because of their innate goodness they would do things that will lead to a better and more just society (Racevskis, 1993, 1998).

The Age of Enlightenment was also characterized by a hostility toward the church (or organized religion) and the monarchy. It was believed that both the church and the monarchy placed restrictions on the ability of people to act rationally and thus these two institutions would act as hindrances to human progress.

The Age of Enlightenment is also credited with being the source of revolutionary ideas, like the importance of democracy, liberty, religious tolerance, equality between peoples, and rational discourse (as opposed to the supposed divine rights and arbitrary mandates of kings and queens as the ultimate ruling authority), that were thought to be indispensable elements of a free and productive society (Griffin, 1988; Racevskis, 1998).

Modernity, which as mentioned before has its origins in the Age of Enlightenment, thus is equated with the changes as noted above: science over superstition; reason over ignorance; and liberty over (monarchical) tyranny. Above all, modernity gave people a sense of optimism because of the possibility of progress. This expectation of progress was grounded in a faith in rationality and the application of science and the scientific method to the solving of societal problems.

While few people doubt that science (and its twin offspring of engineering and technology) have dramatically improved our living conditions over the last two hundred years, progress in other realms of human affairs has been decidedly sketchy, to say the least (Racevskis, 1998). One expectation of progress was that by using the powers of reason and rational negotiations, human beings would forever banish wars to the scrapbooks of history. That has not been the case. In the last two hundred years, there have been two major world wars and countless

other wars that have cost the lives of over one hundred million people. In fact, critics of modernity would say that science, engineering, and technology have made wars even worse by inventing and producing some of the most unimaginably destructive weapons in history.

Another expectation associated with the idea of progress was the eradication of poverty. While there have been substantial improvements in the material living standards of the countries of the Western world, hundreds of millions of people in other parts of the world (in Asia, Africa, and Latin America) remain mired in abject poverty. Reason and reason-inspired progress have failed to spread the benefits of modern science to large swathes of the human race (Racevskis, 1998). Put in other words, human rationality and science (directly and also indirectly through their proxies of engineering, technology, economics, and business management) may have raised the material standards of living for some peoples, but they have failed to do in a uniform manner – thus, we have the rather conspicuous spectacle of economic inequality writ large on a global scale.

Critics of modernity thus would consider the presence of wars (as mentioned above) and mass poverty to be damning indictments of how modernity's promises about universal progress have fallen far short of what were claimed by its proponents (Racevskis, 1993, 1998). It was in this climate that doubts about modernity started to rise, especially after the post-World War II period. Those doubts ultimately provided the seeds of postmodernism's birth – many of the basic tenets of postmodernism (as discussed previously) are nothing but deep-seated rejections of modernity's most grandiose claims about rationality, science, liberty, and progress.

In the next section, I look at how postmodernism has, in my view, influenced the field of AE in recent decades.

Postmodernism and its Influence on Adult Education

In this section, I look at the various ways that postmodernism has influenced Adult Education (AE) in recent years and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. I break up the discussion in this section as follows: skepticism and AE; deconstruction and the reinterpretation of ideas and texts; power and its effects on knowledge-related activities;

anti-foundationalism, anti-scientism, and alternate ways of knowing; the rejection of positivism and the rise of alternate research paradigms; and the emergence of constructivism as the dominant paradigm in adult learning.

Skepticism and AE

As indicated before, postmodernism encourages a healthy skeptical frame of mind -- it questions established dogma (as in the enunciation of all-encompassing grand narratives) and draws attention to the influence of existing power structures and their latent influence on the processes of knowledge construction and creation.

This skeptical attitude is a necessary boon to making AE an inclusive field. By the term “inclusive,” I mean recognizing the existence of alternate voices -- the voices of marginalized segments of society. If AE as a field only recognizes the version of reality as promulgated by the dominant group in society, it will never give alternate voices the chance to air their perceptions of reality.

In order to question the regnant perspective, AE (or for that matter, any other intellectual discipline) has to deliberately and conscientiously nurture an attitude of skepticism -- a skepticism that is akin to what Lyotard (1984) calls an “incredulity towards meta-narratives” (p. xxiv). The “metanarrative” referred to above is of course the perspective (on various societal issues) that the dominant group utilizes to look at an issue (or phenomenon) and the resultant story that that group proffers to explain and, if necessary, justify that issue’s (or phenomenon’s) *raison d’être*. Without a systematic skeptical intellectual orientation, it is easy for AE educators and scholars to innocently overlook or disregard the perspectives of other (minority) groups. This can have detrimental societal effects in that injustices and other social ills that have as their origins the perspective of the dominant group will never be remedied (Bagnall, 1999; Gitlin, 1989).

Of course, just espousing a skeptical attitude toward societally important knowledge claims is just a beginning in our struggle to combat deeply entrenched social ills and injustices -- much more is needed, especially in terms of concrete action, to actually bring about any imp-

rovement in that regard (Freire, 1970). However, as a first step toward making our society more just and equitable, we have to skeptically (and critically) look at social issues with a special eye toward the current dominant narrative that colors our thinking on such issues (Pietrykowski, 1996; Rorty, 1998; Usher & Edwards, 1994).

Deconstruction and the Reinterpretation of Ideas, Texts, and Messages

As discussed before, postmodernism rejects essentialism and what it implies for the interpretation of ideas and texts (and, by extension, all messages). Essentialism is the belief that any object has a certain essence (that is, a set of attributes) that makes it what it is (Leicester, 2000). Postmodernism, as noted previously, is particularly interested in the application of the concept of essentialism to ideas and texts. When essentialism is applied to ideas, it means that any concept or idea has a distinctive core essence that can only be understood or interpreted in one way. Similarly, when essentialism is applied to any text, it gives rise to the idea that a text can be interpreted in only one way.

Postmodernists strongly reject this belief that any idea or text can only be analyzed and understood in one particular way. As a solution to this problem, postmodernists have come up with the concept of “deconstruction” to analyze and interpret ideas and texts. Deconstruction was originally proposed by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. From a practical perspective, deconstruction entails tearing up an idea or a text to detect all its meanings (both covert and overt) (Norris, 1991). Deconstruction is regarded as a somewhat controversial process because it elevates a reader’s exegesis of the text above what the author of the text might say, even directly.

The process of deconstruction is not a set of specific procedures that are set in stone. In fact, deconstruction can mean somewhat different things to different people. But, from a practical perspective, deconstruction at the very least involves analyzing a text and trying to understand the assumptions, perspectives, reasoning processes, and intentions (for writing) of the author of the text (Norris, 1991). Deconstruction, in a somewhat similar manner, can be applied to an analysis and reinterpretation of an idea or a message.

So what relevance does deconstruction have for AE? Like any other academic discipline, AE deals with texts written by many different authors. By adopting the methods of deconstruction, AE scholars can uncover hidden messages or implications of these texts (some of these messages and implications may even be unintentional from the perspective of the authors of these texts). By drawing attention to these alternate interpretations, new lines of research are opened in addition to making others aware of these other interpretations (Chase, 2000). Hidden messages can have invidious effects on society and by exposing these messages, the field of AE would be benefiting society as a whole. The same argument holds for applying deconstruction to any idea or a message (including the public pronouncements of political leaders).

Power and its Effects on Knowledge Activities

Postmodernism focuses a great deal of attention on the complex political issues surrounding the activity that philosophers and AE scholars and practitioners call “knowledge construction.” Knowledge construction is any activity where the end-product is some new body of knowledge. Knowledge construction is a politically charged activity -- it is never neutral. Whenever we talk about knowledge construction (that includes knowledge production and propagation), the following two all-important questions crop up:

1. Who is creating the knowledge?
2. For whom (whose consumption) is the knowledge being created?

In addition, there are auxiliary questions like who is in charge of (financially, administratively, or otherwise) the knowledge-constructing activity, who benefits from this activity, whose knowledge construction is accepted by society as “legitimate,” and what types of research are of higher status (or privileged) (Bagnall, 1999; Chase, 2000; Gitlin, 1989).

Thus, this topic of the politics of knowledge construction directs our attention to issues of power and legitimacy that plague this extremely complicated (and intellectually lofty) human endeavor. It is a tacitly accepted reality of our human existence that people in positions of power (vis-a-vis the rest of society) have much greater control over vari-

ous facets of the knowledge creation process. To become more aware of this baneful societal problem, I suggest that we apply the 5W/1H set of questions (who, why, when, where, how -- and, as noted above, for whom) to any discourse on power hierarchy in society and its effects on knowledge creation and consumption.

In addition, postmodernism's drawing attention to this topic has the added benefit in that it redirects the AE profession's and society's attention on to questions of how the political aspects of knowledge construction further marginalizes demographic groups that are at the peripheries of society to begin with (Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997; Usher & Edwards, 1994). I believe that to redress the imbalance on this issue amongst different groups with varying degrees of power, AE educators and scholars need to be mindful of the above-listed "5W/1H" aspects of the knowledge creation process and if any instance of injustice is detected should take appropriate rectifying measures for the benefit of all.

Anti-Foundationalism, Anti-Scientism, and Alternate Ways of Knowing

As mentioned previously, postmodernism rejects the idea that there are some bodies (or disciplines) of knowledge that are foundational in nature -- that is they act as the bedrock on which other bodies (or disciplines) of knowledge are grounded in and grow upon (Leicester, 2000). Postmodernism espouses the belief that all knowledge claims are related to comparable or related knowledge claims as in a network of ideas, but no one group of knowledge claims can claim to be in a superior position vis-a-vis other knowledge claims because it is presumably foundational to the other knowledge claims.

Also, as explained previously, postmodern is also resoundingly against scientism which refers to the claim that science and the scientific method (which entails the empirical verification/falsification of facts and hypotheses) are universally applicable to all types of knowledge contexts (the natural sciences, the social sciences, the arts, the humanities, etc.) (Leicester, 2000). In other words, scientism espouses the belief that science and the scientific method are the ultimate arbiters of all types of knowledge.

Postmodernists reject that grandiose claim -- they think that science is only one way of acquiring knowledge about the world, especially the natural world; in addition, they also vigorously reject the related claim that science is the primary mode for knowledge acquisition and construction of the social world.

One of the primary competitors to science (and the scientific method) that has emerged in recent years is feminist epistemology. Feminist epistemology is not one specific research technique or methodology. Instead, it is an umbrella term for various types of research programs and methods that valorize alternate non-positivistic, non-scientific methods of looking at and solving problems (Lather, 1991; Tisdell, 1998). The description that follows is a summary of some of their common features which set them apart from, say, scientific research.

Feminist epistemology initially developed in the social sciences, primarily sociology. It is essentially a prescription for a specific type of methodology for the social sciences. One of its most fundamental claims is the hidden ways in which marginalized groups (including women) find themselves in a position of epistemic disadvantage vis-à-vis the dominant (or majority) groups in society (Harding, 1987).

Feminist epistemologists argue that those individuals who belong to groups that are on the peripheries of society have to accept the norms and mores of the dominant groups and live their lives accordingly. Because they have this status of being at the margins and their experiencing the trials and tribulations associated with this status, they are acutely aware of the negative attributes of their societal position (members of the dominant group are ironically enough at a disadvantage regarding this). It takes conscientious effort on the part of educators and social activists to make the members of the dominant group aware of this status-related discrepancy before anything meaningful gets done.

In philosophy (and, in particular, the philosophy of science), this position associated with marginalized groups was developed by Harding (1987, 1998). She opined that because disadvantaged groups lead different lives vis-à-vis the dominant groups, they, paradoxically enough, enjoy a position of epistemic privilege, since they view societal problems differently and even conceive of possible solutions differently. In

fact, in extreme cases, the marginalized groups perceive of problems whose existence the dominant groups are not even aware of. Of course, it must be noted that Harding is not implying that one has to be a member of a disadvantaged group in order to be aware of such problems – a person of the dominant group is also capable of doing it provided this person makes the effort to do so. For instance, many individuals, like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, were not members of the proletariat, yet they were acutely aware of the plight of the proletariat in the heydays of the Industrial Revolution.

The above discussion leads us to the concept of the epistemological standpoints of various marginalized groups – these epistemological standpoints are tied to these groups' epistemic privilege mentioned above. Harding's ideas have had the greatest influence on the philosophy of science and the sociology of science. Science has historically been a male-dominated field – women have been severely marginalized in science (and technology). The agendas that scientists have (in terms of methods of research and also topics of research) are naturally determined with a male bias. Harding argues that women (and especially women scientists) need to argue their causes from their epistemological standpoint. She believes that the female epistemic standpoint might lead not only to different methods of inquiry (ex. a greater importance assigned to intuitive knowledge which is more commonly associated with a female way of thinking), but also to changes in how scarce funds are used to research specific topics.

So what ramifications does feminist epistemology have for AE theory and praxis? The primary ramification has to do with making AE scholars and educators aware of the disadvantaged position that marginalized groups (women and other minority groups) have in relation to those of the dominant group.

The idea of alternative perspectives in AE is not limited to just feminist epistemology. Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2000) and Kilgore (2001) posit that race (which, according to them, is a socially constructed idea) has widespread and deep-seated ramifications for societal functioning. The societal face of race manifests itself in the form of social power and privilege accruing to the dominant racial group (mediated via that

group's perspective acting as the only legitimate perspective on all societal issues) – and that is what ultimately determines how fairly or unfairly minority groups are treated.

Once AE educators become aware of the above-mentioned uneven and unfair state of affairs prevalent in a society, they can make deliberate efforts to make the voices and perspectives of these disadvantaged groups heard (Tisdell, 1998). Also, AE practitioners can make efforts to make members of the majority group become aware of this discrepancy in status and this might lead at least some members of this group to contribute their efforts to redress this societally pervasive imbalance of status and power (Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997).

Rejection of Positivism and the Rise of Alternate Research Paradigms

Postmodernists have for the last few decades become increasingly vocal in their criticism and, for some, even the outright rejection of positivism. Positivism, as a reminder, is the belief that only knowledge that can be logically proven (like mathematical theorems) or empirically demonstrated (like scientific laws) can count as true knowledge. Anything else is pure speculation at the very least or downright meaningless. Positivism with its glorification of the use of logic and systematic empirical observations is thus naturally aligned with the use of science and the scientific method of doing research. Thus a positivism-driven research agenda, based on the hypothetico-deductive method of generating hypotheses and testing them for verification/falsification, is heavily geared toward purely quantitative research. This was the primary method of doing research in most of the social sciences and education until about a couple of decades back (Stronach & Maclure, 1997).

However, in the last two decades, the social sciences and education have increasingly become influenced by the criticisms of the inherent weaknesses of a purely positivistic approach to doing research (postmodernism being one of the most ardent and consistent critics of positivism can certainly claim a substantial amount of credit for that). This critical response to positivism has been accompanied by the rise in popularity of qualitative research methods (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research is allied with various alternative (non-positivistic) research

paradigms, two of them – the interpretive and the critical theory – being the most important.

The interpretive paradigm is based on the notion that any conception of reality is socially constructed and is vulnerable to an individual's subjective perspective. The philosophical foundation of all interpretive research is hermeneutics and phenomenology. One of the fundamental goals of interpretive research is to give central importance to people's personal interpretations of events and phenomena – that is, what meanings they impute to the happenings in the world around them. The interpretive research paradigm is thus very much about the centrality of people's meaning-making activities (Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997).

The critical research paradigm focuses on the social reality that people find themselves in. It assumes this social reality is subject to various types of social, cultural, political, and economic forces and that powerful groups control these forces to dominate and subjugate those that are weaker in power. One of the main practical goals of critical theory research is to highlight these discrepancies in societal power distribution and their deleterious effects on people's lives. Critical theory also has end-goals that are emancipatory – that is, the promotion of structural changes in society such that exploitation and subjugation of marginalized groups will be brought to an end (Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997).

Both the interpretive and critical theory research paradigms have in recent years found a welcoming home in the AE community – this can be seen in the rise in popularity of qualitative research methods in AE research (Merriam, 2009). Both of the above paradigms focus on the emancipation and empowerment of disadvantaged groups. In addition, both of these paradigms blur the distinction between theory and praxis (as opposed to positivism, where there is a much greater delineation between theory and praxis). This emphasis on the closeness between theory and praxis resonates with many AE scholars and practitioners who are interested in not only gaining knowledge about the world around us, but also using that knowledge to effect a betterment of social conditions (Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997).

Constructivism and Adult Learning

Another putative influence of postmodernism on AE is the emergence of constructivism as the regnant paradigm in adult learning. At the outset, though, I want to make it clear that constructivism (whose basic tenets are explained below) as a learning theory (some might call it a philosophy) developed independently of postmodernism; however, I would contend that constructivism's influence on AE has been augmented by the overall postmodern "turn" of the field of AE (that I have documented elsewhere in this paper).

During the 1960s and 1970s, behaviourism was the dominant paradigm in the field of education. Behaviorism advocates a teacher-centered curriculum with the ultimate goal being to produce a change in observable behaviour of the learner (reinforcement, in the form of the teacher's feedback to the learner's performance, would enable the learner to modify his or her future behaviour to whatever is deemed desirable by the teacher) (Alberto & Troutman, 2003; Driscoll, 2000; Mayer, 2003; Parkay & Hass, 2000).

A behaviorist curriculum posits that a learner's mind is like a blank slate or chamber into which knowledge (that is desirable to be taught) can be poured in – and the primary responsibility in doing so lies solely with the teacher. In this scenario, the teacher is the primary (and only active) instigator of the knowledge transmission process. The learner, on the other hand, plays a rather mechanical and relatively inert role (that of a recipient of knowledge) in the entire learning process (Mayer, 2003; Parkay & Hass, 2000).

During the 1980s, the tide started to shift against behaviorism. This shift was precipitated by the emergence of constructivism. Constructivism advocates a learner-centered curriculum where learners are treated as active participants in the learning process. Constructivism also posits that learners construct their own version of knowledge – the teacher in such a scenario plays the role of a facilitator (Kincheloe, 2005; Tobias & Duffy, 2009).

Constructivism also believes that optimal learning takes place when students are allowed to collaborate with their peers, to set their own learning goals (and the mode of attaining them), and to critically reflect

on their learning processes and experiences. Constructivism, by encouraging an independent learning spirit, helps learners become critical thinkers and effective problem-solvers (Savery & Duffy, 1995).

Constructivism has become a buzz word in current academia. Educators at all levels of academia (K-12, college, post-graduate, etc.) are encouraged to make the transition from a teacher-centered to a more learner-centered curriculum (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). Of course, the constructivist “invasion” of education (including AE) should not be construed to mean that behaviorism has become a relic of the past. Behaviorist practices, like the administering of quizzes and tests and the presence of teacher-designed structured curricula in academia (at all levels), are a constant reminder that the influence of behaviorism will be here with us for the foreseeable future.

Constructivism has also influenced some AE-specific learning contexts also. Kolb (1984)’s experiential learning model tries to explain how different individuals learn from their real-life experiences via reflecting on those experiences. Likewise, Boud and Walker (1990) developed another model of experiential learning that looks at how a learner’s self-reflective activities in conjunction with his or her background, past life history, preferred learning strategies, and affective state helps him or her learn from real-life experiences.

In addition, Schon’s (1987) description of a “reflective” practitioner and how he or she can, through self-reflection and learning, thrive in a complex and unpredictable workplace environment borrows ideas from the basic tenets of constructivism. Likewise, Mezirow’s (1991) work on transformative learning (based on an individual’s real-life experiences and his or her critical reflections on those experiences) has pronounced constructivist leanings.

All the above models are based on the idea that an individual actively constructs knowledge on his or her own by carrying out self-reflective activities. This idea of an individual constructing knowledge, instead of being force-fed knowledge by a teacher, is one of the most fundamental tenets of constructivism and we can thus discern constructivism’s influence on the genesis of these various adult learning models.

So what connection does the rise of postmodernism have to do with

the rise of constructivism? Postmodernism's advocacy of a sceptical and critical attitude toward all stated knowledge claims is reflected in constructivism's rejection of the teacher as a source of infallible knowledge. Thus we see that constructivism encourages learners not to blindly accept what they are being fed, but to construct knowledge for themselves through independent effort and critical reflection.

Another similarity between postmodernism and constructivism has to do with the issue of power and knowledge construction and consumption. In behaviorism, the teacher is regarded as the be all and end all of all knowledge – the learner is a docile receptacle of the knowledge imparted by the teacher. Constructivism, on the other hand, rejects the elevated status of the teacher as the sole provider of knowledge. In constructivist pedagogy, the learner is put on an equal footing with the teacher – the teacher might act as a guide of the instructional activities in the classroom, but the learner is the independent knowledge maker (or constructor) and he or she is the ultimate arbiter of what knowledge (and in what form) he or she accepts as his or her own self-constructed knowledge. Thus, the “downgrading” of the teacher's status in constructivism has strong similarities to postmodernism's rejection of socially powerful individuals as the principal providers of knowledge in society.

Conclusion

This paper set out as its goal exploring the possible linkages that exist between postmodernism and AE theory and praxis. In order to attain the above goal, I started by describing the basic tenets of postmodernism. I also thought that it was apropos to discuss the origins of postmodernism and, especially, its links to modernism.

I then discussed six specific instances or aspects of AE that have been influenced by postmodernism, including the encouragement of a skeptical and critical outlook, the advocacy of deconstruction and the reinterpretation of ideas and texts, a field-wide acknowledgement of the pivotal importance of power in all knowledge-related activities (both creation and consumption), the encouragement of anti-foundationalism, anti-scientism, and the embracing of alternate ways of knowing (like the family of feminist epistemologies), the rise in popularity of non-

positivistic qualitative research methodologies, and the current influence of constructivism on educational thought and praxis -- including constructivism's clear-cut influence on specific adult learning models, like those of Kolb (1984), Boud and Walker (1990), Schon (1987), and Mezirow (1991) (as discussed previously). I believe the evidence shows that there is sufficient justification to make the claim that postmodern thought has had strong influence on the field of AE, both in terms of theory and praxis (albeit, the influence is more pronounced on some aspects of AE as opposed to others).

What can we expect of postmodernism's influence on AE in the future? I think that postmodernism will continue to influence the field of AE for years to come. There may be small pockets of resistance to postmodernism's expansion of its influence on AE (as, for example, some AE and other educational researchers continuing to disparage qualitative research methods as not being scientific or methodologically rigorous); however, in an overall sense, I believe that postmodernism will continue to exert its quite conspicuous influence on AE theory and praxis for the foreseeable future.

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