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Advancing Women In Leadership

## **Critical Research: Postmodern Methodologies for the Examination of Race, Ethnicity, Class, and Gender in Education**

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Historically, we know that particular racial and ethnic groups, the poor, and women have been both withheld from educational opportunities and placed in schools for purposes of regulation, labeled as inferior and intellectually unsuited for "advanced" forms of "reasoning", tracked, placed disproportionately in special education, and on and on. The rationale for these educational decisions has been "scientific truth regarding the nature of human beings". What is this scientific truth? ---- Truth is reason; those who do not reason about the world in the appropriate way must be inferior and are not suited for education. Truth is universality; those who do not fit the norm that we have created for human beings must have something wrong, so must be remediated. Truth is progress; those who do not advance through material possessions, increase their monetary resources, or through education must be lazy or they would "progress". In the context of our presentations today, truth for teacher education is monocultural and technoscientific; those who would move beyond traditional knowledge bases are considered radical or attempting to cause trouble, and labeled as "those minorities". Truth is speaking English; those who do not are categorized as inferior, as not belonging "here". Truth is gendered; women were born for particular roles and those who do not follow those roles are mentally incompetent, too masculine, or even perverts. And finally, Truth is White!! ----

Recently, some theorists have proposed that the Truths that are constructed and accepted as legitimate for society are dependent on the negotiation of power relationships between various groups of people (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Kincheloe, 1991). These "Truths" are actually complicated, decentralized discourses constructed in multiple ways to mask the acquisition and maintenance of power. Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) labeled this interpretation of the concept of Truth as "postmodernism". The objectivity of knowledge or language and the appropriateness of applying (and imposing) generalized world views to(on) all human beings are questioned. This postmodern perspective is the foundation for a critical, and perhaps feminist, multiculturalism and can be one site from which research can construct action toward

progress in the attainment of social justice in education. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to examine postmodern research perspectives and methodologies that can be tied to multicultural education in the pursuit of social justice.

Before postmodern research is discussed as an avenue for the examination of race, ethnicity, class, language, and gender in education, multicultural education must be recognized as the field in which these issues have been predominantly addressed related to teaching and learning. In her historical analysis of the development of multicultural education, Geneva Gay (1983) reminds us of the origins of the field within the 1960's and 1970's sociopolitical context. Connected to the civil rights movement through which racial minority groups sought to overthrow racism and claim their own histories and identities, multicultural education emerged as "a form of resistance to dominant modes of schooling" (Sleeter, 1996). Christine Sleeter addresses the complexity of multicultural education and explains the diversity within the field through discussions of antiracists teaching (Banks, 1992; Darder, 1991; Nieto, 1992), techniques for teaching the culturally different and human relations training (Hollins, et al., 1994; Tiedt & Tiedt, 1986), single group studies that include Ethnic, Women's, Gay and Lesbian, and Black Studies (Asante, 1990; Harding, 1991), multicultural studies that focus on redesigning schooling toward an ideal, equitable society, (Baker, 1983; Gay, 1983) and multicultural and social reconstructionist education, addressing political and economic oppression (Sleeter, 1996).

While multicultural education has come under attack by some critical and feminist educators as not radical enough, educators of color have reminded us that much of schooling is controlled by Whites. Lifetimes of racism have taught multicultural educators that the dominant group must be addressed with school reform language that they will listen to (Banks, 1992; Delpit, 1988). The development of strategies that would more likely appeal to Whites has resulted in language that does not appear radical (for example, using the term human relations as opposed to racial conflict) and practices that are direct and fit dominant constructions of teaching content and methodology. Further, most criticisms have been without recognition of the diverse and complex beliefs and practices represented by the field (Sleeter, 1996).

Multicultural education has been defined as a form of resistance to oppression, particularly opposition to White supremacy and recently, for some, resistance to patriarchy. The goal is an education (and a society) that does not demand monocultural conformity or adherence to one dominant norm, but challenges oppression, celebrates diversity, and strives for social justice, equity, and opportunity. The field of multicultural education is challenging dominant forms of knowledge, universalist perspectives applied to human beings, and constructions of truth that are created and controlled by particular groups as power over other groups. Multicultural education as a field, at least partially represents a postmodern view of the world.

### Postmodernism

What is postmodernism and how does it relate to multicultural research? >From the enlightenment perspectives generated in Europe over 500 years ago emerged a belief in universal "Truth", the naturally predetermined reality and knowledge that was believed to apply to all human beings. Tied to this "Truth" was the belief in human and individual progress; "man"kind is always advancing in thought; individuals are always progressing toward higher levels of growth, sophistication, and intellect. Further, enlightenment beliefs fostered notions of natural dualisms, illustrated by the dichotomy constructed in the Cartesian separation of mind and body, and further demonstrated in contemporary discourses of male/female, White/Black, good/evil, adult/child, objective/subjective, reason/intuition, and on and on. As industrialization maintained and even fostered the enlightenment belief that science could reveal the natural "Truths" that apply to all, the modern era emerged. Those of us who are grounded in the "so called" Western view of the world have accepted this belief in universal truth, progress, reason, and science without question. In education, specifically, we have accepted such notions as the existence of

particular knowledges that all children should learn, the belief that science can determine the universal ways in which all human beings function, and the belief that a range of teaching methodologies are in some form universally applicable to all. Postmodern perspectives in a variety of fields (e.g. arts, philosophy, literature, linguistics) have called to question these universalized "regimes of truth," labeling them as social constructions that give power to particular groups over others (Cannella, 1997; Derrida, 1988; Foucault, 1980; Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991; Lather, 1991).

When Lyotard (1984) coined the term "postmodern," he referred to critiques of enlightenment/modernist "grand narratives" or truths that were applied to all humanity. The notion that reason/knowledge, and therefore, education would deliver the poor from servitude and ignorance is an example "grand narrative" that has permeated much of our educational policy making. This regime of truth has legitimized the control of particular groups by, for example, denying Blacks who could not read the right to vote, categorizing those who exhibit diverse views of the world as ignorant and without talents, constructing experts who control the lives of others because of their "advanced" knowledge and reasoning ability. Further, accepting this "grand narrative" as truth has legitimized blaming the poor for their life conditions and ignoring the larger social, political, and historical context that has generated a classed society. Postmodern perspectives challenge "regimes of truth" or grand narratives, calling to question the cultural and political contexts from which they have emerged and the power that is generated for those who construct the truth. Again, multicultural education is at least to some extent a postmodern view of the world.

Postmodern thought does represent a variety of different perspectives, resulting in a definition that is elusive and problematic. However problematic, a postmodern position is directly applicable to research in multicultural education because it includes

- (1) the examination of regimes of truth, language, and power that have dominated thought;
- (2) social criticism of institutionalized systems and the truth assumptions underlying those systems;
- (3) the recognition that those who have been identified as different have been labeled the "Other", especially related to gender and racial perspectives, and
- (4) a discourse that both accepts and critiques diverse cultural practices (Slattery, 1995).

Postmodernism is not a cure for the disease of "grand narratives" or universal Truth, but the creation of new multidirectional positions from which to view and construct the world (Lather, 1991). Further, postmodern thought would challenge us to create an openness to the unexplained, the ambiguous, the hidden.

Tied to multicultural education, postmodern research perspectives lead to the construction of such questions as:

What are the regimes of truth that have been used to construct concepts of schooling? (e.g. child development, psychologized learning, discipline and management, universalized language acquisition, best practices) How have these truths been constructed (historically, politically, socially)? Who claims the truth? What are the assumptions of these truths regarding difference?

What are the messages that underlie institutionalized educational systems as they are applied to diversity? How do both conservative and liberal education support the status quo? How does the construction of educational professionalism support cultural hegemony?

What students are silenced, disqualified, and/or disregarded by the regimes of truth that dominate

schooling?

What are the "truths" that have constructed multicultural education? What are the values and methods for analyzing those truths as they are practiced in the field? How can we, as multicultural educators, construct dispositions in which we appreciate but continually critique the field?

### Questions and Methods

Scholars such as Jacques Derrida (1988), Julia Kristava (1986), and Michel Foucault (1980) have constructed theories of postmodern analysis and research methods. The work of Foucault best illustrates the possibilities for multicultural education. Foucault's theories have focused on language, or discourse, as constructing knowledge and limiting alternative forms. Language and knowledge are therefore, inextricably tied to power. Foucault raised some of the most important postmodern questions that apply to the goals of multicultural education. As examples:

What languages and knowledges have been included and excluded?

How have forms of discourse been used to justify particular knowledge(s)?

Whose truths have been hidden through our discourse methods? Whose knowledge has been disqualified as not good enough, not important enough, not sophisticated enough for consideration?

How have particular groups gained control over others through the discourses that dominate? (Cannella, 1997)

Foucault's focus included the recognition that discourse, knowledge, and power are rooted in historical, political, and social contexts. Stressing the need for analyses of power from the bottom up, historical counterquestions are asked such as: Who has written the history? Who has been included and excluded? What has been left out? History is approached as counter-memory (Hutton, 1993). Foucault's "genealogy" of knowledge is an example of historical methodology that is particularly applicable for a critical multicultural education. A particular practice is located in the present and problematized to reveal the ways in which the practice was historically justified. The discourses that were used for that justification and the assumptions underlying the forms of representation are revealed. For example, in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault (1977) begins with the practice of imprisonment, asking the question: Imprisonment had been rejected in the past; how did it later come to be accepted? As the genealogical analysis progresses, other questions emerge: What knowledges are disqualified within the construction of imprisonment? Who gained control? In another example, Thomas Skrtic (1995) recently used a genealogical method to trace the discourse that has been used to shape and justify the field of special education. Research issues applicable to multicultural education would be not only the genealogy of public education itself, but the problematization of such discourses as child development, educational constructions of discipline, testing practices, and English language dominance. Genealogical analysis provides a research base from which taken-for-granted truths in the field of education can be challenged.

As a theorist and researcher, Foucault (1978) has provided a perspective from which to function multiculturally that addresses such issues as identity, subjectivity, reproduction, discipline, and regulation. Further, postmodern examples of ties with a critical multicultural research perspective can be found. Foucault introduced the notion of "disciplinary power", power constructed as the desire to be "normal" is produced by dominant discourses. For example, discourses in the media, education, and fields like medicine and psychology speak a language in which mothers are expected to spend a lot of time with their children, "sensitively" talk to them, constantly teach them how to function in ways that fit the

educational system, and provide a play-oriented "childhood". Those mothers who function based on this dominant discourse are considered and labeled normal, good, and responsible; they even take on these labels themselves. Those who for cultural, individual, socioeconomic, or other reasons interact with their children in different ways are considered abnormal, ignorant, irresponsible, and even deviate; these are the mothers who must be taught to parent, and are labeled as uncaring, deficient and unknowing. This disciplinary power may be so strong that these mothers accept themselves as not normal, in some way lacking. Critical multicultural research could explore the disciplinary powers that have been constructed within teachers and over students as learners. Disciplinary powers produce the desire to be normal and may counter and even silence diverse cultural perspectives and ways of being in the world.

Tied to postmodern perspectives are fields of thought that, although not always labeled "postmodern", represent a challenge to dominant discourses, view resistance to oppression as a necessary action, and strive to foster social justice. Two of these fields are (1) a "postmodernized" critical theory and (2) feminist theory and research as represented by postmodern feminism and feminist scholarship from the margins.

### Postmodernized critical theory.

Grounded in the Frankfurt school and often critiqued as using a language of privilege, critical theory has many diverse revolutionary voices. Although avoiding association with the universal, a common belief is that domination, subjugation and injustice play major roles in shaping the everyday lives of human beings (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994; Bottomore, 1984; Giroux, 1983). Postmodern critical theorists have challenged the more structural critical perspective that emancipation and social justice can be achieved through some form of rational critique. Postmodern criticalists point to the complexity and ambiguity of human society and the idiosyncratic ways in which individuals, communities, and even localities are influenced (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991). Further, Foucault's work relating power and discourse has eliminated any utopian belief in a rational, modernist elimination of oppression. Postmodern criticalists do, however, address

- (1) relationships as unstable and in a modernist society mediated by capitalism;
- (2) ways that oppression is perpetuated by placing those with little power into positions in which they accept their status as natural;
- (3) the interconnectedness of forms of oppressions; and
- (4) the ways in which mainstream research constructions and methodologies reproduce oppression (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994).

Critical multicultural research is easily tied to postmodern critical thought. For example, critical analysis of the assumptions underlying mainstream research methodologies is very much a multicultural issue. What are the assumptions concerning reality and human truth in the construction of positivist research methods? Who have these methodologies privileged? Who have they oppressed? When social science research methods have been applied to education, has social justice been the result? Has this educational research been used to regulate members of particular groups (e.g. women, Blacks, the poor, diverse families, children in general)? Other example critical issues that tie with multicultural education include the middle-class materialist emphasis of dominate educational methodologies, the focus on technology that will save the learning world, and the construction of economic, linguistic, and racial division through such practices as honors and gifted programs. Critical research methods most often include historical reconstruction and critical ethnography, methods that support the multicultural researchers attempts to examine various forms of educational oppression (Sleeter & McLaren, 1995; Kincheloe & McLaren,

1994).

## Feminist Research.

Although feminist perspectives are at times in conflict with each other, all focus on the lives of women and, to some extent, social justice for women. For a critical multicultural education, postmodern feminist research and feminist perspectives that have been constructed from the margins provide the most insight.

Postmodern feminist researchers "regard truth as a destructive illusion" (Olesen, 1994, p. 164). The world is viewed as complex narratives, endless stories of people and their lives. Gender is not privileged as in some other forms of feminist work, but women are the focus of the research. Cultural studies that stress both representation and text are common. One example is the work of Haraway (1991), illustrating the cultural construction of "woman" as related to science. With this increased focus on life narratives, postmodern feminist research has drawn attention to two issues that directly relate to critical research in education:

(1) The first is the issue of "voice." How are the "voices" of others to be heard? What does voice mean? and Must voices be made to fit the dominant discourse learned by the researcher? Based on this concern, postmodern feminists have begun to search for diverse (and unthought of) ways in which to provide accounts of women's lives (Lather, 1996; Fine, 1992; Wolf, 1992; Krieger, 1983).

(2) The second is the issue of "experience." While we have accepted "experience" as representing life and educational work reality, postmodern feminists have demonstrated the instability of the concept. Experience is understood as both representing life and as a vehicle for the replication of oppressive systems (Scott, 1991). Experience is an interpretation of life within a context and requires historical, political, and social analysis. Critical multicultural education could explore the experiences of teachers and students with the historical recognition of the position from which their experiences have been constructed. Additionally, critical multicultural research could provide further insight into how we listen and attend to the diverse voices of students in educational settings.

Finally, the work of feminist researchers who represent the margins of societal power (hooks, 1984), e.g. women of color, lesbian women, and women with disabilities, provide the most important postmodern multicultural research perspective. These scholars strain the accepted boundaries of social science, attacking the dualist lens from which researchers function. Patricia Hill Collins (1986, 1990), Patricia Zavella (1987), and bell hooks (1990) are examples of those who have clearly critiqued the creation of the "Other" by researchers dominated by male forms of reference, authoritarian assumptions, and hidden cultural norms. These scholars have always represented race, gender, and class oppression as undeniably linked. Theories that would address only one form of oppression are understood as actually representing forms of thought that are part of dominant ideology and may even perpetuate that very oppression. As bell hooks has stated: "Racism is fundamentally a feminist issue because it is so inter-connected with sexist oppression." (1992, p. 396). This work from the margins has begun to address the need for the construction of bonds between us, as Black and White female researchers and educators, as members of diverse socioeconomic groups, as human beings with different types of education and life experiences. Again quoting bell hooks: "As long as White and Black women are content with living separately in a state of psychic social apartheid, racism will not change" (1995, p. 224). Perhaps the greatest challenge for the construction of a critical multicultural research agenda in education is that we face the ways that we have knowingly or unknowingly oppressed each other and construct partnerships that would attack any form of social apartheid that places limits on human beings.

## After Thoughts

Postmodernism should not become another "grand narrative", resulting in a relativistic form of dominance. The interconnections between the various postmodern perspectives, multicultural education, critical theory, and feminist perspectives can, however, serve as the conditions of stimulation and critique for each other.

*Editors' Note: APA style is followed as closely as possible under the html format. Indentions, spacing, andfootnoting may vary.*

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