

Forum

Multiculturalism and Adult Education: Questions to Guide our Research

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Adult education both as a field of practice and as an area of research has not kept pace with the dramatic social and demographic changes taking place in America today. We know relatively little about the educational needs and interests or learning style preferences of people with diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences. Research on minority populations that could inform our practice is woefully lacking for a number of reasons (Ross-Gordon, 1991). It seems to me that while concerned, some who might otherwise consider doing research in this area are simply overwhelmed by the philosophical and logistical issues involved. Let me suggest three key questions encompassing these issues that might help to get us started doing research on culturally diverse populations.

How Do We Know What to Ask?

Multiculturalism is like adult education in that both terms are broad and can be interpreted to mean different things by different people. There are also a myriad of other terms and concepts used to refer to multiculturalism or related phenomenon; "diversity," "global awareness," "cultural pluralism," "multi-ethnic," "cross cultural," "transcultural," and "minority" are but some of the common terms used interchangeably with multiculturalism. One wouldn't study "adult education" without first defining the term; multiculturalism, too, must be defined and a focus on some manageable aspect of the phenomenon developed.

So where does this meaningful, significant focus come from? It can come from the literature, from previous research, or, more commonly, from our daily lives. Look around you. Your daily life, your work, your town or community are microcosms of the rest of the world! What do you wonder about? What puzzles you? What do you observe about your work, your relationships, your own person that you could investigate further? What answerable questions might have implications for being a better

educator, citizen, or family member? The following are some examples of how to take advantage of your immediate surroundings to generate good research questions.

Dekalb, Illinois, is a small, midwestern university town. Its residents are nearly all middle class and white, as is the university community. What opportunities would be here for doing multicultural research? Richard Orem, a professor in the adult education program, noticed that the Asian students in the program exhibited learning behaviors at odds with North American adult learning strategies. These students relied on rote memorization, were reluctant to participate in class discussions, and viewed "the teacher and the textbook as primary and indisputable sources of knowledge" (Orem, 1991, p. 36). These observations have led him to begin a study of the influence of culture on learning.

In Athens, Georgia, where most diversity issues center on race, a small salvage company employs Mexican workers along with local blacks and whites. Management greatly favors the Mexican workers, raising salaries and accommodating them in other ways. However, management obstructs the training director's efforts to provide English as a Second Language (ESL) or basic education instruction for these workers. This situation raises all sorts of questions about power and control, about human resource development in a culturally diverse work environment.

A third example comes from my own experience as a female professor. By virtue of the inherent power of my instructor role and my status in the field of adult education, one set of power dynamics operates in the classroom setting. However, as the token female professor on certain university committees, I am definitely a minority person in a relatively powerless role.

Two points are worth making with regard to the above examples. First, we need only look around us at our own practice and our own lives for a starting point in raising good research questions. Second, we can uncover these questions as we broaden our understanding of multiculturalism to include the issues of power that are inherent in cultural diversity, whether that diversity is based on nationality, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or some other factor.

How Do We Do This Kind of Research?

A number of issues unique to multicultural research might thwart an effort in this area. First is whether or not you should be a member of the group being studied. Do you need to be an African-American woman to study

African-American women? An immigrant to study immigrants? Much has been written, in anthropology and sociology in particular, about the advantages and disadvantages of being a member of the group, an insider versus an outsider. There is no single answer. There are tradeoffs in either role. An outsider can raise questions that don't occur to the insider, for example, yet the insider might be able to more accurately interpret what is going on.

The best advice I have is to decide which stance you are most comfortable with, then do what you can to maximize the advantages of that stance and minimize the disadvantages. For instance, an outsider can use key informants to help interpret participant behavior. Collaboration is another alternative—a white staff member and a black staff member in the Student Affairs office at my university are studying black students' experiences on campus; both are present at individual and group interviews. Of course, your role as a researcher may not be that obvious. Surface similarities are often obscured by interlocking systems of power and oppression. A well-educated, middle class professional, such as I, is very much an "outsider" to the experience of poor teen-age mothers, even though we share the designation white female.

Gaining access to culturally diverse groups, whether one is an insider or an outsider, is another logistical problem. Sometimes it just takes time to build enough trust to be allowed "in." Sometimes you have to work through an intermediary who will present your case. Sometimes you won't be able to get access. This difficulty may mean refocusing the research question.

Tied into the problems of status and access is concern over accurate representation of the life-worlds and perspectives of the group being studied. These are validity and reliability concerns of central importance to all research. Familiarizing yourself with the strategies you can employ to insure validity and reliability in your study should alleviate this concern (see, for example, Merriam, 1988).

How Can We Assure That Our Research Will Have Impact?

For our research to have an impact on the field, we need to adopt a perspective that goes beyond our immediate environment. If, once we answer our research question, we simply go on with our lives as before, the knowledge gained from a research study is all but lost to the field as a whole. Ross-Gordon (1991) concludes that the paucity of published research on minority populations does not represent the amount of

research being conducted; some 62 dissertations on multicultural issues were completed between 1985 and 1989. However, only 1.6% of the studies have been published.

To ensure that multicultural research will have an impact on the field, those who conduct these studies must be committed to disseminating the findings in some form. Conference presentations, newsletters, workshops, and journals are but some of the ways the field can learn of the research. There are numerous publication outlets in adult education and many resources available to assist researchers in preparing their study findings for dissemination. The key factor here is not how to do it, but commitment to contributing to the knowledge base in this area by disseminating what you have learned.

I have posed three questions and identified some answers that can help guide our research on culturally diverse populations. First, I suggest that we don't have to move to ethnically diverse neighborhoods or change our practice. What we can do is to look closely at our own sphere of life; the questions are there, waiting to be asked. Second, I suggest that we don't need a graduate degree in research methodology to undertake this kind of research. We can use our common sense, we can start modestly, we can collaborate. Third, I suggest that we need to be committed to informing others about what we've learned. It seems to me that research that holds the potential for making an impact on practice is research driven by the very questions of power and social inequality inherent in diversity and multicultural issues. We thus come full circle in the consideration of multicultural research.

References

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