

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 469 692

CE 083 979

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TITLE Where Are "Women Returners" Returning From? Deconstructing Domestication in the Context of Lifelong Learning.

PUB DATE 2001-04-00

NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults Gender Network Conference (2nd, Geneva, Switzerland, April 5-7, 2001).

AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.unige.ch/fapse/SSE/activite/gender/objects/participants_p_cl-ju.rtf.

PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Academic Aspiration; Adult Education; Adult Learning; Adult Students; Biographies; Caregiver Role; Caregivers; *Continuing Education; Education Work Relationship; Educational Attitudes; Ethnography; Family School Relationship; Females; Foreign Countries; Homemakers; Learning Motivation; Life Events; Lifelong Learning; Open Education; Postsecondary Education; *Reentry Students; *Role Conflict; Sex Role; *Student Characteristics; *Womens Education

IDENTIFIERS *England; Identity Formation

ABSTRACT

The question of where "women returners" to education are returning from was examined through an exploration of the life histories of 18 women in southern England. The study focused on the biographies of women who regarded themselves as primarily responsible for the care of others and yet whose aspirations involved some form of continuing education. Each woman participated in three 1-hour interviews, with each interview focusing on a different topic--work, education, or domestic life. The narrative of one of the women was used to illustrate some recurrent themes in the interviews and to help adult educators understand how the identities of many women are constructed through multiple, changing, and often contradictory discourses of work, education, and domestic life. Themes appearing in the narrative profiled include the following: fear of unemployment and a desire to achieve vocational goals as big motivations for learning; the pressures faced by the narrator as she attempted to balance others' expectations that she bear primary responsibility for her family's domestic life against her desire to pursue additional education and a better job; her resentment toward her husband for his lack of domestic support; and her regret for her parents' limited aspirations and her lack of academic opportunities at school. (Contains 16 references.) (MN)

WHERE ARE "WOMEN RETURNERS" RETURNING FROM? DECONSTRUCTING DOMESTICATION IN THE CONTEXT OF LIFELONG LEARNING.

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Where are “Women Returners” returning from? Deconstructing domestication in the context of lifelong learning

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Feminists and post-structural critics have challenged the kind of binary thinking represented in Paulo Freire’s assertion that educators must choose between liberation or domestication as the goal of our educational praxis (see, for example, Giroux, 1998; Luke & Gore, 1992; hooks, 1993). However, educational goals across the political spectrum are still founded on notions of liberation, emancipation or enlightenment which are expressed primarily in terms of engagement in the public sphere of education or the labour market. This is evident in references to “Women Returners”, or “Adult Returners” if we ask about the places where these people are supposed to be returning from. Similar courses for women with titles like “Fresh Start”, “Nouveaux Départs” or “zweite Bildungsweg” suggest that women have somehow gone astray, and need to set off again in the right direction. In Britain, and most of the world, the gendered distribution of domestic labour both supports, and is supported by, gendered inequalities in the wider labour market. In this context, women¹ who take time out from paid work to care for dependants are assumed to lose the skills, attributes and dispositions which are required for public recognition in a successful career. So adult educators offer these women a “Fresh Start” in order to “Return to Work” or to take a “Second Chance” at their education.

In this paper I explain how I came to question my own adherence to a critical pedagogy in which the goal of liberation is constructed in a gendered opposition to domestication. I offer a brief description of my doctoral research in which I explored this problem through the life histories of eighteen women in Southern England during 1996-7. Re-visiting the life history assembled from my interviews with Jay, a participant in this research, I conclude with some ideas and questions about the location of knowledge in time and space. The purpose of this paper is not to generalise from a particular representation of one woman’s experience, but to show how the complexity of human experience might usefully be conceptualised in relation to recent theories about the social construction of space. This may suggest possibilities for more open-ended formulations of the goals and purposes of lifelong learning.

Deconstructing domestication: assembling accounts of “women’s experience”

As an adult literacy worker in the early 1970s I embraced Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy, and his analysis of power and oppression, as reference points for my own educational praxis. However, the dilemmas and contradictions of critical pedagogy became problematic for me when I began to reflect upon the goals and outcomes of courses called “Fresh Start for Women”, which I was managing in the early 1990s. These Fresh Start courses comprised a negotiated curriculum that included the positive evaluation of skills acquired through unpaid labour in the home, suggesting ways in which these might be represented, developed or transferred to other situations. Whatever kinds of learning and change we hoped to achieve, a surprising number of our students went on to do voluntary work in social welfare organisations - surprising since most of them were living on low incomes and yet still chose to work without pay. We might applaud the enhancement of both personal agency and social participation that our courses seemed to engender. I became concerned, however, that our educational

practice often seemed to encourage women to take on this additional burden of unpaid labour in the service of others. This posed a question about whether it was in these women's interests to valorise the skills they have developed through caring for others, while these skills are so under-valued in the labour market.

A Freirean approach to this question might be to engage the women in a critical analysis of the social, economic and cultural factors which secure their own collusion in oppressive relationships. The goal would be liberation through revolutionary action based on the discovery of our *true* interests. As a mother, my own experience includes that of making choices about work, education and caring for others that may appear to be against my interests. These interests, however, comprise a constantly shifting and often conflicting jumble of needs, wishes and desires, none of which are more *true* than any others. My questioning of Freire's repression of domestication in his concept of liberation arises from a belief that the desire for involvement in committed relationships, and consequent ambivalence and conflict, does not constitute a case of false consciousness but represents a challenge to the goals and values of critical pedagogy. Adopting a feminist deconstructive approach to the problem (Grosz, 1993; Elam, 1994; Nash, 1994) meant foregrounding the subordinate term in the binary opposition of liberation/domestication. I therefore decided to look at educational experiences from a standpoint which gives prominence to women's *domestication*, not in order to reverse the opposition and privilege domestication above liberation, but to displace both terms and open up the way for new meanings.

The focus of my study was on the biographies of learners who have regarded themselves as primarily responsible for the care of others and yet whose aspirations involve some form of continuing education. I conducted three, hour-long interviews with eighteen women who had chosen to continue their education despite facing all the barriers most commonly identified as those which prevent participation in continuing education.² The women were given the interview questions in advance, each covering the same chronology but with a different focus – on work, education or domestic life - and some chose to provide written responses as well as an oral account. I later selected narrative extracts from the interview data and transcribed these using a framework which illuminates the poetic structure of oral narratives (Gee, 1985; 1991). Representing the narratives in this way enabled the research participants to treat their stories as works of fiction when we came together to discuss them in a series of group meetings. When we tell stories about our lives we construct these within larger narratives or discourses which provide criteria for evaluating the actions of, for example, the good mother, the serious student or the enterprising worker. Critically reviewing the stories that had been transcribed from our interviews enabled these women to consider other possible directions or courses of action which the central characters might have taken. This was not a question of seeing the error of their ways, but of seeing how their identities are constructed through multiple, changing and often contradictory discourses of work, education and domestic life.

In a short paper, I can hardly begin to represent the complexity of the life histories collected and analysed in the course of this study. Nor can I summarise the varied interests and changing desires that motivated each of these eighteen women to confound the statistics and participate in continuing education. For my doctoral thesis I organised questions derived from the analysis and group discussions into themes about public and private life, knowledge, work, autonomy, time, agency and progress

(Clarke, 1998). Of course, these themes did not simply “emerge” from the data, but resulted from my particular engagement with the data in that place, at that time. Jay was one of the participants who subsequently gave me permission to use the data from our interviews in any way I might choose. So, for the story which follows, I draw upon Jay’s spoken and written accounts and re-visit some of the people, places and events which featured in an earlier representation of Jay’s auto/biography.³

“Fear of unemployment”

In the course of our Education interviews, I asked participants what might be their vision of a “Learning Society”, and during my interview with Jay she told me that she had a “definite view about this” and had spent some time drafting and re-drafting a written response. Jay wrote,

Fear of unemployment is the biggest motivation for learning. Various training schemes have been established to update qualifications and enhance job prospects... For the foreseeable future, ours will remain a “Learning Society” as we endeavour to keep abreast of modern technology plus achieve our full potential.

While this resonates with the rhetoric of policy documents, it also reflects an emphasis on vocational goals in Jay’s account of her education and training activity since leaving school. At the time of our interview, Jay had worked for nine years at a local naval base which had been under threat of closure, with consequent redundancies, following defence cuts across Europe in the early 1990s. When this had been announced in 1992, Jay told me,

...that came as a dreadful shock to me right out of the blue. Suddenly, the thought that I might lose my job. I realised at that point what a terrible thing that would be when it’s suddenly thrown on you... It is devastating, and that was what prompted me to go on further training.

Jay’s account of her childhood gave the impression of a cold, repressive, and socially isolated family. Parental expectations for Jay and her older sister were limited to wage earning for the benefit of family finances until they should leave home to get married. When she left school at the age of fifteen with no qualifications, Jay got an office job, and immediately enrolled for evening classes in typing. Jay said that she enjoyed writing, particularly with a word processor, and she provided extensive written responses for each of my questionnaires. In her accounts of various office jobs, Jay often referred to the pleasure and satisfaction she derived from the physical production of a nicely bound document, a neatly wrapped parcel, or a cleanly typed page of text

Seeing how the other half lived

Jay continued to work after she was married, but left her job when she was expecting her first child. When her second child was about four years old, Jay started to take on part-time cleaning jobs and did machine sewing at home. One of her cleaning jobs was for a

film director, and this provided the first of two stories in which Jay creates a potent sense of place,

I was often alone when I was there, and it was here that I became aware of my deep fascination for books. Here they had a fabulous old-fashioned library, and I can remember seeing it and... aghast, you know, how lovely. The wooden shelves surrounded and completely filled the room. Each shelf was stacked with every sort of book imaginable... and I always... if I was on my own, sneaked in there... I had to dust this library, so when I went in there I always took a moment to browse through the collection and... have a little peep, and sometimes I could hardly get back to my cleaning.

Jay elaborated on this account of the surroundings in our group meeting, saying how wonderful it must be for their children to grow up in that sort of environment, "...and it was just seeing how the other half lived". Jay said she was happy during that time, working in various part-time jobs and sharing childcare and leisure activities with a group of women in similar circumstances. But her glimpse of "how the other half lived", emphasised the low status of cleaning work and, when both the children were at school, Jay decided it was time to return to work in an office. She saw an advertisement for a local part-time job as a teleprinter operator, which she wanted to apply for. But her husband, Alan, discouraged her from applying as,

He didn't mind me doing all the other jobs because he knew that it wasn't that same responsibility, like I could have phoned up and say I'm not going, you know. But this job was a proper job. Someone would have had to have covered for the children... I felt like, with friends and everything, I could have done it. But he wasn't of that opinion... I had to forget it.

But Jay certainly never forgot this, and mentioned it in all three interviews. The incident strengthened Jay's resolve to return to office work, but, she said, "I remember feeling quite anxious about modern office practices and about meeting people as a person again rather than a "Mum"". So Jay enrolled on a two-day "Women Returners" course and attended classes at the local Technical College in basic word processing.

Soon afterwards, Jay's husband was transferred to a job at the naval base, and the family moved to the small town on the South Coast where they had been living for the past nine years. Jay took on a full-time office job, and this time she secured her husband's consent, arranging "cover for the children" after school with a professional care agency. After a year, however, Jay reduced her working hours to half-time as she wanted to be there for her children when they got home from school. She thus found a way to reconcile her desire to be identified as both a "person" and a "Mum", and yet Jay also imagines a life, or a self, who is neither wife, nor mother nor the person in a full-time job. Reflecting on this period of her life, Jay said,

I think when you go out to work full time you do virtually give up your life to it because, by the time you've done that work, and, if you've got children as well, you've got no life left really, have you. I wouldn't be without my children, but I think you virtually give up your life when you get married, don't you... I mean as soon as you've got your husband and he's there, it's almost like you take over as his mother isn't it, in a lot of ways... I'm not being nasty like, I'm not moaning

about it, I mean we have some good - you have some good times don't you when you have your children. It's all... good stuff thinking back.

The ambivalence in this passage is clearly signalled by the shifts between the subjective "I", the indeterminate "we" and the universal "you" in Jay's assertions about what it means to be a wife and mother. While the "life" which Jay talks about giving up is clearly something other than mothering, it is also something you lose if you "go out to work full time". Jay had written about a Learning Society in which she considered "fear of unemployment" to be the "biggest motivation for learning". After the threat of redundancy prompted Jay to take up the opportunity to "update qualifications", "enhance job prospects" and "keep abreast of modern technology", her account of this experience comprised a list of the qualifications she had achieved over the previous two years. She had also achieved the highest possible grade in a more academic course which included the study of English literature. Jay gave a far more animated account of this course, telling me about the books she had read and the Shakespeare plays she had studied. She said the course had "opened up a whole new world" for her, and told the second story which stood out from the rest of her auto/biography because of its powerful evocation of place,

When I went to London one day, we went into Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey, and there was this plaque on the floor. And I stood there and I said to Alan, "Look at that", I said, "I know what that means". And it was all this old English, and I'd actually done it in the English class, you know, and it was such a wonderful feeling that I could stand there and read those things and know what they meant.

Running through Jay's life history there is a current of resentment towards her husband for his lack of domestic support, and of regret for the limited aspirations of her parents and lack of academic opportunities at school. She spoke about her friends and her two sons with affection, and recounted memories of happy times as well as times of sadness or disappointment. But in her written responses to my questions, through all three interviews and two group meetings, I experienced only two moments of passion. The first was when she told the story of the film director's library, where, while asserting her right to be there as the cleaner, "I had to dust this library", she cast herself as a trespasser, "sneaking" in and "peeping" at forbidden treasure in a kind of Aladdin's cave. The second was in the telling of this story of Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey. "I stood there", said Jay, locating herself firmly in that place, feeling wonderful that she could "stand there and read those things and know what they meant".

The location of knowing subjects in time and place

At the time of writing my thesis, I was not sure what to make of this strand in Jay's life story, in which particular kinds of knowledge, or cultural capital, are linked to such a strong sense of physical location. Instead, I explored some of Jay's other stories in more depth and discussed questions regarding the boundaries between work, home and learning. More recently, however, I have come to appreciate the idea that places do not simply provide a ready-made back-cloth against which social life is performed. Instead, we can conceptualise both space and time as "constantly in the process of being made" *through* the social (Massey, 1999:262). This is an open and dynamic conception of space, linked to a historical notion of time with an open view

of the future, unlike those stories of progress and development in which ‘... the future is already foretold’ (Massey, 1999: 272). Modernist stories of progress often dissolve the spatial differences between places, regions or countries by arranging them in temporal sequences expressed in terms like *backward*, *developing* or *advanced*. From a northern hemisphere perspective, the differences between places often become nothing more than their different ‘place in the queue’ within a single story. This fails to acknowledge that there is more than one story to tell, and Massey advocates an understanding of spatiality that acknowledges a multiplicity of possible, relatively autonomous, trajectories. When Jay enrolled on a course for Women Returners, she wanted to meet people as a “person” rather than as a “Mum”, and to return to a “proper job”. Her identity as a “Mum” had included working in a low status job as a cleaner in a private house. This reflects an aspect of women’s experience referred to as “downward mobility” in the literature of the labour market (Beechey and Perkins, 1987; Rees, 1992). At the same time, it was while working as a cleaner that Jay discovered a “deep fascination for books” and a glimpse of “how the other half lived”. In her curriculum vitae and her vision of a Learning Society, Jay tells a linear, technical-rational story of career progress through vocational training to achieve “our full potential”. A focus on affective qualities in the stories Jay tells about her life, however, suggests a more complex and multi-directional view of lifelong learning.

In Jay’s descriptions of the books in the old fashioned library and the plaque in Poet’s Corner, she is transfixed in wonderment. But rather than seeing Jay as an isolated individual in a static location, we can link Doreen Massey’s dynamic notion of time and space with actor-network theory⁴ to conceptualise these places in a particular “process of being made”. In the sociology of science, actor-network theory investigates the performances through which science appears to give an objective account of the natural order (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987). The performance is interrogated by conceptualising objects, infrastructures, places and people as “actors”, each having a role to play in the social construction of knowledge. Places can thus perform particular roles, which are mobilised in a web of associations between people, objects and events. As Jay makes connections with other kinds of people, “the other half”, and other sources of knowledge, “I’d actually done it in the English class”, she brings the places in her stories into a relationship with other places, thus generating new kinds of socially situated knowledge (Nespor, 1994).

In this short paper I have used Jay’s auto/biography to suggest relationships between a diverse array of actor-networks, each of which you, the reader, will configure into different kinds of knowledge as you engage other actor-networks in your interpretation of this text. The task for the adult educator is to make the time and the spaces to engage with the complexity of lifelong learning in an age when goals, purposes, interests and needs are reduced to tick-box categories through the instruments of accountability and quality measurement. Rather than denying or suppressing those aspects of domestication upon which we depend for our physical and emotional sustenance, we might explore the mechanisms which lead a woman to oppose her identity as a “Mum” to that of a “proper person”. If we encourage people to make a “Fresh Start” or give them a “Second Chance”, we might stop to consider what kinds of places we are dismissing as the sites of deficit, deviance or stagnation that “Women Returners” must be returning from.

¹ Where I write about “women” or “women’s experience”, this is generally related to the state of affairs in which most, but not all, women, and some, but very few, men take on the bulk of domestic and caring work in human societies around the world. For the purposes of this paper, I might include in the category of “women” any men who share these aspects of women’s experience and exclude women who do not.

² British and international surveys on motivation and participation in continuing education offer us various typologies of “non-participants”, all of which include people who: have a significant responsibility for the care of dependant/s; are engaged in additional part-time work outside the home; left school with few or no formal qualifications; live in rural areas (McGivney, 1990).

³ In her notion of auto/biography, Liz Stanley (1992) illustrates the ways in which biography is always also autobiography, but traditionally, both rely on textual strategies which conceal the author’s construction of a character, a life or a self. In acknowledging that Jay’s story is also mine, I am seeking to break with this tradition of concealment.

⁴ Thanks to Jo Tait and Richard Edwards for introducing me to actor-network theory

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