Transcending traditional social justice conceptualizations: adult educator activists enacting a fourth way

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Prologue
There’s a homeless day recovery center in New Orleans, Louisiana where those who come may shower, eat, receive medical care, seek legal advice, pursue unpaid wages claims, and even attend mortgage literacy classes if they are on the cusp of getting back on their feet. The people who work at this center are purposeful, adept, and pragmatic in their approach to social justice. On a busy morning, a twenty-three year old college graduate will coordinate showers for 90 homeless people. In practice and in conversation, it seems this worker’s understanding of social justice cannot be easily categorized.

Introduction
The idea of social justice has been a compelling vision in adult education. There have been competing, even contrasting, views of what social justice means in practice. We present this paper as a way to invite discussion on how traditional conceptualizations of social justice inform and relate to adult educator’s activist practice. The essential question is: how does adult education’s social justice theory square with what it means to those participating in its actual practice? Based on an analysis of the literature, we argue that social justice has been conceptualized in three ways. However, it seems that adult education activists understand social practice in multiple, layered ways. In other words, the realities of practice defy the singularity of the field’s theoretical categorizations. We propose a fourth, transcendent way, of conceptualizing social justice, one that mirrors the understanding of those adult educators—in this case several outside the academy—who engage in activism.

We present three conceptualizations of social justice building on the work of Griffin (1987) and Quigley (2000) whose categorizations of social policy, grounded in economic and political thinking, serve as a frame to put forth and complement the three visions of social justice. Our interest is in the role of these social justice visions and their relationship to actual practice. Van Dijk (2006) discusses the ideology-discourse interface and describes ideologies as shared belief systems and ideological collectivities as additionally, communities of practice and communities of discourse. We then juxtapose social justice and social policy categorizations to
social justice discourse as described by Choules (2007) to create a three dimensional matrix. Drawing on dissertation research, we then conceptualize how adult educators working at a recovery center for homeless people enact social justice in complex, nuanced, and dynamic ways. Our aim is to engage in conversation about theory and its relationship to front-line practice.

Social Justice and Adult Education
Many adult educators have expressed concern that the field is losing sight of its social justice mission, meanwhile, economic inequality is one of today’s pressing issues. Observing that our field is increasingly dominated by market-driven technical offerings and also noting the world’s social and economic inequality, Ian Baptiste — in 1999 — called on adult educators to refocus on grave human plights and engage in efforts toward civically responsible change. Over a decade has passed since Baptiste’s (1999) call to action, yet his message remains relevant to the adult education field and to the world at large.

Adult Education’s Social Justice Conceptualizations
The ways social justice in the literature has been conceptualized as conservatism, liberalism, and radicalism (Sleeter, 1995) are, understandably, parallel to how Western scholars (Merriam & Brockett, 1997; Tisdell & Taylor, 1999; and Elias & Merriam, 2005) have outlined the field’s philosophies or orientations. While the specific philosophies used may differ, those philosophies that most clearly inform and interact with social justice as mission are similar and are described as progressive, humanist, and critical.

However, because elements of various adult education perspectives historically influence others (Elias & Merriam, 2005), these parallels, at least for the conservative and liberal conceptualizations, are neither neat nor clearly demarcated. Over time, adult education philosophies have evolved and become conflated. Elias and Merriam suggest that some aspect of progressivism, e.g., Dewey and Lindeman, can be traced to all other forms of adult education as conceived from a Western perspective: learner-centeredness informs humanism, experimentalism informs behaviorism, and social change informs radicalism. Further, salient characteristics of social policy models are embedded in adult education philosophy. With this in mind we depict the three vertical columns of our social justice house as conservatism, liberal-welfare, and social re-distribution. Each metaphorical room may be described by its specific location in the house.

Conservatism
According to conservatism, individuals have the autonomy to work within the prevailing socio-economic system responsible for their success or failure, determined by their actions. In other words, justice is available for anyone; its attainment is up to the individual but “since individuals differ, inequality results naturally from differences in talent and effort” (Sleeter, 1995, p. 82). The
Conservative conceptualization is best aligned with the traditional humanist approach of Malcolm Knowles which emphasizes rationality or individual responsibility in an effort to enhance personal development and has been described as basically devoid of socio-cultural context (Tisdell & Taylor, 1999). It can also be aligned with the progressive philosophy which emphasizes the relationship between adult education and society while placing responsibility on the individual learner to gain knowledge and skills, promote societal well-being, and ultimately society’s reform (Elias & Merriam, 2005). Eduard Lindeman (1944), a leading proponent of the progressive philosophy wrote “without a sense of responsibility towards choice-making among adults, there can be no effective democracy” (p. 102). Conservatism finds the cause for societal equity, be it success or failure, resting with the individual’s ability to make reasonable choices; “conservatives give priority to the individual and minimize the importance of group claims and attachments” (Sleeter, p.82).

Conservatism shares guiding principles with the market models of adult education social policy (Griffin, 1987; Quigley, 2000); these privilege pragmatic rationality with advocates that “see society as a marketplace where incentives, negotiation, individual freedom, and self-reliance can flourish, all based on rational and utilitarian principles” (Quigley, 2000, p. 217). Informed by economic capitalism principles and emphasizing individualist ideologies such as self-reliance and responsibility, market models are aligned with vocational progressive adult education philosophies (Quigley).

**Liberalism**

Liberalism is founded on the principles of John Rawls whose *Theory of Justice* (1971) outlined a common vision of societal justice based on individuals’ self-interest or treatment preferences were they on society’s lower levels. For Rawls, this distributive justice principle is not meritocracy, rather those with greater abilities have a social asset that is used for common advantage. According to Sleeter (1995), liberalism shares the conservative focus on individual competition but it “rejects conservatism’s faith in private institutions and natural aristocracy and takes more seriously collective claims to past and unfair treatment (p. 82). Stereotypical prejudice may impede individual opportunity but this “can be reduced by teaching people to focus on positive rather than negative characteristics of groups” (p. 82). Like conservatism, elements of progressivism and humanism exist within this liberal stance. Rather than emphasizing the progressive role of individual responsibility in societal reform, liberalism considers the societal whole in a way that Rawls’ conceived distributive justice—as a means to effective societal functioning. The humanist perspective is compatible with democratic values; education develops better individuals who contribute in an interrelated and interdependent way to a just, equitable, and well-functioning society. The liberal-welfare state model of social policy emphasizes a meritocratic belief in social justice that focuses on the problems associated with “institutional access, systemic barriers, and concerns with quality of life” (Quigley, p. 218). Griffin (1987) termed this the progressive-liberal-welfare
model and emphasized the societal benefits and redistributive elements to it; Quigley aligns it with the liberal-humanistic philosophies.

**Radicalism**

Radicalism, with its roots in Marxism, seeks to challenge, disrupt, or change “structural and systemic injustice in which certain groups are singled out for less favorable treatment and others are privileged” (Choules, 2007, p. 463). The aim is to ensure equality of societal participation without marginalization based on gender, race, socio-economic class, sexual orientation, or ability. Sleeter (1995) has argued that those supporting this vision reject “the individual as the main unit of analysis and focus on group relations, arguing that most social behavior is structured by groups rather than individuals” (p. 82) and inequality is “structured deeply into society’s institutions, having been constructed by haves in an effort to protect and extend their power and wealth” (p. 82). This vision corresponds to philosophies described as radical, emancipatory, liberatory, or critical. Radicalism includes those educators “explicitly dedicated to investigating, promoting, and engaging in adult education for progressive, social democratic or socialist transformation” (Holst 2009).

Emphasizing social transformation, radicalism’s seeks to accomplish political and economic change in society. As Baumgartner (2006) states, “social justice education exists to challenge societal inequities” (p. 194).

Not only is radicalism conceived of broadly from a theoretical standpoint—that is, having various orientations such as critical, feminist, emancipatory or liberatory (Elias & Merriam, 2005; Tisdell & Taylor, 1999)—it is also considered broadly in terms of practice. Foley (2001) identifies radical adult educators expansively, as “those who work for emancipatory social change and whose work engages with the learning dimension of social life” (p. 72). Social activism exists on a wide continuum of activities or actions that may involve inciting social change with verbal discourse through teaching organizing skills to leading a social movement (Baumgartner, 2006). Radicalism aligns with the social re-distribution policy model, or social control model (Griffin 1987) that emphasizes criticality and grounded in the belief that capitalist democracy creates structural inequalities that require a re-ordering of social systems (Quigley, 2000). Its Marxist-influenced policies “address inequities, community-based initiatives, and alliances across organizations for social change” (Quigley, p. 218) and parallel liberatory/social reconstruction philosophies.

Movement across or down our house’s axes illustrate adult education’s philosophical perspectives that can be approximately, though not neatly, aligned with ways of conceptualizing social justice that are both historical and political, along a continuum that begins at a conservative pole of individual/citizen responsibility, continues with collective action for social change and development of human potential and agency, and ends at a radical or emancipatory pole that challenges the dominant systems of power and privilege. Next, we consider social justice discourse which provides the depth to each of our house’s nine rooms.
Discourse in Adult Education
Each conceptual framework can be understood as implying a particular social justice discourse that flows from and with it. Wilson (2009) describes discourse as a problematic concept in the adult education literature, one “meaning many things from langue to parole to structuralism to poststructuralism to talk to meaning to text to context and so on” (p. 8). Rogers et al (2005) provide useful insight:

... discourses have been defined as language use as social practice. That is, discourse moves back and forth between reflecting and constructing the social world. Seen in this way, language cannot be considered neutral, because it is caught up in political, social, racial, economic, religious, and cultural formations. (p. 369)

According to Sandretto et al (2007), “educators operate within multiple discursive fields that position teachers, students and families in particular ways” (p. 310). Thomas (2006) concurs arguing that ideologies “are not neutral concepts linking beliefs to political and social action but are intrinsically connected to issues of power and domination” (p. 59). For Thomas, ideologies are discursive constructions; they are used to legitimate points of view, frequently appearing as discursive fragments of common sense (p. 60) that can serve hegemony by promoting dominant ideas as normal or neutral (Pratt & Nesbitt, p 119). Van Dijk (2006) argues similarly, adding that ideologies can also “articulate resistance in relationships of power” (p. 117). Drawing from varying aspects of the literature on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2000; Pratt & Nesbitt, 2000; Rogers et al., 2005; Sandretto et al., 2007; Thomas, 2006; Van Dijk, 2006; Wilson, 2009), we consider social justice discourse broadly, that is, how an individual understands, organizes and expresses knowledge related to the construct of social justice. We interpret expression as Foucault might, that is, by the way knowledge is shared, understood, and practiced by actions.

Social Justice Discourses
Choules (2007) contends that “how we understand injustice has major implications for the way we see, or don’t see, our own role in maintaining unjust systems” (p. 462). The social justice discourses she describes are charity, human rights, and privilege. While Choules offers a robust historical and philosophical information about each discourse, we outline some major attributes and delineate the boundaries between them.

Charity discourse.
Charity is one of the two discourses that Choules (2007) indicates maintains the prevailing power structure. When injustice is viewed as unrelated and external to us, “it is easy to use individualistic and meritocratic justifications to remain disengaged” (p. 462). With this discourse, the charity giver fails to examine their own privilege and so underlying causes are not addressed by their charitable acts. While individual suffering may be alleviated in the short-term, this discourse is paternalistic and patronizing because it “lends itself to an ideological approach which positions
those with power in the benevolent and condescending role of protector and the
Other as in need of protection” (Choules, p. 466). Those who fail to examine their
privilege as White, middle-class persons may easily turn their focus to the social
justice victim—the poor—as cause. So, while willing to do good work or provide
charity to those in need, those situated on the charity discourse do not recognize
systemic, societal injustice as underlying causes. This discourse is aligned with
conservatism (Sleeter, 1995) which shares attributes with the market model of social
policy (Griffin, 1987; Quigley, 2000).

**Human rights discourse.**

In this discourse, human rights apply to all persons. Although this discourse notes
the need to rectify social problems, Choules (2007) argues that it is typically enacted
in a way that leaves unjust structures and systems unexamined; the identified social
problem remains located with the marginalized. There are two alternate positions
from which to view this discourse; using the liberal position with its emphasis on
individual rights and responsibilities, the privileged do not consider their position or
role in the prevailing social structure. Choules argues that when applying a socialist
position of collective responsibility to this discourse, the understanding is close to the
privilege discourse in terms of identifying the social problem. This discourse is
aligned with Sleeter’s (1995) liberal vision, sharing some characteristics with the
*liberal-welfare state* social policy model (Griffin, 1987; Quigley, 2000) and supported
by elements of progressivism and humanism.

**Privilege discourse.**

Privilege implies an ability to act without consequences as if one had the right to set
the rules” (Choules, p. 472). For the other discourses, complicity lies in not
analyzing power relationships and structures that benefit those who are in positions
of power, to the detriment of those who are not. According to the privilege discourse,
beneficiaries of privilege acknowledge and understand their implication in systemic
injustice and are compelled to take collective responsibility for it. This discourse is
aligned with radicalism (Sleeter, 1995) which is related to the social re-distribution
model (Griffin, 1987; Quigley, 2000).

**Enacted Social Justice: Conceptualizing A Fourth Way**

So what do practitioners say about social justice when describing their activist work?
In our study we find that they have a critical analysis of their practice but one that
does not draw on formal theoretical sources. Essentially they reference power and
privilege without explicitly naming it. Their way of describing practice is peppered
with charity and human rights discourses (Choules 2007). There is a fluidity and
transcendence to how these activists articulate and enact their social justice work.
They are unburdened by scholars’ academic discourse and this means that their
understanding cannot be neatly categorized. It is important to recognize that social
activism encompasses a broad range of activities as Baumgartner (2006) has noted
and includes participating in life’s *daily social struggles* (Gouin, 2009). Foley (2001)
has argued that “most learning is informal and incidental, embedded in other activities, and tacit” (p. 85). Although some of the education at this day recovery center is formal, by far most occurs ‘on the fly’.

Do our theoretical formulations of social justice practice fully grasp the interrelated and fluid nature of those engaged in social justice outside the academy? As Baptiste (1999) observes, ‘most critical pedagogy classrooms focus largely on the behavior of, and consequences to, students, teachers, and staff within that classroom or institution (p.100).’ Likewise, acting on radicalism in a way that challenges societal barriers is difficult when, in the moment, you are faced with someone who is in immediate need of food, shelter, or legal advice.

Now imagine these practitioners walking freely through our metaphorical social justice house. Like our actual residences, we each have a favorite room yet we find ourselves in any room at any time for various reasons. We go to the kitchen for nourishment, to the laundry room for utilitarian purposes, to our den or living room to engage in leisure activities, and to our bedroom to rest. Sometimes we wander about the house and alight in the place that suits our mood or emotional state while at other times, we do not have a true choice as to room destination, for instance, when we are satisfying a physiological need. Likewise, these practitioners are aware of societal barriers, understand a need for re-structuring and for acknowledging human dignity but also understand that a charitable act may be required in any moment or for most of a day or week. The fourth way to conceptualize social justice may be the house these practitioners occupy; it is one with locations but without visible walls.

Seeing a fourth way to conceptualize social justice becomes possible when our understanding of adult educators activists is broadened beyond the acknowledged spaces of higher education classrooms and organized community activism. Exploring that quiet or tempered space that some activists occupy could lead to a more complex and nuanced understanding of social justice is practiced.

References


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