

# FROM THE PERSONAL TO THE COLLECTIVE: THE USE OF GROUP NARRATIVE IN ADULT LEARNING: GATHERING THE SEPARATE AND COLLECTIVE STORIES OF A MARGINALIZED GROUP

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## Abstract

Recognizing and valuing the experiences of individual adult learners is a key component of adult education. Moving adult learners toward reflective action, or praxis, depends upon the learner and educator creating a space where the student's voice can be heard. This means realigning the power dynamic between teacher and student so that they become co-learners. The following research method models an approach that values the individual and corporate voices of a marginalized group through a renegotiation of power between the researcher and the researched. This model uses an application life history that connects personal inquiry and learner collaboration in the process of gathering stories from clergywomen ordained from 1974-1990 in The North Indiana Conference of The United Methodist Church. Many of the women engaged in this study are colleagues who have often competed with one another for power and position within the conference hierarchy. This has placed them in adversarial rather than supportive relationships with one another and with other women in ministry. The structure of this research project has not only realigned the power dynamic between researcher and researched, but has broken through some of these power barriers as these women have started sharing their stories with one another.

## Introduction: "No one ever asked me before"

Recognizing and valuing the experiences of individual adult learners is a key component of adult educational practice. Moving adult learners toward reflective action, or praxis, depends upon the learner and the educator creating a space where the student's voice can be heard. This means realigning the power dynamic between teacher and student in such a way that they will become co-learners. Practice often takes its cues from research. The following research method models an approach that values the individual and corporate voices of a marginalized group through a renegotiation of power between the researcher and the researched.

How might the connection between the researcher and the researched be reframed from one of hierarchical power toward a relationship of co-participation in the research process? Using the narratives of clergywomen ordained from 1974-1990, this project models a research method that grows out of a feminist approach of reframing power relationships, knowledge construction and individual experiences.

Dominice (2000) understood life history as a method of inquiry that engages the research participant in a patterned, somewhat guided exploration of one area of his or her experience. Bodgan & Biklen (1998) recognized personal narrative as a powerful form of qualitative research. Testimonio is a form of first person narrative that places the writer within a sociopolitical context as a witness to or producer of social change (Denizin and Lincoln, 2000). This type of life history invites the reader into an unknown world and becomes a liberatory text, exposing areas of needed challenge and change. The narratives written by the clergy research participants are testimonio.

Telling stories is a primary way of making sense of the world (McCance, McKenna, & Boore, 2001). People use story, or narrative, to create meaning from experience. Language must be set within a context of purpose, a narrative, through which individuals grasp the meaning of lived experience through retelling and reframing understanding of past events. There is an ongoing nature to these narratives, as the tellers interpret their experiences in light of their past, present and future. When asked to participate in this study, one of the research participants responded, "Thank You, no one has ever asked to hear about my story before." Her narrative, along with those of the other clergywomen, clearly tells the story of what it meant to be a woman called into ministry during a time when few if any women were ordained clergy in The Methodist Church. These narratives continue to retell the stories of these women as they lived and worked in structures that marginalized them, not only from male clergy, but from one another. As the research project continues, the research participants are determining what meaning their stories have for the future of women in ministry and for their own praxis.

Body of Paper: "This was harder than I thought it would be"

Autoethnography calls for the researcher to enter into the research process by engaging actively with research participants (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). My own story, as a woman ordained in The North Indiana Conference of The United Methodist Church in 1983, is included as one of several narratives. In September 2002 I wrote a narrative of my experiences as a clergywoman in the North Indiana Conference of The United Methodist Church (NICUMC). This paper was presented at the 2002 National Communication Association Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana. The topic under scrutiny was the effect of gender on clergywomen. The process of writing the narrative became a life-changing event as I discovered insights about my life in the church, my personal life and the vocational choices I have made. The stories of other women ordained at the same time are equally as powerful. I determined to focus future research on the stories of these women.

I am using a 3-step model to gather data from the research participants.

Using autoethnography and life history methods, I have requested a directed construction of written narrative and am asking the research participants to be critical in their narrative, focusing on areas of conflict, growth and difficulty. They may structure this response in whatever way they need to make sense out of their individual stories.

After reading and coding the individual narratives, I am meeting with each participant and sharing with her the themes that have emerged in her narrative. As a way of balancing the power that is intrinsic in the interview process, I am asking her to reflect on her own story, and make any additions needed, either to the original narrative or to my analysis.

A focus group will provide a third layer of data. Research participants will gather for a two-day retreat and will discuss the themes found in the narratives. The purpose of this time together will be to move from our individual stories to a sense of who we are together. This approach will also allow the research participants to contribute to the final analysis.

My original research participants were asked to share their narratives several months ago. Their response has been slow. Several of the women have indicated that the process of writing their narratives is more difficult than at first believed.

Deborah, who has recently divorced her husband and moved to a new parish, stated,

“I realized I had to heal some more before I could write this. I tried to do it earlier, and I could not.”

When asked about her work, Ruth said she realized that she was trying to make it look all nice and pretty.

This was harder than I thought it would be. I need more time to really write about what was happening to me. I realized that I often lived into the idea of being a ‘good little girl’ and did not challenge people when I needed to.”

Others, struggling with trying to carve out time for job, family and self, have simply not started the narrative process, or are so caught up in telling their stories “correctly” that they have not yet completed them.

I have not pushed my research participants to complete their narratives. Perhaps, as one suggested, this is because I know how busy they are and don’t want to add to their busyness or stress levels. I am afraid, however, that at some level I have complied with the idea that our stories are not important, that our voices do not need to be heard. I need to hear the stories of my colleagues as much as they need to tell them.

### Conclusion

Reframing the power dynamic between researcher and researched, especially as one who is filling both roles, is difficult. Trying not to get in the way of the research participants, while still honoring the intent and value of the research process, is a complex process; one that takes a willingness on both parts to renegotiate roles as the project continues. These women are trusting me, their colleague and their researcher, with intimate, potentially career damaging, stories of their lives. How do I share this information in a way that is helpful, both to practice of adult education, and toward bettering the future of women in ministry?

The third tier of the research process, the retreat based focus group, will help in this process. By adding this last layer, I am reframing the connection between the researcher and the researched by moving toward a relationship of co-participants in the research process. This approach grows from a feminist approach of reframing power relationships, and working together to construct knowledge of our own experiences (Reissman, 1993).

The shared power approach of this methodology offers practitioners a model of research that allows the voices of those who have been marginalized to emerge from individual and corporate experiences. It exemplifies for adult educators, a process that equalizes the power dynamics of owned knowledge by moving toward a framework of constructed knowledge; one that takes the experiences of the individual learners seriously, and sets them within the context of a shared story.

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