# Feminine/Feminist: A Poststructural Reading of Relational Learning in Women's Social Action Organizations

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**Abstract:** This paper reports on research with 8 board members and 8 directors of women's social action organizations. A poststructural reading of the data gives voice to an under theorized aspect of humanist relational learning in women's organizations and makes visible the power-relationships. It explores women's learned practices of resistance, and offers a paradoxical view of relational learning on social action that attends to the ethic of care as well as to power relations.

The intersection of the feminine/feminist signifier in women's social action organizations risks reifying stereotypic feminine learning traits: relational (Fletcher, 1998), caring and connected (Belenky et al., 1986), and inclusive (MacKeracher,1996). These signifiers of women's learning and organization have been valorized in internal discourse, public perception, and some adult education and feminist theory, leading to an almost simplified portrayal of women's learning as homogenous, uncomplicated, and harmonious (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). They reinforce the classical organizational distinction of either collectivist (female) or bureaucratic (male) institutions (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979), resulting in a portrait of women's learning in these organizations as removed from disputation, division, and discord. To relieve it of some of its burden of harmony, this study brings a Foucauldian (1977, 1980) poststructural approach to women's relational learning in social action organizations, by focusing on women in women's organizations rather than women in men's organizations.

The organisations in this study are nonprofits, which are often caricatured as less organizationally strong, yet friendly alternatives to profit-making organizations. The somewhat scant attention to women in nonprofit organizations, with some exceptions (Bordt, 1997; Ferree & Martin, 1995), exacerbates the knowledge vacuum and further marginalizes and essentializes the learning relationships of women who work and volunteer in them. Given that such organizations are the sites of activism and adult education, as well as home to varied social movements, both historically (Hull House) and at present (DAWN), adult educators can benefit from a closer look at their practice.

## Method/Methodological Underpinnings

This study focussed on women's social action organizations in eastern Canada, interviewing 8 directors and assistant directors (minimally paid) and 8 board members (volunteers) to explore the complicated and often contradictory ways in which they govern and learn, as well as negotiate the structure and culture of their own organizations, which include members and funding bodies. The organizations are feminist in orientation and range from women's centers, anti-violence agencies, transition houses for victims of violence, to women's counseling services. The women interviewed range in age from 25-60 and have been involved from a minimum of 1 year to a maximum of 25 years (the median length of involvement was 5 years). Four of the board members are no longer serving on the board but are still attached to the organization. Of the 16 interviews, 4 were done by email, 4 in person, and 8 by telephone. The research asks if the feminine signifiers are relevant and if the internal learning and leading strategies are predominantly collectivist (feminist) or bureaucratic (masculinist) (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). The researcher explicates the complex and often ambiguous nature of the relating and learning of women in social-action organizations.

**Theoretical Framing**

The theoretical framing of this inquiry occurs at the intersection of two frames of thought, the first of which is a feminist reading of the literature on nonprofit organizations and learning, which is generally masculinist (Block &Rosenberg, 2002), funding-focused and governance- driven. The feminist reading suggests that leadership by males and females differs and yet, gender stereotypes do not apply. The second theoretical underpinning is poststructualism, with its emphasis on the nexus of knowledge, discourse and power. Poststructuralism positions the study as a challenge to everyday readings of women's nonprofit organizations as united in voice and cause, as charity driven, and uncritically caring. Rather than focus on a list of gender differences, poststructuralism "informs an analysis of how women experience and express shifting identities that reflect multiple social influences" (Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Ryan, 2001).

Although it is not intended to speak for all women, the dominant humanistic relational learning theory in adult education (Gilligan, 1982; MacKeracher, 1996) stands as an alternative to the masculine bias in many theories of growth and intellect. Yet, much of relational theory is premised on the notion that women grow and develop best in connection and that this will foster empathy, vulnerability, and participation. Guided by these frameworks, the researcher attempts to complicate the learning relationships of women in nonprofit social action situations by focusing on the practices and actions of the women in these organizations that precede and determine the printed texts.

**Reading the Data**
**Socio-Economic Context**

The geographic location on the east coast of Canada, a region known for chronic unemployment, factored into the projects the women's organizations in this study choose to pursue, often issues of housing, poverty and under funding by government. Lobbying for a piece of the pie is a particular challenge for these women's organizations causing major impediments to long-term planning. One board member commented on the culture of the women's organization that she was involved in, noting that with regard to funding there was:

> not a lot of room for overtime pay, a lot of restrictions because women put in too much and sometimes don't get paid money. This causes some friction in that they expect others to do the same thing. Then you're accused of being less. There is an underlying belief among male-dominated government funders that women's organizations need less money because women will pick up the slack. This overwork and underpay can cause jealousy, feeling unequal, and that you are being treated differently. Our experience at the [women's organization] was that we left exhausted. Even the staff were jaded, beaten down by the system. Some women guilt others into taking on things that they cannot handle nor do they want to handle. They can 'guilt' women into volunteering, even to self-detriment-financial and stress-wise," said another board member. Yet, there is a consistent note of optimism in the women's voices, affected to a strong degree by their commitment to the organization, which in some cases has been for more than 25 years. Power, exercised here in the form of guilt, produced a desire in this board member to directly acknowledge the guilt trips and to actively resist them by saying no. The resistance in this female board member was formed precisely at the point where power was exercised by another (Brookfield, 2001).

## Women's Causes and Feminist Leanings

All the women's organizations supposedly had feminist leanings including justice and structural change, as well as the building of supportive networks of women. Yet, the degree of commitment was sometimes hard to read. There is a reality, as one director pointed out, that if "work comes up at a women's center [in this rural area], what will happen is that many women (feminist or not) will apply which has implications for who is involved in the center." Since as one director said, "We're the only game in town," there are conflicting understandings of the organization even among members.

One participant who had few feminist leanings talked about how she felt about the political focus of the board: "Because feminism is to the heart of many women's lives of those who are involved in this association, many of the women who are involved are so heavy– they don't have simple discussions—these women are so heavy. Their talk polarized us versus them. Anyone who doesn't agree with them is the wrong person." She perceived feminist issues to be "heavy." Consequently, in one of the feminist organizations, the board did not broach reproductive rights since this was a sensitive subject locally, in effect diminishing the feminist orientation of the organization. Yet, as a board member put it, she had "learned to choose your battles," something that her own role models in larger centers rarely had to do. Her capacity to stand back and to see that the power exercised by other women in the organization served to support the status quo, was an exercise of her own power, and a strategic way of using silence to dilute theirs. In a Foucauldian sense, she was able to negotiate the conflicted terrain by illuminating, if only for herself, the hidden ways that the others (in some cases, nonfeminists) resisted change.

Another board member observed that she had a "conflicted attitude to feminism. I read a lot about feminism and often appreciate feminist theory; I do not see it in practice by self-identified feminists. I have been in some situations where well known feminists treat new people to the field, other researchers on women's issues, in very uncollegial, unsupportive ways." Her ability to resist the binary of feminists and nonfeminists, and to break down the walls that separate them, is poststructuralism in action (Ryan, 2001).

## Resolution and Conflict

Of note is how the various women perceived the atmosphere of the organization, especially when it came to resolution of conflict. The directors, by and large, saw themselves as problem solvers who describe the resolution of conflict in a relational way—"we talk it out and we discuss issues when they come up." That sometimes makes women's organizations challenging places because there is an upfrontness about problems and a seemingly endless willingness to talk things through. The production of this regime of truth about women as relational learners is producing two connected yet contradictory effects: on the one hand, it reinforces the power of feminism and of women having voice, yet on the other hand it produces a truth effect that women are essentially relational. The latter universalizes the experience of women and learning, and further contributes to women's isolation and separateness. Yet, not all board members share the view that conflict is negotiated and decisions are consensual. Most would say there is consensus or as one woman put it, we "agree to disagree sometimes." On occasion women's organizations choose not to make a policy since it will be too divisive, "such as whether men can participate or not."

It is around issues of conflict and discussion that relational learning as an identity for women's organizations is challenged most. The universal notion of women agreeing to disagree is in contrast with the resistances that some members name. One board member, for instance, has

decided not to participate in board meetings any longer because the organization has "become top down." Her resistance took the form of leaving –silencing herself. Another women remembered a director saying, "You the board are my boss," which was seen by the board member as "disingenuous." While she "admired the work the staff does," she is under no illusion that the board had any great influence: "We, as a board, support, not direct, staff." With the use of the dominant discourse of consensus, sharing, and collegiality, a regime of truth was produced that served to further structures of power, albeit in this case a power that produced services (potentially not the most effective services) for community women.

There is a contradiction built into feminist organizations. Whereas relational learning and feminism are about supporting voice, as one board member notes, "If you allow people to have their say, it can't be warm and fuzzy." And, as she points out, "At my age, I don't want warm and fuzzy; I want honesty." This statement resists the dominant discourse in feminist organizations ("can't we all get along?") and "the judges of normality" (Foucault, 1977, p. 304) who want things to be connected in women's organizations. This participant resists by saying that warm and fuzzy is neither desirable nor a goal for her.

Yet, it must be said that although the discourses of the bureaucratic organization ("you the board are my boss") and feminism ("we support staff") are contradictory, women's strength in organizations is their ability to negotiate this binary. As Foucault (1980) notes, "Each society has its regime of truth … that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true" (p. 133). This research shows that two discourses can in fact operate as parallel regimes of truth.

## Organizational Structures

Feminist scholars have long held ideal notions of what feminist organizations ought to look like—relational, and supportive of voice and difference. In reality, as one director notes, "The organization is hierarchical by virtue of having an executive director and a board of directors." A board member puts it this way: "So then you have feminists who want flat organizations but it's so entrenched in the whole organization it creates more conflict you are trying to oppose patriarchy within confines of patriarchal organization." This participant pointed out that after 4 years of being a board member she now understood that while everyone was trying to operate under feminist principles (participatory decision making, consensus) there are real life demands of funders that the organization be hierarchical, accountable, and adhere to governmental models of organization.

Yet, the rhetoric or regime of truth of these organizations being a home for all members continues. A prime example is the informal way in which some of the board meetings operate. A participant put it this way, "Informal sharing would intimidate women who were embarrassed they didn't know….We would sit in a circle and share how we were and I was frightened to death." This speaks to the disciplinary power of the circle (Brookfield, 2001) and the ways that the dominant and liberal discourse of a supposedly egalitarian structure actually served as an instrument of surveillance, a micro-practice of disciplinary power. Sometimes the larger goals of funding, creating work, and providing support for women in crises took most of the staff time. So, some administrative matters such as valuing volunteer time, were neglected.  One board member remembered her experience: "[It was] easier to do it casual style and also people who were there go ahead and do it. Couple of times when I was assigned a task, I came to the organization and it was already done." The needs of clients, board members, staff and leaders sometimes conflicted, leaving at least one group frustrated and interpreting informality as lack of respect. This seemingly benign exercise of power by the staff in getting things done

expeditiously resulted in an unpredictable case of exclusion and in turn a greater desire on the part of the board member to be heard. Yet, in naming the experience she resisted "the grip it has on" her (Foucault, 1977, p. 26).

Although Bordt (1997) argues that feminist principles and bureaucracy are not incompatible (p. 80), they do create some tensions, as the interviews point out. In these organizations it would seem that the leaders had an ability to navigate contradictory discourses and to model that for others in the organization. This produced the effect of a power-conscious relational learning that moved members to action.

## Learning in the Organization

One of the goals of a feminist organization is to foster the lifelong learning and development of women, especially in the area of feminism(s). Significantly, more than half of the 16 participants indicated that their learning about feminist organizations occurred informally and incidentally. Very few of the women reported having any formal study in feminism. They learned by watching the leaders, participating in meetings, organizing events for women and working with other members. Board members report a considerable amount of learning in "relation to personnel issues; budgeting…. negotiation skills, finances, and fundraising." One board member noted that her learning came through dealing with staffing issues, from finding out that sometimes there is conflict and not everyone wants to negotiate difference. Yet, she pointed out that they were able to work through the issues because "it was all women on the board; women are less inclined to grandstand or to engage in impression management." Relational learning in feminist organizations has been subjected to truth rules, in a Foucauldian sense, about how feminist organizations ought to be, rules that have arisen in women's efforts to define and support themselves, and also in their effort to effect social change. Yet, in practice, relational learning for women was influenced by two seemingly contradictory regimes of truth—relational and bureaucratic. The women in this study negotiated both regimes at once.

## Implications of the Findings

Adult education has long been attentive to the dynamics of complex power relationships (Brookfield, 2001; Cervero & Wilson, 2000), and to the gendered nature of teaching and learning relationships (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Yet, some essentialist, universalizing, and stereotypical readings of women's learning and relating remain. This study attempted to resist these readings by explicating the intersection of power, gender, and relational learning in women's organizations, from a feminist and poststructural perspective. By probing these intersections, the research contributes to our field's research on women, learning, and social activism.

The data show that these women's nonprofits are complex, multivalent organizations in which the relational learning-in-practice serves as a critique to relational learning- in- theory, which ignores power relations. Intricacies of power, authority, and discord factor into the everyday discourse of the organizations, regardless of gender of participants or leaders. Yet, in women's nonprofits there is an articulated attempt to surface these tensions and to engage in an oftentimes conflictual discourse, which does not always lead to harmony and caring. In fact, it allows two regimes of truth to be operative at once. The learning relationships are characterized by a continuous and careful attempt to negotiate the nexus of power, knowledge and ability among leaders, workers, funders, and clients.

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