Counter-Learning Under Oppression

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Abstract: This qualitative study utilized narrative analysis to explore the counter-learning of an oppressed Kurdish woman from Turkey. Critical constructivism was used to analyze counter-learning and Frankfurt School-based Marcusian critical theory was used to analyze the socio-political context and its impact on the oppressed. Key issues for adult education theory and practice are highlighted.

Introduction and Background

When a system of oppression and repression is fed and supported by the state's dominant ideology and its security forces on the one hand, and socio-cultural norms, values, and practices on the other, all social spheres are impacted. Every aspects of everyday life is centrally and systematically predefined: what to read, write, what to learn and not to learn, how and with whom to socialize. Yet, despite their inhumane practices, oppressive systems never accomplish total submission of the masses. In fact, they inevitably beget opposition. Oppressive political systems and practices may stop various things from functioning as they should in a society, but they cannot put an end to learning, because, as Habermas (1975) argues, we have "an automatic inability not to learn" (p. 15). Under oppressive conditions some learn to be conformist, silent, or obedient. Others resist accepting the reality that is imposed by the oppressive system and construct their own reality; they counter-learn. They learn to recognize the system's projects and learn how to challenge them. Foley (1999) argues that significant amounts of learning occur in people's everyday practices and this type of learning in the contradictory nature of everyday life goes unrecognized. He further notes, "Some of the most powerful learning occurs as people struggle against oppression" (Foley, 1999, p.1). The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of counter-learning under oppression (CLUO). The study was situated in Turkey which has a long history of oppression and state terrorism towards dissidents, the Kurds, and other minorities. Besides the state oppression, cultural oppression (including racism, misogyny, sexism, and oppressive religious practices) is historically embedded in everyday life in Turkey.

Related Literature

It is evident that the nature of learning is multifaceted (Taylor, 2005), contested (Foley, 2004), and defies any simplifications (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Perhaps as a result of this, the adult education literature in terms of learning paradigms is vague and to some extent even chaotic. There is not even a common consensus among adult education scholars on how many learning theories adult education has and how they should be organized (Merriam & Cafferella, 2006). Hence, for this study, I grouped learning paradigms based on their stance in relation to the dominant framework: liberatory learning paradigms (LLPs) and non-liberatory learning paradigms (NLLPs). NLLPs are those paradigms that consciously or unconsciously work within the dominant framework of political, cultural, and educational value system. Unlike NLLPs, LLPs deconstruct the dominant framework, challenge the status quo, and promote a fundamental structural change. LLPs take the social problems into account and challenge the roots of the

social ills. The LLPs aim to confront injustices, challenge the status quo, and critique the oppressive and exploitive social structure to reveal the truth about masses' being oppressed, deceived, and alienated because people unwittingly internalize the oppression and reinforce the status quo. Therefore, LLPs strive not only to create awareness among oppressed people, but also to show how to facilitate ways to liberate themselves. Thus, learning is seen as a political process that leads to transformation through contradiction of new and old patterns of knowledge, values, and thoughts. However, the existing LLPs are heavily focused on teaching rather than on learning. For example, even though Freire's theory recognizes various models of learning (such as institutional and non-institutional), it fails to offer us insights about how oppressed people's learning occurs. The same is true for adult education literature in general. For example, radical or critical educators have been studying learning in various oppressive contexts, but their focus is on learning within social movements (Foley, 1999, 2001; Kilgore, 1999). Moreover, because of this emphasis on learning in movements, the focus (intentionally or unintentionally) shifts away from learning to "teaching-learning" paradigms in social movements where people are not only already in the process of critical reflection and individual transformation, but also where structured programs, curricula, and objectives exist (Foley, 1999).

Purpose and Method

There is a complete absence of research on adults' counter-learning under oppressive situations. The purpose of this research was to examine the dynamics of adult counter-learning under extreme oppressive situations. The primary question of interest was how does counter-learning lead adults to radically depart from internalized oppressive ways of learning, thinking, feeling, speaking, and reacting? A qualitative narrative analysis was utilized to explore, explain, or describe a social phenomenon of interest to provide an in-depth understanding and meaning (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Narrative analysis can be a best fit when the research question deals with the "real-life problems," and it can be considered "real-world measures" (Bickman & Rog, 1988, p. 5). As a result, approaching people's lives from a narrative point of view, exploring their experiences and their meaning making, are very relevant to the evolution of their counter-learning.

Data Collection and Analysis

A central concern in narrative analysis is "which voice or voices researcher should use as they interpret and represent the voices of those they study" (Chase, 2005, p. 652). This research entailed a single participant, Zelo (a pseudonym), whose narration provided an information-rich case (Patton, 2002). Eight semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted on the phone with the participant. The focus of the interviews was to explore and gain more insights into her counter-learning experiences under multilayer oppression from her childhood through the present. Zelo's older son, brother-in-law, and her friends provided additional information. Data analysis was twofold: Critical constructivism was utilized to analyze adults' counter-learning and Frankfurt School-based Marcusian critical theory was used to analyze the socio-political context in a greater scale and its impact on the oppressed.

Findings and Implications

Zelo's Story. Zelo does not know exactly what year she was born, but she thinks she is 49 years old. She is a Kurdish woman with short hair, all gray. Dark circles are under her eyes. Her teeth are tinged yellow from smoking. Her height is considered short, but when she talks, when her courage and enthusiasm waves in the air, one would think she is a big woman. Even though she is in her late 40s, her energy, her idealism, and her courage make her look younger. In spite

of her agony, political, cultural, and economical repression, her hope, her eagerness, and her doubtlessness about what she is doing and why she is doing it are unshakable.

Zelo was born in a big traditional family. She is one of the nine children from two different mothers. When she was 14, she got married to her 8 years older cousin. Nobody asked her opinion. Everything was arranged quickly recalls Zelo. "In 40 days, he came, he saw me, he approved that I was okay [to be his wife] and 'took' me." She says, "I was a child, you know. While my friends were still playing, I was forced to make a home in a room." Her marriage was traumatic from the beginning. When she was beaten for the first time by her husband, she was pregnant. Zelo tried to find out why he had beaten her. She tried to find out a reason for the beating, a reason that perhaps could help her to justify the beating. She scanned all her verbal and nonverbal behaviors; had she done anything inappropriate in front of his parents, had she said anything wrong, had she sat wrong, had she stood up right, had she worn something that she was not supposed to? Nevertheless she could not find any reason that she deserved to be beaten. She had done nothing wrong. The only reason that was given to her was that he had both the right to beat and the right to love her.

When they moved to a big city, besides her marriage problem, she faced other problems such as racism, poverty, and political repression. Her kids grew up under a military coup, which repressed any dissident voice, and predefined people's daily lives by the regime of terror. Her children got involved with politics. Her oldest son was arrested and tortured. One morning she found a little note from her youngest son stating that he was going to join the Kurdish liberation movement. Zelo was blamed for not being able to be a good mother. She stood up and defended her son and her son's act. Next, she dared to divorce her husband. Then her daughter joined the movement. Finally Zelo got involved with politics, went to night school to learn how to write and read, attended cultural activities, and took a role in a pro-Kurdish political party. She is now a head of a women's branch in the party and member of several human rights and other non-governmental organizations.

Findings. From a thorough analysis of the data, multiple findings emerged to better understand the dynamics of CLUO. These findings were related to oppression and learning. Even though these two phenomena (oppression and learning) are inseparable, in order to analyze and discuss them I considered them as separate entities. Due to the page limitation I cannot present a detailed examination of all the findings. I, however, intentionally select and briefly discuss some of the findings to provide counter-learning's dimensions and depth.

The first group of findings was related to oppression. First, with regard to the structure of oppression, data analysis showed that oppression is not just multi-layered which implies one-dimensionality. In fact, oppression is multi-dimensional and multi-layered. Each dimension has its own multiple layers and these layers and other dimensions' layers are also dynamically interrelated. For example, Zelo's narrative revealed that gender oppression finds its biggest support from the legal structure, then from the religious and traditional values and norms. The second finding was that oppression inevitably creates its own components. These components play a vital role in feeding back the oppression and maintaining it. In other words, they are mostly invisible parts of oppression, which is felt but sometimes cannot be pointed out. These components are a) culture of creating a caretaker, b) culture of virtue, c) culture of silence, d) culture of objectification, e) culture of double-bind, and f) culture of learned-hopelessness. For example, Zelo's narrative revealed that the culture of virtue refers to the scarcity-conditions of the oppressed. Poverty is one of the required conditions, and is necessary for oppression to be

effective. Even though poverty is not God-given, the oppressed tend to perceive it as God-given. For the oppressed, poverty is an unchangeable destiny and unchallengeable reality. No matter how bad the conditions are, the oppressed are expected not to complain because they are told the world is just, and working to change it goes against God. Under oppression poverty or scarcity is an ingredient that serves to teach virtues "just for the poor"; being grateful with less, being thankful with what is possessed, being gratified by whatever is given.

The second group of findings was related to Zelo's own counter-learning. These findings are a) use of "we" and "they", b) developing of multi-consciousness, c) healing of damaged psyche and self-confidence, d) being ostracized and distanced from the dominant discourse, e) problematization, f) politicization, g) negation of dominant discourse and reality, h) conceptual learning, i) developing a counter-language, and j) transformation.

Problematization: In oppression Zelo was taught to be submissive, obedient, and incapable of even identifying her problems, let alone finding solutions to them. She was not to possess or exhibit any quality other than those which were culturally expected. However, cultural condemnations, political oppression and repression, and her survival experiences including attempts at committing suicide built a massive potential in Zelo. This potential was raw; it was convoluted with feelings, emotions, rational and non-rational insights, knowledge, and various unformed skills. This potential enabled Zelo to realize and recognize her unhappiness in spite of the cultural limitations. She stated various times, "I was never happy. I've never been happy." When she talked about her husband's abuses she said, "He did not think that I deserved to be happy. He did not allow me!" She was aware somehow that happiness was forbidden, or taken away from her, or stolen from her. When she posited that she was not happy with how she was treated as a woman, as a wife, and as a mother; she problematized her gender-related issues in her life. If it is bluntly examined, Zelo's awareness of unhappiness in her life was a highly political issue in its nature, but something within her culture prevented it from being political. Her awareness of unhappiness and discontent posed a threat to the existence of the oppressive culture. The culture's response to this threat was to create a negative stigma towards to her womanhood, motherhood, and her ability for learning and adjustment. In other words, in her culture a woman's unhappiness was stripped from its political content and reduced to be seen as an apolitical and merely feminine matter in a way that her gender was emphasized negatively. Her cries were not being heard due to the high volume of noise of condemnation. Without even listening to what she was saying, most people were proposing to her the same thing: "Accept things as they are." They were also indirectly asking her to give up because life was too complex and uncertain for her to know and change it. However, once she came to realize the unhappiness of her life, this realization and awareness created fervor within her. This awareness was an early form of politicization and an antidote for depoliticization.

Politicization: How did Zelo start politicizing things? Did it happen overnight? Was there an "aha" moment? Was it a rational deliberation? The data indicated that it was a process involving many factors. However, her son's departure seems to be a very important incident and a turning point. It provided a power of politics and empowerment. Defending her son's act and his cause (the movement) was highly political, and it was almost too extreme and too renowned to be avoided by other actors who wittingly or unwittingly maintained the existing oppression. Zelo unconsciously drew strength from the existing power of the Kurdish nationalist movement. She became, and was perceived as, political in spite of the various forms of cultural depoliticization. Besides the movement's political power, Zelo was transformed from being just-

one-isolated-unhappy-woman to being a social-being who had connections to other groups of people and political bodies. As soon as she declared her respect for her son and her mental, spiritual, and emotional support to her son's cause, Zelo was not alone anymore. Her action made her look like a member of the movement, as if she were taking the whole movement behind her. What she was doing this time was different from her earlier acts of problematization. Now she was being taken into consideration by others. She was receiving attention, some positive, some negative. Some people were getting angry with her and trying to convince her not to talk in a supportive way about the movement because politics was none of her business. In fact, Zelo did not even have to try hard to make things political. It was like an optical illusion in which the background color causes the color of the foreground to be perceived differently. The political intensity of the movement had formed her acts' background color and was affecting the colors of whatever she was doing in the foreground being perceived as political. As a result, her meeting with the power of politicization was spontaneous, tacit, and unplanned; but it was not an end result of a rational deliberation, nor was it accidental. It was strongly related to her experience with oppression and repression. Different from her earlier attempts of problematizing, now she was not complaining about her problems; she was not whining; she was not begging for mercy. This time she was claiming something from people and from the state. In addition, Zelo started negating things--such negation was a way of dealing with the problems. It was a language and set of actions. It was logic that was against the logic of dehumanization of an oppressive, racist, and patriarchal system. When she could not fit the oppressive practices in her mental schemas to justify them, she concealed their contradictions by defending or proposing an alternative (antithesis) practice which eventually called for a new synthesis. In Zelo's negation, traditionally defined oppressed and militarist motherhood was turned into a kind of activism. She plied motherhood's universally accepted notion of caring and began considering the young activists as her own children. She was politicizing her motherly concern and expanding her concern to all people, not just those within her political spectrum. She was concerned about activists, Turkish soldiers, guerillas, poor people, and women. Motherhood, in Zelo's hands, became subversive rather than submissive; collective rather than individual; and a source of empowerment rather than enslavement. Another example of negation is Zelo's redefinition of honor. One day her younger brother told her that he was worried about her because if she were raped in a police interrogation, the family's honor would suffer. She yelled at him and told him that her honor was not between her legs. This was a total negation of traditional and (non-) official view of honor which was historically formed on women's sexuality. This was a very powerful rebuke of women's sexuality being used to oppress women and at the same time manipulate the community.

This study shows that focusing on the individual within the cultural and political surroundings, without neglecting the role of subjective and material conditions, provides richly descriptive and invaluable data to understand the adult CLUO. In addition, adults' past and present experiences (in the way they internalize the oppression, the way they interpret and make meaning of their lives, the way they choose to struggle, fight, co-opt, or submit) are an essential part of their learning and unlearning framework. This study also offers some insights to practitioners who work with the oppressed. The study revealed that because oppression dehumanizes the oppressed, damages their confidence, transforms them into objects, and destabilizes their emotional and mental abilities, adult educators might need to consider learning as the beginning of a healing process. The data reveals that when oppression is internalized, it is

hard to dispel it rationally. Therefore, the study invites adult educators to review their heavily rational discourse, which does not communicate to the oppressed. This study also implies that learning activities should be designed around everyday contradictions of oppressed people's lives so that oppressed people could reflect back to their problems. Finally, activities and the learning process also should be recognized as tools to help the oppressed to develop a hopeful worldview.

Despite growing up in a loveless family, community, double-binding culture, and repressive State, Zelo found the joy of her life and happiness through engaging in counter-learning which led her to get involved in a struggle to demand her own humanity, gender and ethnic identity. She found love of life. She loved her children dearly and she loved their causes. She loved all the young activists as if they were her own kids. She shared her meal and her last cigarette with them. She loved herself too. She felt that she was loved and respected by others. Her oldest son describes her:

I think for a human being or a woman who newly, although a little late, discovered herself, she is so happy, energetic, and liberated because she makes her own decisions about her life. Her life is for the first time her own. Of course her two guerilla children's memories give her strength, help her endure, resist, and feel proud. Even though recently she gets tired easily, of course she has gotten old, she will never stop. I know she will in this path. But she will die happy.

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