

## CHALLENGING THE UNITARY SELF: ADULT EDUCATION, FEMINIST THEORY, AND NONUNITARY SUBJECTIVITY

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### Abstract

*As the millennium comes to a close, the sociocultural influences of the mid-1900s that shaped the unitary model of self have changed. In this article the possibilities of a nonunitary model of the self in adult education are examined. From two parallel strands, the theoretical and the personal, I argue that a nonunitary model is better suited to catch the full complexity of human experience. Possible implications for adult education theory and practice are explored.*

### Résumé

*En cette fin de millénaire, on constate l'éclatement des influences socioculturelles ayant donné lieu au modèle unitaire du moi vers le milieu du XIX<sup>ème</sup> siècle. Dans cet article, j'analyse la possibilité d'un moi non unitaire en éducation des adultes, selon deux points de vue, l'un théorique et l'autre personnel. Je soutiens que la complexité de l'expérience humaine est mieux cernée par un modèle non unitaire de l'identité humaine. Ce constat comporte également des conséquences théoriques et pratiques.*

An interesting dilemma confronts us as human beings. We think about ourselves as having a core identity, a distinct self that interacts with the world around us, an internal sense of oneness. Yet we also experience ourselves as multiple, as many selves, a complex reality of often conflicting inner experiences of who we are.

How do we make sense of all this? How do we think about the self in a way that captures these contradictory experiences? The question of how the self is conceptualized has been of growing interest to me in recent years—both personally, as I find myself needing to examine my inner experience in new ways, and professionally, as I encounter the work of others in this area (especially feminist theorists) and explore the implications of their ideas for the theory and practice of adult learning. Those two strands, the personal and the professional, inform one another as I engage ideas. This process is not uncommon, as our personal experience often has a profound influence on our intellectual lives. In this article, I make both strands visible and move freely

between them so that I can better represent the ongoing conversation between experience and ideas. I stress the ongoing character of all this—although I am less satisfied with one conceptualization (the unitary self) and more persuaded of the usefulness of another (the nonunitary self), I still struggle with unresolved questions about both. My goal is to pose the problem, to explore some of the issues involved and their implications for adult education, and to interest others in joining this exploration.

### The Unitary Model of the Self

Conceptualizations of the self are never static; they are under steady revision over time because they are socially and historically constituted. Baumeister (1987) traces the notion of the self in the West from medieval to modern times, and the changes are often dramatic—basic modern notions of individuality, for example, are simply not found in medieval conceptualizations, and ideas of self-awareness begin to appear only in the 17th century. The modern notion of the self is unitary. Although its roots go back to the Enlightenment, most people in the West today understand it in terms of humanistic psychology. I think Carl Rogers (1961) articulates this modern self most clearly; quoting Kierkegaard, he proposes that the goal of life is "to be that self which one truly is" (p. 166). I see the search for the authentic self as the hallmark of this model. It is interesting that Rogers assumes not only that there *is* a core self that waits to be found, but even more that the individual has the ability to uncover it. It is no doubt this aspect—the capacity for agency—that is part of the enormous appeal of this model. It assures us as individuals that we have the power to change ourselves, and that kind of power is deeply attractive. Rogers describes a self in process of becoming, and he is quite clear exactly what that authentic self will look like: self-directed and autonomous, responsible, increasingly complex, more open to experience, and accepting and trusting of self and others. Getting there is a highly rational process, which is not to say that Rogers does not account for emotions, because he does, but the engine that drives this authentic self is reason.

This is a unitary model in a number of senses. The core self is utterly harmonious; any conflict that is experienced comes from outside expectations, the desire to please others, or attempts to be other than the authentic self. There is an essential self, what Weedon (1997, p. 32) calls "an essence at the heart of the individual which is unique, fixed, and coherent and which makes her what she is." And it is unitary because it is highly individualistic; power rests with the individual, and sociocultural forces play only a secondary role.

As a product of the 1960s and humanistic psychology, the idea of a unified, authentic self made perfect sense to me. I can remember discovering Carl Rogers' work and reading it with great enthusiasm, finding in it the theorizing of a notion of self that caught my own experience of personal development. The idea of becoming my authentic self captured my longing to become more integrated, more authentic, more whole. My interior life was always a vital reality for me, and my early adult years were spent searching within and without for a way of being in the world that fit me. Spirituality was an important arena for my explorations, no doubt because finding meaning in my own life paralleled the larger search for meaning in life itself. Humanistic psychology meshed well with those inner searches. It provided me with a language and a model of self that was useful in understanding my own growth. But it was not a perfect match, even then. What it failed to explain satisfactorily was my experience of struggle and consistent inability to become that ideal self I longed to be. I blamed myself for those struggles and for that failure. I was the one who was falling short, who was inadequate to the task; I was guilty.

### **Moving Beyond the Unitary Self**

I think my first sense that I might not be totally responsible here was in the 1970s. I was a Catholic nun in those years and was directing retreats and doing pastoral counseling in hospitals and parishes; in that context I began reading some feminist theologians. I especially remember Valerie Saiving's (1979) essay in which she deconstructs the traditional notion of sin, exposing its masculinist origins, and offers a feminist construction that turns the traditional definition on its head. Sin for women, she argues, is not the radical separation of the self from others through pride but rather the "underdevelopment or negation of the self" (p. 37). What this idea suggested to me was that the traditional norms for understanding myself before God were reflective of male experience and needed to be recast in ways that made sense for me as a woman. I think this was my first major insight into how not only women's but nearly everyone's understanding of the self is shaped by culture. I began to understand that how I thought about my self was not something that was fully within my own control.

What I experienced here, of course, was the whole idea of a socially constructed reality: in this case the construction of the self. I began to understand that my sense of self is not located within me in an unambiguous way but is rather an ongoing construction that is both personal and social. Anderson (1990) argues that it is precisely the notion of a socially constructed

reality that is responsible for the dramatic and often unsettling transition into a postmodern world. This notion, of course, has enormous implications for how we as individuals understand the self. Griffiths (1995, p. 79), echoing Marx, asserts that "we collectively make ourselves, but not in conditions of our own choosing." For postmodernists this gives rise to the idea of a nonunitary self or of nonunitary subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> This self is nonunitary in the sense that there is no single, core self that exists separate and unaffected by its sociocultural context. How we as individuals think about ourselves is shaped by culture, ideology, and language; therefore our subjectivity is not straightforward but is, in fact, contested, usually at a level beneath our conscious awareness. Although postmodernists do not agree on how exactly the self should be conceptualized—or much else, actually—they do suggest that the self is "characterized by fragmentation, lacks much self-awareness and makes no claim of self-consciousness" (Rosenau, 1992, p. 54). It is, by intention, a negation of the autonomy, agency, and rationality of the modernist unitary self.

I encountered these ideas in a more developed way when I returned to graduate school and began reading feminist theory. A key feminist concern is explaining not only how women are oppressed within patriarchy but also how and why they are complicit in their own oppression (see, for example, Weedon, 1997; Griffiths, 1995). This complicity can not be explained with a model of the self as unitary; it requires an understanding of subjectivity which is both contested by culture and split between experience and interpretation. When I reflect on my earlier experience, now from a feminist perspective, I can identify many times when this was happening, but one memory has particular force. My mother and I were sitting on our front stoop when I was probably 12 or 13; she was telling me how important it was in any marriage to put the husband at the center. She gave as one example her practice of getting cleaned up at the end of the day so that she would look fresh and appealing to my father when he returned home. I know it never occurred to her, nor to me at that time, that this simple act also made less visible the costs of her labor to maintain the household day by day, nor that the entire structure of 1950s domesticity served his interests far more than hers. In those days she understood herself in relationship to my father, defining herself as the good and dutiful wife. Although her experience was of a quite narrow scope of boring domestic labor

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<sup>1</sup>In this article I use *self* and *subjectivity* somewhat interchangeably, though I understand subjectivity to relate more specifically to the way in which individuals experience the self, at both conscious and unconscious levels.

and, as a military wife, the disruption of frequent moves in support of her husband's career, she interpreted her life in that context not as servitude but as virtue. It is impossible to understand my mother's interpretation of her self and her life as coming from a unitary, autonomous, rational self (unless someone were to argue that she was somehow choosing subjugation and oppression—hardly a reasonable or fair interpretation). But if I think of her as a nonunitary self, I can understand how she experienced herself as both virtuous and oppressed, though the latter awareness was less conscious and came to the surface only occasionally and obliquely as anger and resentment. Understanding her as nonunitary enables me to represent more of the complexity of her selfhood.

The idea of multiplicity is implicit in this nonunitary model of the self, and it derives from the multiple positionings people experience. Gergen (1991) describes this multiplicity as relational, a function of their overexposure to others through communication technologies. He argues that "as we become increasingly conjoined with our social surroundings, we come to reflect those surroundings. There is a *populating of the self*, reflecting the infusion of partial identities through social saturation" (p. 49, italics in the original). Today, in the period of identity politics, personal identity is not singular but plural. I can identify myself, for example, as multiply positioned: white, female, of Anglo-Irish descent, liberal Democrat, rebellious Catholic, feminist, and so forth. But this multiplicity also exists beneath conscious awareness, as some of the work on gender and racial consciousness reveals. I think some of the most interesting research in that area has been done with women who are educational administrators (Bloom and Munro, 1995; Chase and Bell, 1994), no doubt because the contradictions and tensions inherent in the lives of women within patriarchy are most visible when women assume roles of power and influence in male-dominated institutions and fields. These studies use a nonunitary model of the self to examine the complex and often contradictory interpretations these women give of themselves and their life experience. They are at once rebellious and subservient, aware of gender discrimination and in denial of the limits patriarchy places on them, resisting racial oppression and succumbing to its effects. Working from a model of the self as nonunitary enables this complexity of multiple selves to become visible.

For me, now, this is most real when I examine my experience as a woman within the academy. Establishing my place within a decidedly male world gives rise to a sense of multiple selves. The self in force as I stand in a classroom, where I engage students around ideas that interest and excite me and over which

I feel a comfortable degree of mastery, is very different from the self that sits in faculty meetings or serves on university committees, where I develop a sensitivity to the complex political realities at play and learn to negotiate within and between the various power interests. There is also the prepossessing self that had to emerge during the tenure process and who serves me whenever I have to revise my vita or otherwise present myself for the review and judgment of others. She is not someone I particularly like, but I can not survive in this environment without her. Of course, there is also and always a doubting self, one unsure I really belong here, uncertain of my abilities and of the value of my ideas; I know her quite well and struggle to be compassionate towards her. In my lived experience this multiplicity is more than functioning within the different roles which this career demands, or understanding the different parts of my psyche making themselves present. Each of these selves is *authentically me* and cannot be denied.

Increasing age also seems to foster this sense of multiplicity. Sometimes this sense is connected to the body. When I was recuperating from major surgery several years ago, an embodied self took over for several days; this experience was new and sobering for me—though I encounter her now with more frequency, if with less force, as I adjust to midlife's physical declines. Multiplicity also comes with the renegotiation of earlier roles. I feel this particularly with my 79-year-old father. As I interact with him I am many selves: the responsible care giver, guided by a rational assessment of his needs; the counselor, trying to help him deal with the losses of aging; the counselor's client, trying to deal with my own frustrations with him; the child, shaped by my particular experience of this father. They are conflicted, messy, and hard to make sense of, but all these selves are very real and undeniably me.

I can, of course, make an historical argument for this seeming contradiction. The unitary model of the self is a product of the modern era and it reflects the values and lived experience of the mid1900s. But historical and social conditions have changed significantly now at the end of this century from what they were earlier. Gergen (1991) sees technology as the major source of change, linking people to one another in complex and ever accelerating ways and creating endless possibilities, both real and imagined. Nearly everyone is exposed to many more competing belief systems, many more ways of seeing the world, and this often results in a sense of self that is fragmented and often under siege. Powell (1998) argues that "we live increasingly in a world of interconnected differences—differences amplified and multiplied at the speed of electricity. No longer is there one morality or myth or ritual or dance or

dream or philosophy or concept of self or god or culture or style of art that predominates" (pp. 3-4). This plurality of voices and positions, creating a vertigo of competing claims to truth, marks the postmodern era. The unitary model of the self no longer works to capture this complex and contested experience; people need new ways of conceptualizing the self that fit their own social and historical era, and I believe a nonunitary model is the better fit.

### **Implications for Adult Education**

So, what might some of the implications of all this be for adult education? I think the implications for learning theory are particularly rich. Theories of learning for a nonunitary self would have to be quite different from current theory that assumes a unitary self. Knowles (1980), for example, presumes a unitary self when he outlines the principles of andragogy—for him adult learners are autonomous (self-directed), agenic (able to use their experience as a resource for learning), and rational (problem-centered in their learning focus). The model of the unitary self defines the shape of this familiar theory. Applying a nonunitary model would make our understanding of self-directed learning more complex. What self is acting here and what sociocultural forces are shaping the direction of the learning by, for example, defining the nature of the problem to be addressed? The learner would no longer be understood as an autonomous actor but instead would be positioned within a complex social and cultural context.

Mezirow's (1991) theory of perspective transformation provides another good example. He understands the self to be autonomous and rational, and he offers a theory in which development and change come about through a process of critical reflection on assumptions and taking action on the new insights gained. However, if a model of nonunitary self is used, the primacy of rationality is challenged, because other forces, like emotionality, are also powerful, and the whole notion of agency is made problematic. The question of agency is a complex one. Action, of course, is still possible and desirable. For example, as Hart (1990) argues, the process of consciousness raising has played a highly significant role in the liberation of women, both personally and collectively, and other emancipatory learning projects are directed towards goals for enormous improvement in human lives. What a nonunitary model of the self offers, I believe, is a more complex understanding of the interplay of personal agency and the colonizing power of particular sociocultural forces, because people can experience both liberation and oppression simultaneously. A theory of transformational learning that takes as its starting point a nonunitary

self could help account for this complex and often contradictory experience of multiplicity that operates both within and beneath conscious awareness.

Let me offer an example. In recent years I have become increasingly interested in the notion of narrative as a way to understand how adults make sense of their experience. This approach takes as its starting point the fact that people understand themselves and present themselves to others by means of stories; in a very real sense they lead storied lives (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992). Those stories, through both their content and their structure, give people a way to understand their inner experience and the meaning that experience has for them. As a methodology, this approach is particularly suited to the study of subjectivity and identity (Riessman, 1993; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber, 1998). Paired with the notion of nonunitary subjectivity, it offers a way of accessing the various selves through their different narratives. Currently I am studying identity development in marginalized women through the collection of life histories. In my first group, incarcerated women, I am hearing a complex weaving of voices from each woman as she struggles to articulate her life story. Common to most is the presence of several selves: the Good Woman, capable of love and right action, especially as expressed towards her children or other family members; the Bad Woman, guilty of serious crimes, some of them violent; the Victim, damaged in significant and multiple ways by others; and the Racial or Ethnic Self, embedded in a culture with particular mores and values, especially as they apply to women. These narrative threads are often in conversation with one another, for example the Good Woman with the Bad, struggling to integrate and make sense of these apparently contradictory identities. I expect that listening to these multiple narratives over time will give me a new way to theorize personal change and transformation. Already I can see a complex process of ongoing negotiation of meaning across these narratives, suggesting that transformational learning is not simply the linear and rational process depicted by Mezirow but rather a messy, multilayered, and multifaceted process that involves the action and interplay of many selves within the person.

I believe this model of the self as nonunitary offers new ways of thinking about our practice as adult educators. I have found it especially useful when I teach feminist courses, in that it gives me another way to understand the dynamics of motivation and resistance. Typically my feminist classes draw primarily women and, given the conservative context in which my university is situated, these women do not usually identify themselves as feminists, though all enroll in these courses because they have some interest in exploring this

perspective. What I experience in these students as the semester unfolds is an interesting ambivalence towards the ideas presented. With a nonunitary notion of the self I can understand this in terms of different selves being engaged with the material in different ways. For example, I can see the women in whom an Autonomous Self welcomes the ideas that support self-definition and wider professional opportunities, while their Relational Self feels that their marriage could be threatened by such notions and so resists them. I also often see a Fundamentalist Religious Self that rejects ideas of gender equality, in uncomfortable dialogue with a Rebellious Self that resents being forced into limiting roles and categories. I have put my own labels on the multiplicity here; it would be interesting to invite my students to name their various selves and to describe their different interactions with the course material. If I were to do that, then the nonunitary model could become a useful teaching tool, providing a means for self exploration and understanding.

I do not believe that the unitary model of the self works for us anymore. Personally I feel increasingly fragmented in my life, and longing for an authentic self seems nostalgic at best. I believe that multiplicity is everyone's normal state. Overall, I am arguing that a nonunitary model of the self is more congruent with people's experience of self in this postmodern age and that it provides a better analytic tool than does the unitary self for understanding that experience. It provides us as adult educators new and more complex ways to conceptualize the learning process and to think about our practice. There is much to do in exploring its theoretical possibilities. The ways in which it can inform our understanding of the goals of adult education, for example, need much more development—as does addressing the tension between multiplicity and the quest for inner coherence. I am hopeful that others in the field will consider it worth exploring further.

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