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Irene C. Baird

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The examined life: A study of identity formation, agency, self-expression among imprisoned women

Irene C. Baird

Abstract: This study demonstrated the efficacy of a Freirian/humanities-based adult education program on identity formation, agency and empowerment through self-expression within the context of a women's group in a county jail.

We must meet the prisoner as a person and listen to her story. As she speaks about her life and her experience of prison, a human face is suddenly superimposed over the mind-numbing figures. (Chesney-Lind, p.8)

Introduction

Corrections facilities identify incarcerated women by their prison I.D. numbers; society defines them as a threatening statistic and negative demographic factor. Within adult education, there is even a perception that the status of incarceration, given the statistics and demographics, generates a "universal" composite and denies agency (Clark et al., 1998). Noting, among others, critical race feminist Harris' belief that essentialisms (composites) "reduce the lives of people who experience multiple forms of oppression" (1997, p. 11), this study sought to involve groups of incarcerated women in an educational program in which the women defined themselves and their realities. The purpose was to examine the impact of a Freirian/humanities-oriented medium on identity formation, agency and empowerment through self-expression. Lacking adequate resources within adult education, the study turned primarily to current criminal justice feminist and womanist researchers who are equally critical of the creation of a single incarcerated woman's voice and experiences as representative of all within the group (Harris, 1997; Hill Collins, 1997; Owen, 1998; Watterson, 1996). Although these studies provide substantive information on the causes and conditions of incarceration, they highlight the lack of programming that promotes identity formation and provides techniques for successful transition to the outside (Newman, Lewis, Beverstock, 1993; Rafter, 1982; Watterson, 1996). In addition, therefore, Freirian theory was consulted because it addressed the issue of the "silenced" oppressed and, through praxis, the finding of voice and empowerment in the process of identity formation.

Methodology

The Freirian/humanities-oriented learning model, a 1992 pilot project with homeless women, has been implemented at a county jail since 1994 (Baird, 1999, 1997a, 1997b, 1994). It involves facilitating, in ten week segments, forty sessions annually, each lasting one and one-half hours. An average of twelve women volunteer to participate. During each meeting, the participants read poetry and prose selections of established female authors of similar race, class and experience. The Freirian concept of reflection and discussion for meaning-making follows, with each woman

using the author's experiences as the link for exploring and examining her own. This process generates themes for further discussion. The relevant themes are then reinforced through creative self-expression which is published in a booklet for the women at the conclusion of each ten week segment. The entire process of self-reflection provides them with a non-threatening opportunity to define themselves and their worlds. The visual impact of their voice in print promotes self-esteem, a sense of pride and empowerment.

Since this is now an established learning program at the county jail, the women learn, by word of mouth or by having read other participant's books, the purpose of the program and its encouragement of their selecting authors, books and/or issues of their choice. During the course of this study, the participants (7 black, 6 white, 1 Native American between the ages of 19 and 40) elected to engage in a personal inward journey since many of them were spending cell time writing their stories for themselves, their children or their families. Included in the reading selections were excerpts from bell hooks' reflections on writing autobiography; Maya Angelou's *Gather Together In My Name* which covered her late teens, her struggle for survival, identity and agency development; and Nikki Giovanni's poem, "Make Up" with its references to using make up for a variety of reasons but "before the public is faced [and] to face life." Data were gathered from individual evaluations, interviews of seven volunteers and the women's writing which reflected on the outcomes of their own self-exploration exercise. In addition, because these groups of women seemed especially involved in identity issues and were influenced by the Giovanni poem, they requested materials to draw their own masks. Identity formation, exercise of agency and empowerment through self-expression prevailed as the dominant themes that emerged from the analysis.

Identity

Hill Collins (1997) states that the primary responsibility for defining one's own reality lies with the people who live their reality, who actively have those experiences. Feminist corrections research concurs (Belknap, 1996; Chesney-Lind, 1997; Owen, 1998; Rafter, 1982; Watterson, 1996) as do the results from this study. Although there was a similarity of causes for incarceration, there was diversity of "when, why and how" the individual became a correction's statistic, how her culture, personal history and persona influenced the way she handled a situation. As examples, one woman provided a succinct account of how she and the authorities resolved a domestic violence incident: "Abusive man I was with said he love me ... didn't see it that way, he end up in the hospital, I end up in jail." Another woman who related to Maya Angelou's resorting to even questionable means of survival in her youth, honestly admitted, "I sell drug for money so that I can take care of my children."

The women did not operate in isolation. As a group they worked through similarities each one found between herself and the authors; however, they did resent being considered as a composite. They spent one entire session addressing a question one of them raised, that of whether they were **on** or **in** the same boat. The **on** side prevailed as they voiced their intent to express their individuality whether in their mechanisms and/or strategies for coping, their value system, their creative writing, mask or hairstyle. What emerged from these activities is an equally diverse outcome of their efforts in identity formation. One woman wrote that she saw herself through others. Another referred to herself "as a walking number, a confused individual

... someone's friend, someone's enemy and sometimes someone's disappointment." A few indicated that a self-exploration opened wounds and pain. "... my [inward] journey ... will be a difficult one. For unlike most, I have to go back through my pain and disasters to move on." Alternatively, there was one who was not ready to deal with the inward journey yet, but felt that the process was a necessary first step.

I'm scared to face the real me
being someone else for so long
I don't know who to be
I have more faces than Bozo the clown ...
Being me isn't like the drop of a dime.

There were examples of positive assertions of selfhood. Some include, "I'm a beautiful black woman standing tall and strong ... your the person that wants to see me fall [but] just like Maya still I rise." Another woman wrote, "I am powerful. I am strong. I am mother. I am lover. I am me." There is even evidence of wit in the following:

My style is so unique My voice is built to suit me
I guess that's how I got my name there's not another voice like mine
I am in all ways a woman everything that I'm compiled of
there's none like me the same what makes me so divine
I speak with clear distinction My wit is one-of-a-kind
none can emulate my talk there ain't a soul like me
my 6 foot frame belongs to me my style is all my own
and no one can stroll my prideful walk I grew into my divinity
I am so proud to be a woman
I have strength, peace and joy
this woman you see is so unique
praise God I wasn't born a boy

These last, positive reflections offered by black women are reminiscent of one of Alice Walker's definitions of "womanist" which includes: *Loves the spirit. Loves love ... Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless* (1983, xii). For black women's identity formation, the womanist perspective as defined by Walker here and in the section on agency begs further study.

Agency

The literature medium, especially the positive, strong messages in Angelou and hooks, was effective in generating discussion in group sessions, in evaluations and interviews on the exercise of agency. The women's responses were consistent with findings in current feminist corrections research (Belknap, 1996; Owen, 1998, Watterson, 1996). Several drug addicted women spoke of their inability to handle their habit and exercised agency by deliberately putting themselves in situations where they would be apprehended, hoping incarceration would provide them treatment. Others, for whom life became too overwhelming, made a similar decision. The county jail, they said, gave them food, clothing, a roof over their heads and time to reflect on the complexities of their lives, on how they could resolve them.

Wrote one woman, "By me going to jail help me to do the right thing. I've learned to think now with my head instead of my heart." Irrespective of demographic factors, there were women who admitted to choosing to live "on the edge;" they were exercising agency by involving themselves in high-risk activities, fully aware of the consequences and certain punishment for such decisions. Some of them were recognized for their "smarts," for being able to get things done within the facility. There was a polarity between those who were conforming merely to do "easy time" and those who expressed a firm will to change. In both cases they exercised agency by volunteering to participate in learning and/or rehabilitation programs, with different outcomes in mind. It was an individual choice.

Other areas of choice, of exercising agency, involved relationships. In this particular jail, the women are confined to their cells twenty one hours daily. Some choose to isolate themselves except for attending the learning program. They admitted to not trusting anyone, especially other women. Others talked about a need for community. Knowing the punitive measures that could be incurred if detected, they form pseudo-family relationships with each in a "community" assuming a different role: father, mother, brother, sister, others. Some studies suggest that this may be an effort to exercise autonomy and control; others feel that this is a survival mechanism. There is debate about whether these are sexual situations which are totally unacceptable to corrections (Belknap, 1996; Owen, 1998). Another insight for consideration is the following extension of Walker's "womanist" definition: "A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves men, sexually and nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (1983,p.xi).

For some women, the literature afforded a medium for mental liberation, an escape in spite of their confinement. They considered this a very empowering exercise of agency. bell hooks wrote, "Living as we do in a white-supremacist capitalistic patriarchal context that can best exploit us when we lack a firm grounding in self and identity, choosing 'wellness' is an act of political resistance" (1994, p. 452). Two different excerpts exemplify her words. "I describe [jail] as a journey through the twilight zone. This place is crazy. I had to fight hard within myself to use it as a place to improve myself and stay strong. I also learned I do have a lot of strength within myself." The following is from a nineteen year old:

You tell me "line up, so of course So, yes, while I'm here I'll stand
I get in line in your line
You punch in, you punch out, but me? I'll follow your rules while I'm
I'm doing time doing my time
You push the buttons to open But I look in at you from these
the doors I'm behind bars I'm behind
but one thing you can't change is because, locked in or not, I have
my freedom of mind freedom of mind.

Empowerment Through Self-Expression

Freirian theory and humanities philosophy were an appropriate foundation for this study in that they encouraged the incarcerated women to find and use their own voices to define themselves. As a prescription for social action, Freire provided illiterate peasants with a medium for liberating themselves from their oppressors, that of reading and writing using their own words. In his methodology, the praxis - reflection and action - is a problem solving technique for the learners to look at their reality and to find and define their own word. The humanities reinforces this approach with its similar philosophy of looking at and defining one's self and one's community, in this case through the literature of women of similar race, class and experience.

The creative output of the incarcerated women is tangible evidence of their accepting what Hill Collins (1997) calls primary responsibility for defining their realities, their experiences. Through praxis these women identified the many ways they exercised agency in spite of restraints. Their evaluations confirmed the sense of pride, of self-esteem in their accomplishments; it also empowered them when they recognized that they now had techniques that inhibited anyone's "messing with my mind," to quote one of the participants.

To those committed to social justice/social action, this process appears to be too "self" focused. This was discussed in group sessions, but especially during the interviews. The women maintained that they must first identify and accept themselves in a positive way in order to be of benefit to their families, to be contributing members of society. This is supported by Hill Collins' contention that "... self-definition is key to individual and group empowerment" (1997, p.254). They pointed out that the process was effective because interaction - the reflection and dialogue - was necessary to consider varying perspectives before they could work through their many masks to find the "authentic" self. They added that the process continued in their cells, between sessions. Those whose writing focused on incarceration, on what they experienced, knew that their stories would be disseminated and read. They took that risk (exercising agency); although there was a therapeutic element in so doing, they also wanted to inform the outside community and "educate" other females who are at risk of incarceration. One woman shared that she did this deliberately for a daughter who is approaching her teens, to teach her that there is a better way to live than her mother's. These responses affirm bell hooks' statement that "when we lack a firm grounding in self and identity, choosing 'wellness' is an act of political resistance" (1994, p. 452).

Implications

Just as incarceration has been considered a male issue, with facilities, operation and studies viewed from that perspective, so also has been adult education's perspective. Marginalized women are the invisible, the silenced in adult education literature, as evidenced by the need to turn to feminist corrections and womanist research as the literature framework for this study. In adult education, the tendency is to involve primarily white, middle class women, often students, as research participants, thus widening the gap in the adult education knowledge base (Cunningham, 1997; Hayes & Flannery, 1997). The underscored implication from this study is that if adult education is really about social change and truly empowering marginalized women, then adult educators need to be inclusive, need to listen to the stories of the marginalized women of all races/ethnicities and need to develop programs with the women that will allow them to take

control of their lives. Then, to use hooks' words, their "ground[ing] in self and identity," their "wellness" will empower them and their community.

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