When We Lay Our Burdens Down to Lift Each Other Up: An Intersectional History of Women’s Biographical Storytelling as Activism in the US

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Paper

Text
Stories women tell of their lives have long been an important part of social, cultural, political and economic activism in the US. However, different racial and ethnic communities have brought distinct traditions and epistemologies to the practice. While these have been documented and analyzed separately, they have not been compared in terms of their philosophical, cultural, and historical ecologies and the epistemologies and practices that developed from them.

We address these questions:

- how have different ethnic and racial communities of US women used lived stories in the cause of activism?
- what have been each community’s distinct philosophical/cultural/historical influences and epistemologies that have shaped their practices?
- what have been the challenges, intersectional strides, and evolution of each community of women’s feminisms?
- how have women adult educators used biographical storytelling in research for activist purposes?

Our comparative study draws on primary and secondary sources for this historical review and published research in adult education to examine how women have used and are using biographical methods in the service of activism. We define activism broadly to include action at the interpersonal, group, community, organizational, national and international levels, reflecting the multiple domains to which women have historically been active.
We begin our history with the “telling it like it is” life stories that were part of the Black Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’s & 60’s and the (re)telling of Chicanas’ life stories as part of the Chicano Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s. These movements, as well as “speaking bitterness” or Suku during the Chinese land reforms of the 1940’s and 50’s, influenced women’s use of biographical stories for consciousness-raising and collective-resistance from the 1960’s through the 1980’s. We pay particular attention to the different ways they were imagined and employed in Black (Lorde, 1984; Combahee River Collective, 1986; Hill, 2000), Chicana (Bernal, 1988; The Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Bernal, Buricaga, & Carmona, 2012 ) and EuroAmerican (Redstocking, n.d.) feminist movements, briefly discussing the European feminist postmodern influence with its emphasis on narrative and discourse (Irigaray, 1975, 1979; Butler, 1990).

For our current moment, we examine identity-based activism in two ways. First, we look at the intentionally subversive process of biographical sharing by members of intersectionally-marginalized communities in activist spaces to disrupt the retelling of a singular dominant narrative. Second, we focus on sharing biographies across difference to resist the polarizing efforts of agents in the US aiming to gain political and economic power by enacting divisive policies and trying to dominate the public narrative with the intention of exploiting ethnic and racial differences and inflaming intergroup conflict, a practice familiar throughout US history.

Finally, we focus on the use of group biography in adult education, both within and outside of the academy, and how such biographies have been used as activism. Then, as four researchers, we look at the power in our own lives of using autobiographical processes as activists within Black, Chicana and Euroamerican feminisms.

**Question:** What can different lenses of gender, sexuality, culture and politics bring to our research?

**Keywords:** Activism, Narrative, Gender, Epistemology, Intersectionality

**References:**
