

RESEARCHER SUBJECTIVITIES AS A CONCEPTUAL FRAME IN COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH: HOW EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF ADULT EDUCATORS LED TO EXAMINING RESEARCHER LENSES

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Abstract

This article discusses how narrative research that began as an exploration of adult educator practice transitioned to incorporate an examination of researcher lenses, ultimately resulting in an increased understanding of the critical role that researcher subjectivity plays in the collaborative qualitative research process. First, we discuss the aims and methodology of our original research study, which explored significant experiences in adult educators' practice. We examine how our focus shifted during the analytical stages of this research to explore our own presence in the research. We then discuss each of our own subjectivities and how our individual researcher lenses influenced our collaborative research. Next, we detail our research findings, exploring how acknowledging our own subjectivities altered our approach to the data, helping us to reconceptualize the 14 initial themes in our interviews with adult educators to three overriding ones: meaningfulness and ambiguities, power and critique, and reflection and authenticity. We then discuss emerging issues about collaborative inquiry and how our subjectivities as researchers construct lenses that continually inform our research processes, including the analysis and interpretation of data. We conclude that researcher subjectivities, when overtly invited into the research process, can become powerful tools in collaborative qualitative research.

Résumé

Ce document porte sur une recherche narrative, qui se voulait à priori une exploration des pratiques éducationnelles utilisées par les andragogues et qui a évolué pour incorporer l'étude des points de vue des chercheurs, ce qui a permis comme résultant d'avoir une compréhension croissante du rôle important que joue la subjectivité du chercheur dans le processus d'une recherche qualitative collaborative. Nous abordons en premier les objectifs et la méthodologie de notre recherche originale qui traitait des expériences importantes dans la pratique de l'andragogie. Nous examinons les changements qui ont eu lieu au niveau du focus adopté au départ dans l'analyse de cette recherche pour se tourner plus sur l'étude de notre propre présence au sein de l'équipe de recherche. Cela nous a conduits à l'exploration de notre propre objectivité spécifique et sur le comment nos points de vue individuels ont influencé cette recherche collaborative. Nous exposons ensuite les résultats de notre recherche qui tient compte de l'influence de nos subjectivités individuelles sur notre approche vis-à-vis des données et qui a mené à la réconceptualisation des 14 thèmes originaux dans nos entrevues avec les andragogues en trois thèmes déterminants : signifiante et ambiguïtés; pouvoir et critique; et, réflexion et authenticité. Puis, nous discutons des questions de l'heure relatives à la recherche collaborative et sur comment la subjectivité d'un chercheur construit des points de vue qui informent continuellement les processus de recherche, incluant l'analyse et l'interprétation des données. En conclusion, nous constatons que, lorsqu'ouvertement invitée dans un processus de recherche, la subjectivité d'un chercheur peut s'avérer un outil puissant et efficace dans une recherche qualitative collaborative.

Introduction

A key tenet of reflexive inquiry (Cole & Knowles, 2000) is that the assumptions underlying practice must be subject to critical questioning. In this article, we seek to critically question our own research practices by sharing our process of reflexive inquiry in a collaborative narrative study. We relate how our experiences and related assumptions and subjectivities influenced our research about the professional practice of adult educators and ultimately extended our understanding of the critical role that subjectivity plays in the collaborative research process. Our research focus expanded to include the personal and the contextual, embraced the role that experiences provide in the development of practice, invited a critical perspective to our process, and ultimately cast new light on our understandings.

In our research, we sought to understand the ambiguities and complexities of adult educators' professional practice. Our original research entailed using open-ended interviews in a narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to focus on personal experience stories (Denzin in Creswell, 2008) of adult educators. As our collaborative research shifted to a reflexive inquiry, we overtly strove for authenticity in the bringing of individual and collaborative "self" to the research process and the co-creation of meaning. There are, therefore, two intertwined foci in this article: one explores the implications of our subjectivity in our research, the other explores the themes that emerged from our

interviews about the practice of adult education. As such, the first half of the article focuses on questions of subjectivity in collaborative research; the second, on questions of practice in the experiences of the adult educators we interviewed. We interconnect these foci in the final section.

We begin the article by discussing the aims and methodology of our original research study, which examined significant experiences in adult educators' practice, exploring how our focus changed during the analytical stages to problematize our own presence in the research. We then discuss each of our own subjectivities and how our individual researcher lenses impacted our collaborative research. We explore how "getting lost" (Lather, 2007) redirected us to examine the complexities of collaborative qualitative research as it relates to researcher presence. Next, we detail our research findings, exploring how our own subjectivities altered our approach to the data, helping us to reconceptualize the 14 initial themes in our interviews with adult educators to three overriding ones: meaningfulness and ambiguities, power and critique, and reflection and authenticity. We conclude that subjectivity is a powerful yet too often unacknowledged and unexplored tool in collaborative qualitative research that researchers should acknowledge and utilize more effectively to enhance validity in their research.

In our original attempts to engage in a collaborative process with each other as researchers, we consciously focused on how to work well together while unconsciously sidelining issues of our own subjectivities and analytical frameworks. When we began to consciously acknowledge our own perspectives, both individually and collectively, we were able to view the data in a different light. Reflexive inquiry, with its emphasis on critical questioning (Cole & Knowles, 2000), is a means by which researchers can further explore their subjectivities and develop them as credible aspects of the research process.

Methodological Shifts to Encompass Researcher Subjectivities

Our initial narrative inquiry research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) was framed around three general questions:

1. What are the significant experiences of our participants as adult educators?
2. How are the experiences of adult educators reflected in adult education literature?
3. What are the implications of adult educator experiences for adult education as a field?

We utilized purposive sampling to invite participants from a wide variety of contexts, drawing upon our own contacts and various adult education listservs. When contacted by interested participants, we set up interviews with one of the researchers. Twenty-nine interviews were conducted. Participant practices included post-secondary faculty (full- and part-time, with one working overseas), program developers, teaching assistants, and student union workers; workplace trainers; non-profit community educators; community health educators; justice system administrators; coaches; and adult education high school upgrade teachers. Several also were consultants. Their work in the adult education field varied, from teaching in front of a classroom in formal and

nonformal training, to advocacy and one-on-one advising/mentoring/coaching work. Their education backgrounds ranged from high school diplomas to doctorate degrees. Interviews were conducted mainly face-to-face (in one central Canadian province and one Maritime province), with some via teleconference.¹

Our interviews began by asking each participant about their journey to their current position in the field of adult education. (Each participant self-identified as an adult educator by responding to our research invitation; we did not articulate a definition of adult education.) We then asked participants to discuss a particular meaningful experience, letting each guide the interview toward their significant stories and concepts.

Each researcher analyzed her own interviews, engaging in open, axial, and selective coding (Neuman, 2006), sending out the final selective codes to the others in advance of collaborative analysis sessions. The lead author, after analyzing her own data, listened to all interviews and conducted an overall preliminary analysis. Finally, all researchers met to discuss their analyses and contribute to a collective analysis of data, conducting another cycle of selective coding to arrive at an initial 14 themes: engagement, reflective practice/knowing self, connections to daily life/lived experience, organizational constraints, theory/practice connection, applied learning, marginalization/systemic societal barriers, assessment as inhibiting learning, transformation/resistance, experience-based practice of educators, acknowledging whole being, networking, no blueprint for adult education, and emotional toll of working with marginalized people.

After the initial analysis of the implications of our data we were intrigued as to how we arrived at the identified themes and why they resonated so strongly with our own interests. We questioned both our research approach and the role our subjectivities played in the initial data analysis process, and this query prompted us to consider how we had informed our process individually and collectively. As we began to explore our own subjectivities and the main tenets of our theoretical and practical approaches to adult education, we returned, with a more critically reflexive lens, to the original identified themes and reanalyzed them at the selective coding level. We mapped these tenets onto a comparison table to find congruencies between the selective codes and each researcher's personal conceptual framework, resulting in three final themes of meaningfulness and ambiguities, power and critique, and reflection and authenticity, which cut across our own individual subjectivities. Focusing our three distinct lenses allowed us to interpret our data as more clearly related to the individual perspectives we each brought to the study. This shift in our process allowed us to ask deeper questions not just of our data but of ourselves as researchers.

Although we had approached our interviews in an open-ended way, we had more presence related to the final analytical themes than we had originally anticipated. When we as researchers conduct sole research projects, our own conceptual frames in our approaches to theory, methodology, and data analysis are forefronted. However, in this research study, in an effort to work in an open-ended, collaborative, and non-competitive manner, we unintentionally backgrounded our own subjectivities only to find that our ontological

1 See Taber, Abbey, Howard, & Watson (2008) for a preliminary conference paper presenting findings from the first 14 interviews.

and epistemological understandings worked in hidden ways, informing all aspects of this research. It was only when we became aware of this phenomenon and consciously put ourselves back into the research that we were able to frame our findings more cohesively and make deeper meaning of them, thus providing critical insight related to reflexive inquiry and ultimately broadening our initial research path.

This exploration of self within research is akin to Lather's (2007) process of "getting lost" in her research methodology as she negotiates her place as a researcher. She determines that this feeling of being lost is necessary to unravel the multilayered roles of the educational researcher as she moves in precarious spaces between knowing and knowledge. Getting lost is a process of uncovering the researcher's underlying values and beliefs and their impact on the research process. It is a process of caution in methodology by questioning our own limits in representing the voices of those we study. This sort of "not knowing" opened the door for us to engage in a different sort of doing with a critical lens, while exploring each of our own researcher lenses: ruling relations and feminism (Nancy); transformation, reflexivity, and authenticity (Loretta); and, Foucauldian power issues at individual and institutional levels (Georgann). We therefore altered our focus to include the implications not only of our participant experiences, but of our own analytical process. We each had brought our selves uniquely into the process, as the following explores.

Feminism, Caring, and Ruling Relations (Nancy)

I followed a circuitous route to adult education that included completing an undergraduate degree while in the military. There, I always tried to play down the fact that I was a woman, preferring to be just a military member, not a female military member. I enacted the hegemonic masculinity that was typically accepted in the military reasonably well, but also often felt that I did not quite fit in. While completing a graduate degree, I learned about critical and feminist theories, which led me to begin to challenge my place in the military, explore how women's learning (particularly in the homeplace) is often discounted (Gouthro, 2002; Hart, 1992, 2002), and precipitated my critique of societal violence. Over time, in particular during my dissertation research, I came to identify myself as a feminist anti-militarist (Enloe, 2000, 2007), questioning societal ruling relations and the social organization of knowledge (Smith, 1987, 1999). This central lens informs my approach to adult education as a practitioner, teacher, theorist, and researcher. Consequently, I have refined my focus on education to centre on gender processes, violence, and militarism.

Most of the participants I contacted for this research worked as advocates in non-profit community work. In my interviews, I either saw a feminist critique or its absence. I was most interested in those that related to my research interests, while quickly reviewing and putting aside those that did not. Although not all my interviews held a power critique, more did than did not. When coding the interviews, I used many codes (in my own interviews and those of my collaborating authors) that had nothing to do with power. But my focus continually returned to the presence or absence of a power analysis, an exploration of ruling relations and an investigation of "a social organization implied but not spoken of in the original narratives, a social organization that is presupposed but not explicit" (Smith, 1987, p. 202). I searched for the ways in which ruling relations worked to generalize participant lives in ways they might not have been aware.

Transformative Learning, Spirituality, and Authenticity (Loretta)

My lived experience as an adult learner resonates with Mezirow's (1997, 1998) psychocritical approach to transformative learning. I returned to undergraduate education older, married, and pregnant. I felt disconnected from my co-learners in many ways; I left university with my degree in hand, but feeling disjointed from the process. I encountered Mezirow's work a number of years later as a graduate learner, and consequently experienced an awakening. Employing a transformative lens by "using a prior interpretation to construe a new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 5) finally enabled me to make sense of my previous experience.

As a doctoral student, my philosophy continued to develop, informed by others in the adult education and transformative learning field (Cranton, 2006; Daloz, 2000) and drawing broadly upon the framework of constructivism, spirituality (Fenwick & English, 2004; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006), and the connections evidenced between mind, body, emotion, and spirit (Dirkx, 2006; Weiss, 2000). Currently, my professional practice is guided by my understanding of both the theory and practice of transformative learning. Reflexive inquiry, grounded dialogue, and collaboration are key strategies for me that enhance authentic meaning making.

When meeting to discuss our data analysis I recognized that the aspects I was most interested in exploring related to transformative learning and issues such as barriers to learning, reflexive inquiry, and aspects of spirit. I recognize now that I (un)consciously sought participants who related to my lived experiences as both learner and practitioner in higher education. I believe I was able to draw more substance from the dialogical process as this increased the sense of identification between participant and researcher, forged a link between us, and created a wider sense of solidarity (Edwards, 1993). Some may claim this impacts credibility; however, I believe that the relationship dialogue in which I engaged with my participants enhanced the discourse of the inquiry and promoted reflexive insight on a variety of levels due in no small way to the fact that our experiences, in many cases, were shared.

Poststructuralism, Power, and Praxis (Georgann)

As a researcher, I want to answer my own questions about my place in the world of adult education. The words of Lather (2007, 2008) regarding finding our way in the world of educational research support my own intuition to keep my research close to my lived experience. As an educator, I feel challenged by the restraints imposed on me as a teacher by the structures within which I work. These structures include physical components (classrooms, lecture halls, schools); administrative components (imposed curriculums, assessments, and evaluations; rules and regulations); and societal components (hegemonic structures, discourses, and practices) (Foucault, 1979). Foucault deconstructs the systems of power that operate in Western society as they influence our everyday behaviours. Foucault's framework serves as the theoretical basis for me to examine the challenges I experience while building my pedagogical practice as an adult educator in higher education. Brookfield (2001) similarly finds that "Foucault's analysis of power has direct

implications for common practices found in institutionally sponsored formal programs of adult education” (p. 1).

In this research study, I brought my own philosophical orientation to research derived from an understanding of a Foucauldian theory of power and its application to the practice of adult education. I acknowledge that my interviews were principally with practitioners in higher education. I also recognize that I have been drawn to these participants as I seek to find authentication in my own practice and as I explore the potential of sharing common experiences among practitioners. More importantly, I question how systemic and institutional restraints challenge or support individual pedagogical practices. I want to explore the tensions other practitioners experience as they negotiate the spaces between their own positions as educators and the structures they work within, recognizing my own subjectivities while honouring myself, my co-researchers, and our participants.

The preceding explores the subjectivities and analytical frameworks that ultimately informed our process and demonstrates the unique ways in which we bring our personal selves to our research process. We maintain that the intentional inclusion of the individual can lead to greater insight and authenticity (Cole & Knowles, 2001). We wear lenses from our own lived experiences that inform us, and we believe that to employ the use of our lenses authentically to enhance our perspectives and understandings, we must be diligent in our practice of reflexive inquiry. Any potential limitation of the use of a personal lens is minimized given that we are co-researchers actively engaged with each other in authentic critical reflexivity, grounded dialogue, and self-disclosure.

This collaborative research study raises questions around subjectivities, validity, and authenticity. To support our examination process we turn to the literature on collaborative research methodologies. Gershon (2009) explores how the turn toward collaborative research addresses these questions. Collaborative research is evolving as a methodology for researchers to address the implicit and explicit collaborations between the researchers and the researched and the inherently collaborative nature of interpreting meanings in other people’s lives. Gershon brings together a collection of work that confronts the issues around collaboration in qualitative research and documents how knowledge is formed through the dialogic process that provokes “deeper, more demanding quests for understanding than ordinarily required by researcher-centered methods” (Kroeger & Orillion, 2009, p. xi). In the foreword to Gershon’s edited book, Kroeger and Orillion remind us that

to engage in this type of research, researchers who are accustomed to, or socialized to, a certain amount of authority must allow space for alternative perspectives . . . [and] create space to allow others to speak to create multi layered, multidimensional texts that illuminate the complexities of social relations and structures in ways that are not possible using traditional methods. (p. xi)

An examination of the concept of researcher subjectivity should be foregrounded by an examination of the concept of validity in qualitative research. Angen (2000) confronts the concept of validity through proposing ethical validation and substantive validation. Ethical validation requires reflexivity on the part of the researchers and substantive validation requires an understanding of one’s own understandings of the topic. In this study,

we are attempting to deepen the validity of our work through the process of reflexivity. Further, Mazzei and Jackson (2009) examine the concept of voice in qualitative research in an attempt to bring the importance of the polyvocal and multiple nature of voice to the forefront. They problematize the "notions of voice inherited from metaphysics—voice as present, stable, authentic, and self-reflective" (p. 2). They further problematize "innovative practices that attempt to provide voice data that is more authentic, spontaneous, or realistic" (p. 2) as these methods may not confront the epistemological or methodological limits of voice. Practices may fail to recognize how individual or group voices are always subject to the unequal power relations that are present and their own exploitive research agendas and timelines. As researchers working in a team of three, we did experience the logistical problematics brought forward by Mazzei and Jackson. We had challenges with meeting face-to-face, meeting deadlines, and trying to write a document that honoured our individual and collective voices. Collaborative research methodologies also have to consider the issue of working together as co-researchers, considering working lives, family lives, and individual values and beliefs.

Kroeger and Orillion (2009) speak about "the need to constantly redefine how the project and self shapes and coheres collaborative work" (p. xi) and that "collaborative research has to be polyphonic or polyvocal—an orchestration of meanings drawn between participants and collectively constructed from various individual and/or group processes" (p. xi). We therefore decided that we would make explicit our polyvocal voices as we explored our subjectivities. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) propose that the researcher always speaks from a "distinct interpretive community that configures, in its special way, the multicultural, gendered components of the research act" (p. 20). This approach frames our work as white, middle-class women who are able-bodied, educated, and heterosexual, with particular epistemological and ontological perspectives.

Findings: Three Reflexive Lenses

As we emerged from our "getting lost" process, it was clear that the subjectivities that inform who we are as educators and researchers created unanticipated space within this study and focused the lens(es) we each wore in our analysis and interpretation of data. This critical insight resulted in the reconceptualization of our original research and the revisiting of our data with new sensitivity as to how our subjectivities informed the reanalysis, intertwining our own standpoints with those of our research participants. By locating our presence within the inquiry process in a more intentional manner, we were able not only to attend to our participants' stories, but to forefront how our own various perspectives informed our findings.

With this new insight, as discussed above, we mapped the initial 14 themes onto our own theoretical frameworks and constructed three final lenses from which to view the data: meaningfulness and ambiguities, power and critique, and reflection and authenticity. Our aim in identifying these themes is to account for our own subjectivities while honouring the voices of the participants. Drawing on Smith (2006), researchers must begin their investigation in people's everyday worlds, in this case that of our own, as well as adult educators through participant personal experiences stories, with the aim of "looking

out beyond the everyday to discover how it came to happen as it does” (p. 3).² Mazzei and Jackson (2009) challenge qualitative researchers to explore how each researcher’s representation of participant voices is driven through their own subjective epistemological limits. They encourage us to “search for new ways of considering voice that engage with the power relations that produce voice” (p. 3). This exploration requires an examination of the idiosyncratic subjectivities each researcher brings to the research process. In examining our data through our subjective lenses, we achieve a level of authenticity we were unable to claim in absence of these lenses.

The lens of meaningfulness and ambiguities encompasses the initial themes of engagement, theory/practice connection, applied learning, and no blueprint for adult education. Engagement was variously explained as the importance of understanding learners and their backgrounds, meeting learner needs, making learning meaningful, creating relationships, giving valid feedback, giving learners responsibility for own learning, co-constructing curriculum, and respecting learners’ experiences. The theory-to-practice connection was put forth by several participants who spoke specifically about the importance of grounding theory in practice and vice versa. One community non-profit educator stated that she had a “powerful learning experience” in university, exploring literature that connected to her beliefs and experiences about anti-oppression and feminism. There was a “practical interplay” of theories with her experiences that enabled her to make connections in her life, strengthening her convictions. Applied learning was discussed in terms of helping learners transfer knowledge to their lives in practical applications of learning material. A workplace trainer described competitions that she created between stores in different locations in order to learn about new products and do team building. She stressed the need for employees to be able to apply what they learned directly. The challenges were “fun but educational but still [had a] serious business outcome.”

By viewing the above original themes through the lens of meaningfulness and ambiguities, we incorporate the ways in which our participants focused on making learning meaningful while acknowledging that there was no one right way to approach education and each unique learning situation. Our participants, who spoke of the importance of engaging learners and understanding their needs, possessed a certain willingness to be open-minded about their practice. They spoke of the importance of listening to their learners, observing them, and adapting practice as required. We realize that our call for participants itself (and the ways in which we circulated it through adult education listservs and personal contacts) was more likely to attract educators who were reflexive, prepared to discuss their work, and willing to improve their practice. We may have unconsciously attracted and chosen participants who aligned with some of our own particular epistemological understandings of adult education. For example, since learner engagement is an important part of our practice, we may have unintentionally “give[n] voice” (Mazzei & Jackson, 2009, p. 1) to this particular thematic structure. The lens of meaningfulness and ambiguities rises out of our own subjectivities, as we perceive the complexity of adult education theory and

2 Although this research study did not use the methodology of institutional ethnography that Smith (2006) promotes, her core concept as it relates to ruling relations is helpful. In fact, Smith herself discusses how institutional ethnography is not solely a methodology, but also a sociology.

practice, as did several of our participants. Power is a critical but often overlooked aspect of this complexity.

The second lens of power and critique encompasses the initial themes of organizational constraints, marginalization/systemic societal barriers, assessment as inhibiting learning, networking, and the emotional toll of work with marginalized people. In our initial analysis, we considered connecting these themes to a societal power critique, but did not originally do so because participants, other than those discussing marginalization/systemic social barriers, did not. However, there was a need to take our analysis past what the participants said to explore the ways in which their lives and their educational work was socially organized by ruling relations of which they may not have been aware—hence the combination of these themes under the lens of power and critique.

Many participants involved in community work and non-profit organizations discussed the ways in which their learners were marginalized, disenfranchised, and oppressed. They described systemic barriers such as funding, government policies, and red tape that restricted their ability to give help where it was needed. They spoke of poverty, racism, and gender issues. Key to them was the necessity of understanding the social and political context in order to advocate for their learners. One participant who had worked in a food bank as an educator stated that it was often easy to get people to give to the food bank, but not to see the systemic social barriers that marginalized the lives of those who need food.

Assessment as inhibiting learning was discussed by participants in post-secondary institutions, in the workplace, and in sport. Participants stated that organizationally dictated assessments and outcomes hindered meeting learner needs and decreased trust. Learners were often more concerned with assessments than with learning. When assessments were separated from the learning environment (as discussed by a coach) or were ignored (as discussed by an educator in the justice system), learners were more likely to take risks and to be honest about their needs. As a coach stated, "We started to change things, we stayed within the curriculum but we allowed them to open up to their own learning." This approach allowed for more learner-centredness, increasing trust and collaboration.

Organizational constraints came out most often in the interviews with participants working in post-secondary institutions. They spoke of the power of a teaching assistant relative to faculty, of part-time faculty relative to full-time faculty and to students, and of college leaders relative to program developers. The teaching assistants also spoke of a desire to shift power to students and give them more responsibility for their own learning, which was received both positively and negatively by both students and faculty. Marginalization of adult education as a field was discussed by many workplace educators, who often had difficulties being involved in decision making and were told just to give learners "a shot in the arm" and get them back to work. One participant stated that her attempts to implement training were like "running into a wall every time . . . really, really discouraging . . . we [workplace training developers] were just seen as that evil add-on that they had to have in the company." Downsizing, job turnover, and mandatory training were also discussed.

The community workers in particular spoke of the importance of networking due to a lack of sustainable funding in programs that weren't perceived as "hard core"

enough (e.g., job skills) to receive support. They discussed the need to make connections, share resources, mentor others, and volunteer. One participant stated that community organizations needed to “share, share, share . . . whatever kind of resources you have, you’re stronger together than you are in your own silo.” Participants who worked with marginalized people spoke of the emotional toll of their practice and described the need to build relationships to deal with their stress, sadness, “burnout,” and frustration with the system. One participant left a community advocate role due to feeling helpless over an issue that was not receiving adequate support and resources from the government.

In viewing the above themes through the lens of power and critique, it is telling where issues of power were discussed as organizational constraints and where they were discussed as marginalization and systemic societal barriers. Equally telling is where issues of power were not realized at all. Although there was some crossover, participants in post-secondary institutions, health, corporate training, and coaching were more likely to speak of organizational constraints (if they spoke of the issue of power at all), and those in community work were more likely to speak of marginalization and systemic societal barriers. Community workers also spoke of the need for practicality, but this was generally done with a broader, more critical social perspective than other participants. Community non-profit work (past or current) was the most common indication that participants would speak of issues of marginalization and social barriers. Those in more privileged positions with the general ability to make decisions and access resources (even if near the bottom of their organizational hierarchy) arguably have more power than those in less privileged positions, who are often fighting for funding and realizing the challenges in working with marginalized populations. Therefore, it can be argued that those in the former group did not see power as an issue because they themselves had access to power, while the latter did not. Our participants were very homogenous, almost all white and middle-class, which was likely a contributing factor to the themes in their stories, highlighting the importance of the use of critical reflection to explore implications that may be beyond adult educators’ personal experiences. The fact that the majority of our participants did not address issues of societal power highlights the need to use critical theory to underpin reflexive practice; otherwise, the complex ways in which society and education can perpetuate marginalization and oppression remain largely invisible. By employing the use of a power analysis and critical reflexivity, we can “explicate the actual social relations in which people’s lives are embedded and . . . make these visible to them/ourselves” (Smith, 1999, p. 74). By acknowledging ambiguities and engaging learners, adult educators can critique power relations as well as attend to the practicalities of learning.

The third lens of reflection and authenticity encompasses the initial themes of reflective practice/knowing self, connections to daily life/lived experience, transformation/resistance, experience-based practice of educators, and acknowledging whole being. Our participants were self-described reflective practitioners who take great pride in the work they do and strive for continual improvement despite the systemic obstacles they face.

Reflective practice was a common theme, as several participants discussed the importance of learning from their own experiences as educators, paying attention to what worked and what did not, and spending time observing and listening. Participants felt that reflecting on their own actions and perceptions was key to their lives as educators

and as people. There was a need to be open-minded and flexible, and adapt as needed. While each of our participants could arguably be defined as reflective practitioners, not all participants specifically spoke about reflective practice or ongoing learning as an educator. Various educators explained their practices as developing intuitively: "I built my practice instinctively and intuitively and with reflection"; through experimentation: "We developed our practice through trial/error, not through theory"; and by observation: "Observe, observe, observe." They were willing to assess their own practice actively and continuously in order to improve it.

Participants described how who they are in life informs the ways they teach and vice versa. The lived experiences of learners and educators are central to their practice. They discussed that learning happens everywhere and is ongoing and lifelong. Participants spoke of the need to understand their own stories and those of their learners in order to be effective practitioners. Participants expressed the importance of recognizing and utilizing connections between learning and personal and professional experiences. They did not separate learning in an educational context (whether sport, community work, or classroom teaching) from the lives of themselves and their learners.

Transformative learning/resistance was a central part of two interviews with participants who work in the area of college faculty development. They discussed how many of their learners were very resistant to learning new ways of teaching, but how they used transformative learning activities to confront resistance and explore why it was occurring. One workplace trainer who was involved in retraining programs for injured workers stated that "second-chance training after an injury is transformative." Resistance in particular was mentioned by a community health educator who found that her learners just wanted a "quick fix" and were reluctant to engage in discussions or explorations of self: "They do not want to get to know each other . . . They want the answers."

Certain participants described how they felt that the experience of educators is often undervalued but is central to their practice. Two participants spoke of how their experiences were not validated until they gained the appropriate credentials. One participant eschewed certification, saying it was only experience that indicated whether one was a good educator. These participants spoke of the value of their experiences in their ability to problem-solve and in becoming a better educator. One participant who works as a faculty developer in a post-secondary institution stated: "I did adult education for 25 years and I didn't know who Stephen Brookfield was or who Malcolm Knowles was. It was experience-based." When she later learned about particular theories, she incorporated those that supported her thinking into her practice, not vice versa. Experience was the bedrock of her practice.

Several participants discussed the importance of addressing learning holistically and acknowledging the whole beings of themselves as educators and of their learners. They spoke of the mind-body connection and of the need to acknowledge and deal with emotions in order to, as one participant stated, "understand the whole being, the whole human being, and not just conveying some knowledge"—for instance, the "technical teaching of a language." Another participant used health as an example, stating a need to "legitimize adult learning in the field of health protection." Adult learning, she said, is "much broader than literacy, it's the whole well-being of people."

Interestingly, when viewing these themes through our third lens of reflection and authenticity it appeared that, even though the participants self-described themselves as reflective practitioners, their reflections were based mainly on self and on improving practice, striving for authenticity in their practice, but not on challenging overall frameworks and paradigms to bring in new understandings. They discussed their practice of engaging in reflection on self and other, but in the absence of applying a critical lens, we question the presence of engagement in critical reflexivity and to what degree this is a reflection of surface versus deep learning (Tagg, 2003).

Discussion and Implications

The three lenses of meaningfulness and ambiguities, power and critique, and reflection and authenticity can be extended from the examination of the professional practice of the adult educators in our inquiry and further applied to our own collaborative research practice and back again to raise implications for the practice of adult education professionals. In seeking to examine ambiguities and complexities in educator practice, we were confronted with those within our own research process. In originally attempting to withhold our individual power from the process, we limited the collective power we had to examine our process more critically. By engaging in an initial reflective process that lacked an authentic critical lens, we almost missed an opportunity to understand our participant practice more deeply and make greater meaning of our own individual and collective lived experiences.

Lenses serve both to expand and limit our world view. How often do we as educators and researchers alike believe we are being critically reflexive in our practice when our true understanding of our subjectivities is in fact a limited or surface-level perspective? How often do we find ourselves in situations that truly confront our understandings of self and other? This research inquiry provided a unique opportunity to challenge each of us to be open-minded in order to alter our process when it became apparent we were unconsciously informing our data analysis; to unearth our assumptions by being “continually alert to . . . biases and . . . subjectivity” (Glesne, 1999, p. 151); to expand our individual and, consequently, our collaborative lenses; to “get lost” (Lather, 2007) in a process that allowed us the space needed to delve into truer insights; to re-examine our subjectivities “to confirm, expand, and inform” our work and understand how they inform who and how we are, “and thereby contribute to the accumulative nature of knowledge” (Lather, 2007, p. 151); and, as a consequence, gain greater personal and participant insight than the original inquiry would allow.

By framing our work around Cole and Knowles’ (2000) concept of reflexive inquiry and striving for authenticity as researchers, we have confronted our own tensions between our implicit epistemologies and our explicit methodologies. We moved from thinking about what we know and how we know it to thinking about what we do and how we do it. More often than not our subjectivities are unconscious in the collaborative research process; thus, without authentically raising them to consciousness and examining their influence, we are not really doing what we set out to do as qualitative researchers.

In this research, in seeking to understand the ambiguities and complexities of adult educators' professional practice, we questioned our own practice and how our individual epistemologies influenced the research process, including the design of the study, the data collection and analysis, and the findings and implications. By pausing in our collective process to examine critically and acknowledge our subjectivities, we were in turn able to analyze our participants' experiences at a deeper level, achieving greater understanding of, and authenticity in, both the process and outcome of our inquiry. In reconceptualizing our original research, identifying and employing the three lenses of meaningfulness and ambiguities, power and critique, and reflection and authenticity to reinterpret our data, and intentionally locating our presence within, rather than beyond, the collaborative inquiry process, we were able to explore our participants' stories more authentically, consciously informed by our subjectivities. Just as participants described how who they are in life informs the ways they teach and vice versa, we were able, by challenging ourselves to consciously "get lost" and critically examine our individual and collective processes, to explore at a much deeper level the degree to which subjectivities inform who we are as collaborative researchers and in turn apply that deeper understanding to the analysis and interpretation of our participant data. The lived experiences of learners, educators, and, we argue, researchers, are indeed central to their practice. Understanding on a deeper level how those lived experiences inform researcher subjectivity, particularly in collaborative research, is critical to ensuring the validity of any qualitative inquiry.

This research process provokes reflection into the possibility of authenticity in collaborative qualitative research and the role that subjectivity plays as a research tool. We can push the limits of our own subjectivities through a critical analysis of self to other. Research into the practice of our discipline should honour individual autonomy, life history, experience, and individual context, as well as interrogate social relations. As researchers we need to ensure that we continually link theory to practice in the interest of authenticity. This study has pushed us toward a new form of praxis in ways we had not previously considered. Examining our own epistemologies has explicitly and transparently allowed a close connection to the concept of authenticity in research. Researcher subjectivities play a crucial role in reflexive inquiry and, when authentically raised and invited into the research process, become powerful tools in collaborative qualitative research.

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