

An exploratory study of the social and personal dynamics that deter underserved women from participating in adult education activities.

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Abstract: This study explored the social and personal dynamics that deter underserved women from participating in formal adult education. From a grounded theory perspective, an inductive analysis revealed four integrated categories of deterrents that describe factors leading to nonparticipation (a) preadulthood factors; (b) patterns of nonsupport in adulthood; (c) conventional deterrents; and, (d) lack of "voice" in adulthood.

Introduction

The primary purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the dynamics that influence underserved women's decision not to participate in educational activities. Building on previous research, limiting the population to underserved women, and employing the grounded theory approach to researching the topic, allowed us to discover relevant data categories and put them together in new ways. Four dominant categories emerged. Alone, each category provided insights about participation and nonparticipation, but by examining their interaction and relationships, new theory developed.

Previous Research

Several theoretical perspectives and studies framed this research. First are those that examined the relationship between processes occurring across the life span and participation in adult education (Cervero & Kirkpatrick, 1990; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). Other bodies of literature address deterrents to participation for adults in general, for underserved populations, and for women in particular. This literature includes several studies of deterrents to participation (a) in Adult Basic Education and literacy education (Beder, 1990; Hayes, 1988; Hayes & Darkenwald, 1988; Ziegahn, 1992); (b) of women in work-related educational activities (Blais, Duquette, & Painchaud, 1989); and, (c) in specific occupations or in the general adult population (Scanlan & Darkenwald, 1984; Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985). Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's (1986) research on the cognitive development of women also has promise for helping us understand participation as it relates to women. Their five perspectives from which women view the world--silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural

knowledge, constructed knowledge--give hints of the cognitive and emotional deterrents women must overcome to participate.

Method

While informed by previous research and theory, a grounded theory approach was employed in which subjects were allowed to tell their "story" so that themes and relationships among them could emerge from the data. Interviews were conducted with thirteen nonparticipating women, who were from 18-36 years old, had not earned a high school diploma or equivalent, had dependent children, and lived in a rural Midwestern town.

The interview guide was loosely based on Hayes and Darkenwald's (1988) "Deterrents to Participation Scale--Low Literate." However, questions were not limited to those in the guide. New questions evolved through the interview process that allowed the women to express themselves while at the same time focusing their thoughts. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Five African-American and eight white women participated in this study. The women had an average of two children, seven were married, three lived with significant others, and three were single. Six of the women had full-time employment. The interview process stopped after 13 subjects because data categories reached saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Data analysis procedures adhered to those recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990). By asking questions, repeatedly validating the relationships and patterns against the data, and referring to prior research to verify and support the findings, several persistent themes surfaced allowing conclusions to evolve (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Trustworthiness of data was assured through keeping field notes and having one other person analyze the data.

Findings

Through extensive examination of the data using grounded theory procedures, four recurring themes emerged from the data: preadult factors, support during adulthood, conventional deterrents, and women's ways of knowing. Although these findings were not new in and of themselves, the product of their interaction either influenced or became deterrents to women's participation.

Preadult Factors

A shortcoming in the research to understanding participation in adult education is a lack of focus on factors from a person's preadult life and how these factors influence the likelihood of participating in their adult years. Darkenwald & Merriam's Psychosocial Interaction Model (1982) and Cervero & Kirkpatrick's work (1990) acknowledged the importance of preadult factors and their significance in explaining adult participation in educational activities. When examining these women's preadult years, several factors emerged as influencing their future

educational decisions. First, schooling related issues such as the father's educational attainment, amount and quality of preparatory education, type of high school program in which the students were enrolled, and past educational experiences were associated with predicting participation as adults. Secondly, socioeconomic forces during preadulthood influenced participation. Thirdly, a pregnancy in the preadult years was a primary reason the women in this study dropped out of school. Lastly, during the women's preadult years, their level of family support for education encouraged or discouraged future learning activities.

Adult Support System

An influence that some women in this study experienced was not only a lack of support from their parents while growing up, but they also faced nonsupport in adult relationships and from their own children. Nonsupport in adulthood was manifested by lack of both verbal and actual support or by rhetorical support without actions to back up the rhetoric. This lack of support was often an insurmountable deterrent to participation for the women in this study. Only a few women were found to live in an interpersonal environment that actually encouraged and supported them. As will be noted later, support or lack thereof was found to be related to the factor of "voice."

Conventional Deterrents

Several conventional deterrents to participation were identified for the women in this study. Although reported individually below, looking at these deterrents in isolation was impossible (Beder, 1990; Hayes, 1988; Scanlan & Darkenwald 1984; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). Based on the findings of the current study, a woman's decision not to participate is due to the effects of multiple conventional deterrents within her life context. For example, some of the women were deterred by child care responsibilities. Of the 12 women who expressed interest in returning to ABE or vocational programs, six cited lack of child care as their number one reason for not attending. Time was a factor as well. Two meanings of time surfaced from the data: (a) lack of time, and (b) being out of time. In the latter case, several women, even in their 30s, had a deep-seated feeling that they had "run out of time" to pursue further education. Finally, four women explicitly named lack of information as a barrier to participation.

Women's Lack of "Voice"

At the heart of nonparticipation lies a "deterrent" so deeply embedded in some women that no theory can fully capture its meaning. The way a woman feels about herself, her self-esteem and self confidence, and the way she can express herself are significant elements in her decision about whether to participate in adult education. For the women in this study, the concept of lack of "voice" is a crucial recurring theme that comes closest to capturing the meaning that the

women communicated (Freeman & Coll, 1991). Women's Ways of Knowing (Belenky et al., 1986) provides a means to examine the different perspectives from which women know and understand their world.

Silent Women: Belenky, et al. (1986) have identified five ways of women's knowing. Each category sits on a continuum with silence on the left end, with the woman being voiceless, to constructed knowledge on the right, where the woman values learning and has a well-developed voice. Silent women display "unquestionable submission to commands of authority," (Belenky et al., p. 28), have "chaotic and unpredictable" families (Belenky, et al., p. 159), grow up in isolation, and feel "deaf and dumb" (Belenky et al., p.24). Silent women feel they should "devote themselves to the care and empowerment of others while remaining selfless" (Belenky, et al., p. 46). Seven out of the 13 women were classified as silent at least at some point in their lives.

Subjective Knowers: Five women in this study moved through received knowledge where they had little confidence in their ability to speak, toward being subjective knowers who were discovering their inner voice. Women's ability to understand and communicate knowledge is intricately linked to the relationships in which they are involved (Belenky, et al., 1986). At the point of subjective knowledge on the continuum, the women had discovered their inner voice. For those who started silent, their self-esteem is now healing and they are becoming more confident in themselves (Belenky, et al., 1986).

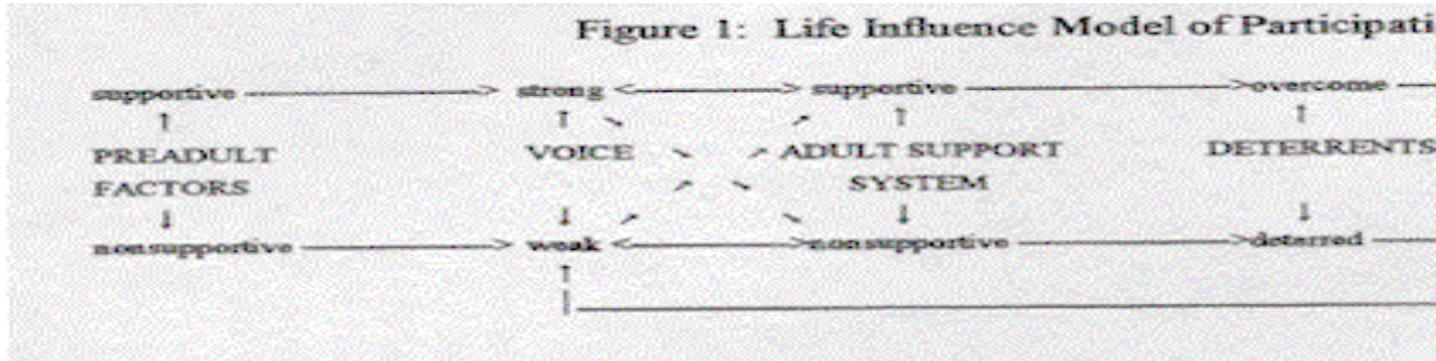
Satisfaction with Life: The degree of satisfaction a woman feels in her life was found to relate to the strength of her voice. Of the 13 women interviewed, most expressed a degree of dissatisfaction with their lives. Many of their hopes were put on hold because they lacked opportunity, motivation, or strength to pursue their goals.

Hope for a Better Life for Children: Beyond preadult factors and deterrents to participation is a desire so universal that it was heard in 100% of the interviews. The women in this study, regardless of ethnicity or age, hoped for their children's lives to be better than their own. Benseman (1989) identified a typology of nonparticipants, "Low-Interest, Schooling-Oriented Abstainers," that captured the behavior of 92% of the women in the current study. Although these women aspired for a better life for their children, many had lost hope for themselves. As will be demonstrated later, "hope for children, none for self" was found to be related to women's way of knowing. Consequently, those women who hoped for their children to succeed educationally, but had lost hope for themselves, were also those who had a weak voice.

Discussion

Although the themes detailed above are worthy of consideration, the relationships among them truly contribute to the literature on participation. Figure 1, which details a model of participation developed from this study's findings, illustrates the themes and their relationships. The difference between this model and previous participation models is that it observes the interconnectedness of four main components: preadult factors, adult support system, conventional deterrents, and

women's "voice." Although only exploratory, this study is nonetheless the first study to explore this combination of factors related to participation.



Although this was a small sample of women, the problems and issues they faced were generally universal. Preadult factors, especially the amount of positive support received, contribute to women's development of voice or lack of voice. This research found that silence generates out of lack of support. Women who continue into adulthood with a nonsupportive system, often remain silent and therefore are not able to overcome the conventional deterrents faced by many women.

Because the specific combinations are unlimited, an example of their interaction is included. (See Figure 1.) In preadulthood, factors contribute to a supportive or nonsupportive environment for education. The resulting preadult environment influences the woman's development of voice and of her way of knowing. Furthermore, preadult patterns of nonsupport often lead to women dropping out of school.

Families continue to influence adult women by either encouraging them in their development of voice and of more independent ways of knowing or by not being supportive of their maturation. It is this influence that determines whether women will overcome the deterrents they face. Also, a combination of preadult factors, strength of voice, and amount of adult support influences the degree of satisfaction women have with their lives. In turn, this satisfaction affects women's development of increasingly verbal ways of knowing.

Women's ways of knowing not only affect their ability to overcome deterrents, but often leads those who continue without support and who have a weak voice to have hope for a better life for their children, but have no hope for themselves. The resulting loss of hope reduces their ability to overcome deterrents to participate. Each factor interacts with and influences the others to create a combination of deterrents so deeply embedded, that many women cannot overcome them to participate. Conversely, those women with support and stronger voices have a better chance of overcoming the deterrents they face.

The Life Influence Model of Participation is the first to incorporate this combination of factors: (a) preadult factors, (b) voice, (c) adult support system, and (d) deterrents into a model of participation. Both levels in the model include supportive and nonsupportive factors related to education. Although the components may occur in a linear progression, there is room for movement between the two levels depending on the individual situation.

To examine the relationships occurring within the Life Influence Model of Participation, it is necessary to understand the top line's flow. Supportive preadult factors influence the development of strong voice. If the woman has supportive adult relationships, her strong voice will be reinforced (thus the two-way arrow); therefore, she can overcome the deterrents she faces and participate in educational activities. However, a woman who grew up within a supportive environment and who developed a strong voice may encounter nonsupport in her adult life (down arrow). This factor may weaken her voice (two-way arrow), diminishing her chances of overcoming deterrents to participate in adult education.

The flow of the bottom line begins with nonsupportive preadult factors influencing the development of weak voice. In adulthood, if the woman continues in nonsupportive relationships, her weak voice will be reinforced (thus the arrows both ways); therefore she will be unable to overcome deterrents which leads to nonparticipation. This negative pattern encourages the women to have hope for their children, but none for themselves. They will remain weak-voiced and continue the pattern of nonparticipation. However, women who grow up in a nonsupportive environment and who develop a weak voice may, in adulthood, be involved in supportive relationships (up arrow) that allow her voice to mature (two-way arrow) and increase her likelihood of overcoming deterrents to participation.

Future Research

If this study opened a new way of thinking about nonparticipation, then we have made progress. The point that we cannot forget is that there is a bigger picture than what we have seen. These women expressed a desire to empower their children through education, yet did not have the strength to empower themselves. It is necessary to find ways to lead "disenfranchised" women into education so they can be successful and increase their self-esteem and confidence (Taylor & Marienau, 1995). Reentry into a learning environment heightens a woman's "awareness of her construction of self-as-knowers" and leads to a "greater awareness of her construction of self" (Taylor, 1995, p. 23).

Research supports the conclusions of this study, but more issues and the relationships among them need to be explored. Most importantly, investigations need to be conducted focusing specifically on women and the cause-effect relationships among the model's four components: preadult and adult factors, women's way of knowing, and deterrents. Each link in the chain not only entwines with the one preceding and following it, but relies on them for strength. Research on the dynamics of ethnicity and culture's effect on women's ability and desire to overcome deterrents to participation would further narrow the conclusions of this and previous research. In addition, the mother's influence in preadulthood should be explored. Another important area for investigation is a deeper analysis into the theme, "hope for children, but none for self."

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