Refereed Article

Homeless Women, Street Smarts, and Their Survival

Carole Pearce

Abstract

This article highlights a dissertation study designed to examine how homeless women learned to survive in their daily lives. Their relationships contributed to many years of unsettling experiences and continuous transitional situations. Each woman followed a progression of sophisticated street smarts, but each eventually faced a devastating decision that served as the impetus for a learning experience that resulted in an empowering change.

Introduction

This study examined the informal learning of homeless women, the factors that shape their learning, and the situations that inspire it. Furthermore, this study examined how influential individuals (parents, significant other, etc.) affected the participants' perspectives of learning, whether their voice is "heard" or "silenced," and who is the agent of silence. The data analysis noted specifically how each woman defines knowledge, who values that knowledge, and how this knowledge affects what and how she learns. This focus revealed societal issues and concerns that affect homeless women's learning.

Poor women, victims of social and economic oppression, are the most likely individuals to become homeless. By the very nature of this oppression, they must learn to survive in adverse circumstances. These women are faced with numerous challenges that may warrant the attainment of further knowledge. There are times that stressful situations, such as loss of job or change in familial circumstances, motivate an adult to seek new information. Within the social context of homelessness, women in transition must learn to survive and, one hopes, realize a better quality of life

Carole Pearce is a graduate of the Adult Education doctoral program at The Pennsylvania State Univesity.

in order to move beyond homelessness and poverty. Homeless women, coping with daily multiple and adverse situations, make decisions based on prior knowledge obtained in both formal and informal learning environments. Specifically, formal learning environments include public schools, vocational-technical training schools, business schools, and the like, while informal learning environments are not structured and constitute primarily an individual's daily life experiences.

Welton (1995) suggests that all social relations provide the arena in which learning takes place and refers to this viewpoint as the social learning paradigm. He suggests that there are three types of institutions that "are the indispensable source from which our character and identity is formed and reformed" (p. 134). They are family and schools; groups and associations; and cultural groups that promote religion, art, social norms, and the like. Personal identity and behavior patterns are formed through our social learning processes.

An examination of the socio-economic situations in which these women's experiences are grounded is useful in providing a clearer understanding of the social learning paradigm that is advocated by Welton (1995). The social learning paradigm recognizes that all learning, whether formal or informal, is influenced by an individual's daily social interactions. Therefore, learning may be seen as in integrative, relational process. Specifically, the social learning paradigm examines the relationships of individuals within the public and private spheres and how these relationships affect the learning process.

This article will provide a profile of a study of four women and their life experiences while homeless. This overview will include a discussion of two paradigms of women's learning, analytical and relational, and examine the informal learning of homeless women. The research methods, including a description of the study participants and an overview of the thematic analysis, will follow. A brief presentation of the prevalent themes drawn from each woman's oral history will frame the study findings by highlighting their progression of street smarts. The implications for adult theory and practice will also be included. The discussion now turns to an examination of particular ways that women learn through various life experiences.

Paradigms of Women's Learning

The context of women's learning is patterned by and reflects the multiple roles and tasks performed by women in our society. In turn, their

relationships form an intricate web that serves as a foundation for their ongoing learning experiences. Bateson (1994) exemplifies this notion by suggesting that by "living and learning, we become ambidextrous" (p. 9). Furthermore, Bateson (1994) reminds us that sometimes we learn by "plan and experience" (p. 42) and at other times we learn by observation. Most importantly, each of us learns how to transfer knowledge from one experience to another. Knights (1995) suggests that women's relationships, roles, and life experiences serve as interdependent components of their learning outcomes.

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) conducted a study that examined how women formulate and value truth, knowledge, and authority. One of the central observations that emerged from their research is that women's knowledge and their learning styles incorporate relational tendencies. Specifically, what a woman learns in constructing her own knowledge base is based in part on her social and familial relations at that particular time. Weiler (1991) suggests that sometimes feelings and emotions may contribute to women's knowledge. This notion of relational tendencies is supported further by Gilligan (1982), whose seminal work on moral development revealed that girls and women focus on relationships while boys and men focus on rules and rights.

Women's learning may be viewed from two perspectives: the analytical learning paradigm and the relational learning paradigm. In real life, it is difficult to distinguish the characteristics and tendencies inherent to each paradigm. However, for the purposes of this discussion, each learning process will be examined separately.

The analytic learning paradigm investigates the acquisition of knowledge that is gathered through formal institutions. The relevance of including this paradigm stems from a feminist interpretation that knowledge obtained in formal institutional settings reflects the male-dominated norms pervasive in our society. Specifically, this knowledge has been sanctioned by society and taught in a manner that meets the needs of men and society.

The relational learning paradigm examines knowledge that is acquired from informal sources, particularly life experiences. Of primary interest is how women utilize what they learn outside of formal institutions, such as schools and community activities. Britton (1996) reminds us that "the concept of understanding . . . the idea of how human beings come to know, [sic] is shaped, along with every other concept, by the aims or interests of the community in which it emerges" (p. 40).

Learning and understanding are not always mutually exclusive. Hart (1990) views understanding as "both a process of completion and of opening up the view on the terrain of unexplored interpretations of experience and of possibilities for action" (p. 55). Furthermore, Hart (1992) reminds us that "understanding involves first of all moral-practical rather than technical or analytical knowledge. This knowledge represents a complicated web of assumptions, convictions, beliefs, and values" (p. 149). However, it is important to realize that what a woman understands affects both how she learns and when she realizes that learning is taking place or has taken place. The most critical component of this notion or observation of learning is that an individual often does not realize that learning has taken place until she/he uses that acquired information.

Informal Learning of Homeless Women

The following synopsis of the informal learning of homeless women provides the context for this research study. The term "street smarts" refers to the various ways that each woman went about surviving while in transition, whether it be negotiating to reside with a friend, to live on the streets, or to seek refuge in a shelter. Acquiring street smarts is a very complicated, intricate process. This process begins as a child when the learning process begins; such learning is often very intrinsic at first, or learning is accomplished by observing one's parents. Formal schooling also plays a part in this process as the child, as an adolescent, negotiates her social relationships both in the public world and in the private world of home. How the individual feels about herself, her self-esteem, is very important and affects how decisions are engineered. When a girl or woman is abused, whether physically, emotionally, or both, she will make decisions under duress and often will take drastic measures that ordinarily would be of a more calculating nature. As one participant commented, "When you're being abused, you question everything that you're doing."

Homeless women utilize both analytical and relational knowledge to cope with the many situations presented in their lives. Conflict remains because society values analytic learning; however, the women's relational knowledge is most often more useful in handling various situations. This conflict has an impact on their self-efficacy and decision-making processes, processes that ultimately affect the likelihood that these women will move from a life of homelessness to a more stable existence.

Research Methods

The design of this study was constructed by drawing from the tenets of three forms of research: qualitative research, phenomenological methods, and feminist research. Qualitative research is based upon the notion that reality is best understood by examining the social interaction among individuals. The underlying philosophy of phenomenological research methods guides the researcher to examine a specific situation within a particular environment. Feminist research methods (methods that are used by individuals who consider themselves feminists), with their acknowledgment of "voice," guide the relationship between the researcher and the participants while the former records each woman's oral history.

Three in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the four study participants. These interviews focused on obtaining specific information regarding the critical incidents, or significant events, that each woman experienced while homeless. Evidence that each woman had learned some information and how this learning took place was sought from the transcripts of her collection of stories. The transcripts were then examined to identify the emerging themes and categories that were used to formulate the study findings.

Study Participants

Three white women and one African American woman participated in this study. All four of the women were mothers: One woman had three children, one woman had two children, and two women had one child. Each woman had her first child as a teen-ager. Three of the women were single and one was married at the time of the interviews.

Chris, Marie, and Michelle (pseudonyms chosen by the participants) grew up in inconsistent households. Chris was adopted and admitted that her adoptive mother was an alcoholic. She believes that her mother's condition contributed to her lack of nurturing as a child and also led to numerous confrontations with her mother as an adolescent. Marie's mother had been married five times. Marie mentioned that the presence of numerous stepfathers continually disrupted her family life. While Michelle's mother and father seemed to be supportive of one another, the family moved frequently, sometimes several times in one year. Shyria (pseudonym chosen by participant) recounts a very happy childhood; however, her father became physically and emotionally abusive to her when he learned of her pregnancy at the age of 16.

The formal educational history of each study participant was affected by her familial surroundings. Chris's mother, although a first grade teacher, expected her to excel in school. However, her mother, according to Chris, offered her no guidance and assistance at home. Shryia's mother assisted her with her homework, but Shyria suffered emotional abuse from her father who continually told her that she "wasn't good enough." Marie's mother offered her little support with her schoolwork. Although her mother encouraged her to attend school, she blamed Marie continually for her failed relationships with her husbands. The frequent moves made by Michelle's family affected her schooling. She mentioned that attending school in so many school districts was very confusing.

The women interviewed had been homeless from 5 to 27 years. Their homeless situation was due to adverse familial situations ranging from being asked (or forced) by parents to leave, to fleeing from a difficult and abusive relationship, to the inability financially to maintain a home or apartment. Two women obtained a high school degree, and the other two completed GED requirements. As a teen-ager each woman had a child, a circumstance that ultimately served as the impetus for leaving the familial home. At the time of the interviews the four women were living in a temporary women's shelter.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a system of procedures for examining the data to identify the themes and emerging patterns of the text that provide the foundation on which to build theory about the data. Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggest that "themes provide explanations for how or why things happen" and that "related themes help you build toward a broader description or an overall theory" (p. 234). The procedures used for analyzing the data contained in the participants' interviews included data immersion, unitizing, selecting significant units, and sorting these selected units into thematic categories.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, it was imperative that the researcher become immersed in the data so that she could identify the multiple realities of each study participant. This step was done by both listening to the interview tapes several times and reading and re-reading the transcripts. This step was begun as the first interview was conducted. While listening to each woman recount the story of her life, the researcher focused on the participant's learning progression from childhood to the

present time. For example, the participant was asked specific questions about what she believed that she learned from a particular situation. Follow-up questions were asked to clarify any information or to reposition the direction of the study participant's story-telling. This process continued throughout the course of the three-interview sequence in order to identify any missing information or to clarify any situation described by each study participant that needed further explanation.

After all the transcribed interviews were read and re-read to flush out significant emerging themes, categories were constructed to identify the commonalities and differences in each theme. This process provided the identification of what Strauss and Corbin (1990) refer to as the "core categories." These categories were used to construct each woman's personal participant profile and narrative profiles.

The themes and categories were then placed into "meaning units" (Giorgi, 1985), which formed the core categories for my analysis. Meaning units are significant if the content relates directly to the research questions. Keeping this perspective in mind, the researcher constantly asked herself such questions as the following: "What did this participant learn from this situation?" "How did she learn it?" "Where did the knowledge come from?" Once the meaning units were identified, they were sorted into thematic categories according to the emerging patterns and themes.

Emergent Themes

The experiences of the study participants were grouped into four themes: perception of self, instability of relationships, ineffectual decision making, and resourcefulness. These categories were chosen because they best represented the key issues faced by each woman as she learned to survive while being homeless.

Perception of Self
The theme of perception of self is broken into three parts: first, how each woman viewed herself; second, each participant's perception of how others viewed her; and third, how the researcher perceived each woman based on her references to herself in relationships or the comments that she made about herself. These self-identifying perceptions affected how each woman went about making decisions and how this decision-making process affected her learning outcomes. Sometimes parents and other primary relationships in her life exercised a heavy influence on these per-

ceptions. There were other times when each woman's perception of self was based on how she felt while dealing with a particular situation in her life. These perceptions were predicated on their initial perceptions of self as a child.

Instability of Relationships

The interviews revealed a suggestion that each woman experienced unstable relationships. The relationships with parents, siblings, children, and men that each woman named in her interviews had an influence on the decisions that she made and often affected her learning. Many times a study participant commented that she learned from her mistakes when taking familial relationships into account.

Ineffectual Decision Making

The decisions made by the participants did not always yield the desired outcome. Some negative outcomes included instability in a relationship, lack of suitable housing, and little or no economic benefits. How each woman went about making decisions affected the learning processes during her transitional status. Sometimes it is difficult to discern between the decision-making processes and the informal learning processes as they often follow similar or parallel paths. Occasionally, how the study participants made decisions and the learning that took place was often identical.

Each of the women interviewed made decisions in various ways. All of them commented at some point that their decision-making strategies evolved from learning by the mistakes that were made through life experiences. It is interesting to point out here that throughout the span of their transitional status, their decision-making skills ranged from making impulsive decisions to contemplative thought and planning.

Resourcefulness

The theme of resourcefulness examines the ways in which each woman utilized her understanding of a problem with which she had to deal and how she went about resolving the situation based on her understanding of her needs at that time. This section reflects the crux of this study: how each of these women learned and the ingenuity each developed to survive. One participant depicted her experiences of living on the streets when she stated, "I was a con artist"; another, when discussing her flight from an abusive relationship, summed up her experiences by

claiming, "I was acting"; a third woman held the belief that you "do what you have to do." Sometimes the study participants acted contrary to acceptable moral behavior by lying, cheating, and stealing. Most often they survived by figuring out who they could trust to assist them during their transition, and, more importantly, they learned to craft conscious resolutions to the dilemmas they were facing.

Study Conclusions

The informal learning progression of the study participants was affected by many external factors that stemmed from familial and social relationships. The foundation of each participant's social learning began as a child relating with her parents. Overall, family life did not always provide a nurturing environment to encourage a positive sense of self and, in many instances, was detrimental. Specifically, each woman lacked positive role models as a child to help her develop a personal identity that would foster self-esteem. Moreover, her family environment did not provide a positive and stable atmosphere for supporting her pursuit of formal education or to establish strong and healthy social relationships with her parents.

Each woman, through unforeseen circumstances, was forced to assume prematurely adult roles and responsibilities while still an adolescent. This fact, coupled with a poor foundation for positive learning experiences within the family unit, forced her to persevere throughout periods of transition ill-prepared to meet the challenges that she faced. Consequently, each woman as a young adult did not have the guidance necessary to distinguish between good and bad choices. Hence, each woman did not learn the skills to initiate effective decision making, maintain a healthy relationship, or acquire sufficient education to obtain sustainable employment.

Their informal learning path could be subdivided into situational and intentional learning. Their situational learning course involved a complex web comprised of learning from mistakes, experiencing controlling relationships, crossing moral boundaries, and making spontaneous decisions. When viewing situational learning through a feminist lens, each woman was under the power and influence of controlling relationships with her father, a boyfriend, or a mother upon whom she was dependent at the time. To some extent her learning was limited within a particular relationship since each woman succumbed to the choices established for her instead of making decisions based on her own choices.

When participants employed intentional learning, the process consisted of planned activities that utilized community resources and services. Therefore, each woman took the initiative to make conscious choices about her learning despite the desires of someone who had previously dominated her life. Most often, when engaged in intentional learning, the participants were making plans or had already left an abusive relationship. Thus, the intentional learning was self-initiated.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

Several discoveries emerge from this study. The learning of these women was affected greatly by their relationships, and these relationships often provided intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors for a positive or negative learning experience. Their dominant relationships also influenced their social capability for positive informal learning experiences, an interference that affected their awareness of their own personal identity and development as women. However, the study does not reveal how their self-esteem was affected by their relationships, the extent to which their self-esteem was suppressed by the men in their lives, or the extent to which these women believed that they could make a change in their lives. What is known is that they continued to repeat similar behaviors that were devastating to their lives.

In order to enhance the learning strategies of homeless women, educators could benefit by incorporating into their practice ideas drawn from the theory of perspective transformation, which is defined as "the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167). Educators of homeless women may consider ways to foster self-efficacy and self-esteem into their daily interactions with the women. Without a strong sense of self and belief that she has control over her thoughts, feelings, and actions, a woman in transition will more likely repeat similar behavior that stifles her chances to obtain a stable and independent life. Furthermore, educators of homeless women must remain cognizant of the fact that decision making among homeless women affects their stability and seek ways to encourage homeless women to make decisions that will disrupt their transitional cycle. This intervention may be accomplished by examining the decision-making process of each woman and providing a means that would encourage reflective learning.

Homeless education classes should incorporate ways to encourage women to engage in critical thinking. It was apparent that these women did not often acquire critical thinking skills through their life experiences. However, they crafted ways to obtain street smarts and possessed the capability to analyze this knowledge in a positive manner. By employing critical thinking, a homeless woman may examine previously held assumptions, attitudes, and behaviors to discern different ways of navigating her life. Finally, educational programs for homeless women may provide tools that will empower women to initiate conscientious and healthy behavior to obtain stability in their relationships and in other areas of their lives. Specifically, the women must realize that there are practical solutions to their problems and seek actively the tools to achieve a stable life.

References

Bateson, M. C. (1994). *Peripheral visions: Learning along the way.* New York: HarperCollins.

Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1986*).* *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind.* New York: Basic Books.

Briton, D. (1996). *The modern practice of adult education: A postmodern critique.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Giorgi, A. (1985). *Phenomenology and psychological research.* Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.

Hart, M. U. (1990). Liberation through consciousness raising. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: A guide to transformative and emancipatory learning* (pp. 47-73). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hart, M. U. (1992). *Working and educating for life: Feminist and international perspectives on adult education.* New York: Routledge.

Knights, S. (1995). Women and learning. In G. Foley (Ed*.), Understanding adult education and training* (pp. 220-231). St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (1995). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Weiler, K. (1991). Freire and a feminist pedagogy of difference. *Harvard Education Review, 61*, 449-474.

Welton, M. R. (Ed.). (1995*). In defense of the lifeworld: Critical perspectives on adult learning*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.