Doing cross cultural research in adult education:
Methodological and epistemological considerations

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Abstract: While doing cross cultural research is not new, the growing acknowledgement of the perils of crossing cultures unconsciously is gaining support and calling for change. This paper examines some methodical and epistemological considerations of doing cross cultural qualitative research in adult education. Reliance on partial knowledge and middle class cultural and political bias point to the need within the field for critical reflection on how and why emperical realities are studied in the ways that they are and at the same time require rethinking and revision of traditional research methods while designing new methods of inquiry.

Introduction

Doing cross cultural research in adult education is inherently problematic because of the rich diversity of populations engaged in adult practice and programs. In many cases there are social, political, economic, gender and other cultural differences between the researcher and the subjects which necessitates a need to understand varying and contingent standpoints in order to improve practice and increase effectiveness and relevancy.

This critique focuses on qualitative research methodology as I am familiar with it through my practice and experiences conducting ethnography, participant observations, and developing grounded theory. In attempting to understand others, I am interested in enhancing an understanding of the normality of pluralism and cultural difference as a shared human experience.

Conducting cross cultural research is not new. What is new is the growing acknowledgement of the perils of crossing cultures unconsciously. Some issues are a matter of gaining certain sensitivities while other concerns are more cognitive and require critical reflection or scrutiny. Matters of methodology and epistemology are considered here as they impact various stages of cross cultural research from design to analysis to reporting.

Adult Education Research Limitations

The need to critically examine cross cultural research is supported by two obvious limitations of both historical and contemporary research. First, adult education theory and practice has for too long relied on partial knowledge (Minnich, 1990) from privileged perspectives using scientific notions of universal reason in hopes of understanding American society. What, in fact, this restricted and restricting view does is to mask and promote exclusive traditions of what is called objective knowledge. Reliance on this partial, and so-called objective, knowledge has been at the expense of silencing voices of difference which would challenge what is known in the mainstream. Poster (1989) suggests that the "...art of appropriating the universal was the main business of the Enlightenment. The philosophies were master impressionists whose collective textual voice ventriloquized that of humanity but spoke for a particular social class" (p. 31) and gender.

Secondly, an unusually strong cultural and political bias toward middle class values has been promoted within adult education. Stanfield (1993) suggests this bias is rooted in what he calls "societal folk beliefs" (p.4). Folk beliefs, or folk wisdom, are dogma derived through ideological bias despite empirical evidence to the contrary. One such belief is the liberal notion that eventually all African Americans, or other marginalized groups for that matter, will assimilate. Such folk notions explain away difference in much the same way that "controlling for race" in quantitative studies wipes out any sense or recognition of the human element behind the numerical cases. For various reasons, people continue to hold onto biased ideological knowledge in theory and practice.

These limitations, as well as others, point to the need within the field of adult education for critical reflection on how and why empirical realities are studied in the ways that they are in order to both enlarge the partial knowledge currently available to us and to neutralize the middle class cultural and political bias. As we rethink and revise traditional methods and design new methods of collecting data and interpreting what is found, we will begin to see matters as they are. The tools used, however, need to be relevant to cross cultural projects in order to collect data that provides adequate explanations for multiple dimensions of culture and difference.

Existing theory

There have been calls within strands of social science research (Stanfield, 1993; Andersen, 1993;), feminist inquiry (Reinharz, 1992; Lather, 1991; hooks, 1984, Zambrana, 1988), educational critical theory (Giroux, 1992; Horsman, 1990) and postmodernism (Kellner, 1989; Fraser, 1990) for not only the recognition of difference but the significance of difference in illuminating everyday life, across race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality to compare and evaluate social policy and to generate new theory that accounts for new worldviews.

Cultural theorists provide solid theoretical foundations for extending legitimization of knowledge to nondominant groups. They call for a reexamination of meaning, recognizing variant communal and individual standards (Facio, 1993), a debate over ethnocentrism versus cultural relativism (Reinharz, 1992; Minh-ha, 1989; Pai, 1990) and an activism that widens the circle of inclusiveness. These texts and many others speak to the importance of constructing and building upon authentic location-based theory and practice which challenges while at the same time moves beyond the dominant authority.

For example, in Kellner's critique of postmodern, or post-industrial, society he states that old theories of technological rationality and one-dimensional society are no longer useful conceptual frameworks for analyzing dynamics of contemporary capitalist societies. He calls for more multidimensional approaches grounded in dialectical cultural theory and ideological critique with a practical intent to understand the struggles of the present age and to "increase the boundaries and extent of democracy" (p. 226). Fraser (1990) suggests there is a "struggle over needs" between those of the dominant culture and the oppressed and excluded. She shifts our attention away from talk about "needs" to "discourses about needs" stating that "thin theories of needs" only concern themselves with whether predefined needs will or will not be met. Consequently, people's needs are taken as simply given and unproblematic. Additionally, such theories assume it doesn't matter who interprets the needs in question, they take for granted that dominant forms of public discourse for interpreting needs are fair and adequate, and they fail to problematize the "institutional and social logic of processes of needs interpretation" (p.164) thus neglecting important political questions. Horsman (1990) agrees and contends that the dominant discourse, supported by legitimate research studies, encourages blind and systematic planning of programs for women who are defined "illiterate" without taking into consideration their self identified needs based on their differing economic and social locations.

At the site of feminist inquiry, much of the recent feminist scholarship merely presents new stereotypes of women's roles rather than seriously addressing how historical and social structural differences construct a different range of options and choices for women. Zambrana (1988) warns "mainstream scholarship has not provided useful paradigms for understanding Latina women" (p.138) "thus the analysis of Latina women needs to emerge from a description of their own experiences. Perhaps there will be many similarities with majority culture women based on gender alone. We must cease, however, making assumptions related to personal and institutional variables that have repeatedly been proven erroneous" (p.144). A harsher critique of white women's research efforts is made by hooks (1984). She states "even though they [white women] may be sincerely concerned about racism, their methodology suggests they are not yet free of the type of paternalism endemic to white supremacist ideology (p.26-27). This accusation continues today. Reinharz (1992), as a feminist theorist, feels it is her responsibility to learn as much as possible about racial diversity and interracial attempts at mutual understanding to avoid feeding into the type of research hooks rejects.

Standpoint theorists (for instance, feminist and critical theorists) understand that researchers and their subjects are located in specific social-historical settings. Minority group members have insights about the interpretations of their experiences that are likely different from those generated by majority group scholars. Andersen (1993) states "majority group scholars can develop and utilize tensions in their own cultural identities to enable them to see different aspects of minority experiences and to examine critically majority experiences and beliefs" (p. 43). Also concerned about variant standards of meaning, Facio (1993) recommends constructing feasible approaches to inquiry and analysis determined by the community's norms, values, and standards" in order to extract as much information as possible about the construction of everyday life.

Conceptual Constructs and Their Relationships

In an effort to engage in Minnich's challenge of "undoing traditional authority" (1990, p.148) and widen the circle of inclusiveness, I am particularly interested in methodological categories of question framing, rules of procedure and evidence, data reliability, researcher as learner and building rapport; and with epistemological questions of location, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, translation, representation, identity formation and group ethos. Embedded within each set of concerns are personal dynamics of ethics and human dignity. Each construct contains numerous dilemmas which must be contended with as one enters into research, makes decisions, and implements various stages of the research process. Selected issues will be discussed below.

For example, question framing suggests there are recommended or preferred, even required, rules of procedure and evidence while at the same time suggesting a privileging of such rules and preferences. What is also implied, moreover, is that how we frame questions will determine what evidence we can actually hope to document. Implicating all of these concerns, Lather (1990) struggles with questions of "to what extent does method privilege findings? What does it mean to recognize the limits of exactitude and certainty" (p. 124). To these questions one can add, whose knowledge counts? How are topics to be constructed? How can we recover unarticulated experiences through interviewing and participant observation? Theory is too often used to protect us from the awesome complexity of the world. Rather data allowed to generate propositions in a dialectical manner where the researcher engages with alternative frames of reference suggested by the study participants promises to be richer and more authentic.

No longer are questions of reliability grounded in theoretical arguments of textual authority. Rather more pragmatic and personal rationales are called for. Thus questions of data reliability warrant an examination of concerns about "distance" between the researcher and the subjects. Subjective data can be tremendously enriched by building rapport with study participants, by using words in interviewing that are familiar, by listening "around and beyond words" (DeVault, 1990, p. 101), in other words, getting close to those we hope to understand. In transcribing and writing up narrative, the practice of smoothing out respondents language often does little more than obscure the power of actual, often puzzling complex language. Issues of distance, or rather closeness, to study participants requires getting to know as much as possible about cross cultural difference and to make attempts at mutual understanding at the local level.

Regarding epistemological issues, the creation of knowledge and how it is we come to know what we know are in question. In fact, as Minnich (1990) states "by the time we reach the level of epistemology, what began as a limited particular set of excluding assumptions has been raised to the status of principles for knowing, of knowledge itself" (1972). Power, or more accurately networks of power, are at stake here. Epistemological questions challenge us to be self-conscious.

Specifically, translation issues move beyond the obvious need for researchers to present study participants as authentically as possible or the contemporary stance of researcher as meaning maker who draws upon his/her own experiences, knowledge, theory, and data. Translation issues, at a deeper structural level, concern the operational recognition of the subjective lens that researchers filter information through thus calling into question the language and discourse of those who not only translate experiences and perceptions of others but also reproduce ethnocentrism with dominant cultural bias or obsolete theory. Translation is never perfect. Each

of us has unique viewpoints based on our origins of race, ethnicity, class, and gender, plus experiences gained due to being in these socially constructed categories.

Issues of representation squarely focus on what and who is real, what and who is valuable. Even when we "allow" Others to speak, when we talk for or about them we are taking over their voice. At the stage of research reporting we speak of authoring lives. It becomes extremely important to know whose voice is being promoted and heard, the researcher or the subject. Often, the author's voice comes through even when attempts are made to create space for the subject, in other words, "we are hearing two voices in one, or more precisely, one voice through another" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1989, p. 131) unless a multiplicity of voices is presented, each distinct as her/his own. What is called for here is a deconstruction of literary devices along with the deconstruction of textual authority and meaning making.

Ethical concerns regarding differences between researcher and subjects hinge on power relations; how power relations are acknowledged and managed, the stereotyping of dominant and subordinate positions within structuring relations, the cultural and political nature of dominant and subordinate positions, and the politics and sociology of exclusion and marginalization in relations. Smart (1983) encourages certain "methodological precautions" concerning the form, level, effect, direction and ideology of power. He calls for an analysis of power from a micro-level, ascending rather than descending, in other words, how techniques and mechanisms of power are appropriated at the level of everyday life rather than at "the summit of the social order" (p. 83) and its diffusion downward. What role do we as researchers play in this diffusion process?

The interaction of these methodological and epistemological concerns within the cross cultural paradigm exposes the criticality of border crossings where difference continues to be politically charged rather than a shared experience.

Basis for Proposed Theoretical Development

Those doing qualitative research are opening up in new ways to accommodate the experimentation of cross cultural inquiry. If this research is to clearly represent cultural differences within human pluralism, and at the same time be accepted into the academic discourse, then researchers need to be more cognizant that questions of methodology, epistemology and ethics need to be decided for only then can all voices get an equal hearing and only then can we deal with reality as it is. Questions of translation, question framing, subjectivity, identity formation and group ethos as well as the others mentioned above require reflection, debate, and explicit acknowledgement, which is more and more making its way into the reporting of cross cultural, and other forms of qualitative, research.

The more I do cross cultural research the more acutely aware I am of the significance of the methodological and epistemological questions I raise here. As Minh-ha says "the understanding of difference is a shared responsibility, which requires a minimum of willingness to reach out to the unknown" (1989, p.85). Those concerned with the human element in adult education practice will be held accountable by the diverse groups of color, women, gays and lesbians, and working and lower class individuals of all color groups.

Significance to Adult Education Practice

The prevailing anxieties of social change in the areas of political, economic, cultural and social arenas require theorists and practioners of adult education to critically reflect upon the equally shifting role of adult education in the United States. If we are to truly contribute to effective practice, responding to diverse and dynamic groups, we must examine our beliefs and practices of research to be truly relevant and authentic in our conclusions.

Resources

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