

Transitional Learning in a Transitional Labor Market

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Abstract: Precarious work traps workers in a cycle of marginalization. Though there is research on how individuals can break this cycle, little is known about how learning can change the conditions of marginalization. This study explores the learning processes that can also improve the conditions of precarious work.

Research Problem

Despite concern over the skills of the American workforce, policymakers continue to resist systematic reforms to workforce development and adult education (Marshall & Plotkin, 2011). A recent international study of adult skills (OECD, 2013) brought to light the need to reconsider this resistance. It found that people born to less educated, poor parents in the U.S. are likely to stay that way themselves. Kalleberg (2011) attributes the decline in mobility to growth in precarious jobs, defined as jobs that uncertain, low-waged, and provide limited social benefits (e.g., fast food), that can trap people in vicious cycle of marginalization.

A great deal of research focuses on the role of education in breaking the cycle of marginalization. Yet this research cannot explain the subjective experience of precarious work and how people in precarious jobs learn to cope, navigate, and possibly change their circumstances. Dewey (1938) believed that educative learning enhances the conditions of future experiences by strengthening individuals' capacity for learning and shifting their social situation in ways that make it open to change. Can educative learning take place in precarious jobs? If so, under what conditions does learning lead to improved conditions for learning, work, and life?

Educative learning in precarious jobs may be supported by Worker Centers, which Fine (2006) described as important hubs in local and regional low-waged labor markets. Centers emerged as workers organized to press their communities and employers to value their work and treat them fairly. Fine (2006) observed that as members of Worker Centers learned about the sources of leverage for change in their industry, they gained greater influence over the structuring processes that allowed employers to create precarious work in the first place, including the social (i.e., bias towards low-waged workers), political (i.e., labor standards), economic (i.e., consumer expectations), and skill formation (i.e., education, certification) processes. Learning in the Worker Centers may change the conditions of learning, work, and life for workers in precarious jobs. Yet little is known about the learning in the Worker Centers and how this learning affects workers' subjective experiences of precarious work, and the structuring processes in precarious industries.

Purpose and Research Questions

This study will examine the learning processes in two Worker Centers to develop an interpretive framework to understand how the processes influence subjective experiences and the structuring processes in precarious work. The research questions are: 1. What is the subjective experience of precarious work among members in two Worker Centers? 2. How do the Centers support learning among members? 3. Do members leverage the learning processes in the Worker Centers to influence the social structuring processes in precarious work? If so, how?

Theoretical Framework

This inquiry is situated in the discourse of lifelong learning (Field, 2006) and research on adult learning in transition (Field, Gallacher, & Ingram, 2009). It is informed by the theory of the risk society (Beck, 1992), which explains how late modern society is changing. Historic trends have frayed the institutions that once structured people's lives and provided the mechanisms for social bonding (Beck, 1992). At the same time, society has grown more complex and people face frequent disruptions that require them to redesign their lives (Alheit, 1994). Many people are vulnerable because new forms of social differentiation like education, occupation, lifestyle, and immigration status combine with historic inequities to impede individual efforts to respond to change and remain socially integrated (Beck, 1992). Society is also more informal because as institutions wane, their functions become distributed. In the case of education, for example, meso-level structures like workplaces, become significant sites for learning, and those who are excluded are cut off from social opportunity structures (Hake, 1999). New research on how to open meso-level structures and foster their learning potential is required (Hake, 1999).

Methodology

The study has two phases: (1) biographic research with 20 to 25 members in two Worker Centers to understand their subjective experience of precarious work, including how they cope, their biographical strategies for survival, and the role of the Worker Centers in their learning; and (2) a case study of the two Centers to understanding of the learning processes and to theorize how they influence the subjective experience and structuring processes in the precarious work.

Biographic material will be collected from workers to clarify the patterns of logic and action underlying their life course and to analyze how their lives are shaped by broader structuring processes (Alheit, 1994). Principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) including theoretical sampling, abductive analysis, and constant comparisons, will be used to build theory about the role of the Worker Centers in institutional processes and subjectivity.

Significance

Precarious situations demand learning. People may need to build new skills, make new choices, and take action to change their circumstances. Those not supported in this learning may face marginalization. How society can promote lifelong learning and help adults learn and act to change their economic and life situation must become key questions for adult education research.

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