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*European journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults* 9 (2018) 1, S. 29-44



Empfohlene Zitierung/ Suggested Citation:

O'Grady, Maeve: An institutional ethnography of a feminist organization: a study of community education in Ireland - In: *European journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults* 9 (2018) 1, S. 29-44 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-155290

<http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-155290>

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## An institutional ethnography of a feminist organization: a study of community education in Ireland

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### Abstract

*A small Irish independent women's community education organisation, founded to provide personal development and community education programmes for women who cannot pay for them, has experienced the struggles of surviving in a patriarchal state that no longer supports women's community building but which funds individual capacity building for 'labour market activation' purposes. The organisation consists of three staff funded to work on a part-time basis, facilitators who work on an ad-hoc basis to meet the needs of groups of participants, the women who participate in different groups in the organisation, the staff of a crèche, and voluntary members. The purpose of the research is to support the need for the organisation to reconceptualise the meaning of the work of the organisation using institutional ethnography methodology to question the extent to which the work can be seen as political and feminist, and adhering to its original ideals. The research consisted of four weeks of fieldwork in the organisation with the participants, followed by a focus group of staff and facilitators reflecting on features that participants valued: making new connections, groupwork, the physical environment, the challenge and support, and the pace of the work. The provision of a space and culture that transgresses the norms of dominant cultural understandings of being a working-class woman is now understood to be the radical outcome, with the original expectation of the possibility of empowering participants to become feminist activists receding but remaining an ideal.*

**Keywords:** class and gender; feminist pedagogy; habitus.

### Introduction

This article explores how a women's community education organisation reflects on its aim of enabling working-class women to work for positive social change in Irish society, and the relationship of feminist pedagogical processes to the realities of the process that women undergo in this context. The organisation is placed within the field of Community Development and Community Education in Ireland and feminist pedagogy, and the changes it perceives as an erosion of its mission are explained by the influence of



neoliberal ideas on state support for marginalised women. The study describes how the women who participate identify significant aspects of the organisational practices, culture and environment along with the reflections of facilitators and staff on the construction and maintenance or minding of these aspects, which are seldom discussed but are the tacit knowledge in this community of practice. The reconceptualisation of the organisation's aims reflects a poststructuralist understanding of identity and agency, which is needed to keep the needs and issues of working-class women a priority. It concludes with reflections on the role of feminist pedagogy and feminist places in fostering the agency of women silenced by culture, gender and class.

### Women's Community Education in Ireland

The emergence of the women's community education sector in the 1980s is linked with processes of social change in Irish society, the experience of contradictory social positions and lack of adequate responses from the state. Inglis contends that the low status of women was reproduced by the education system, media raised consciousness about women's issues, and the influence of the Catholic Church over Irish women was in decline: the outcome of these circumstances was 'a sense of alienation from the existing system' for women (Inglis, 1994, p. 54). Groups were able to emerge because of two developments: first, the consciousness-raising activities of the women's movement through the formation of self-help groups; secondly, the influence of Paulo Freire in adult education and the role of non-formal educational activities in community development. The result was the struggle for women to 'gain ownership and control of their own education' (ibid).

The influence of Freire on the community development movement in Ireland gave groups concepts such as 'education for liberation' to aim for, and the political nature of awareness-raising (Freire, 1970). For women's groups, the vision of increasing women's participation in public aspects of Irish life (such as local and national politics) became a goal, with community education given a role to educate and support women to take on new public roles. Freire's analysis, however powerful, was criticised for being gender-blind by hooks (1994), but her criticism enabled feminists to take an approach combining a structural, class-based analysis with a gender analysis of culture. Many involved in establishing women's community groups did not identify themselves as feminists however. Working-class women do not relate to the term 'feminism'. hooks (2000) states that working-class women and women of colour were betrayed by a particular type of feminism, differentiating between reformist feminism and radical or revolutionary feminism. Reformist feminism is about fitting in, with middle-class women gaining equality with middle-class men. This involves the right to work alongside men in good well-paid jobs, a right that was previously denied to them. This is availed of by 'escalator' feminists, middle-class women who get the benefits of well-paid jobs but leave the structures that oppress and exploit poor, black and working-class women intact.

hooks's analysis is that reformist feminism 'hijacked' the discourse on feminism, and so any other type of feminism was obscured. It did this by coming along at the same time that white patriarchy was resisting black empowerment. Including white middle-class women was a means of bolstering white patriarchy against change. Reformist feminism enabled white middle-class women get some of the benefits of an exploitative, capitalist patriarchy (ibid). The dominance of reformist feminism has served to 'deradicalise' both feminism and its movement for radical change (ibid, p. 105). The discourse of feminism that is dominant reflects the interests only of middle-class women,

and this in turn deflects attention away from challenging ‘white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’ (ibid). Radical feminism sees the only paid work that is liberating is that which is open to the middle-classes. Low paid, menial, or casual work is the reality for working-class women. When they work outside the home, they have the double burden of paid and unpaid work if they have no-one else to share their domestic task. Reformist feminism betrayed those women (ibid). However, it could be argued that because media are controlled by the owning classes and operated by the middle-classes who are including middle-class reformist women, that it was also the negative media portrayal of radical forms of feminism that alienated many working-class women from feminism.

hooks’ criticism identifies the limitations of what became known as second-wave feminism that was manifest in the United States in the 1960s. Women of colour and poor women were not the beneficiaries of the actions that responded to the struggle for change. The patriarchal nature of institutions was not radically altered by the inclusion of middle-class women. This criticism, and the rootedness of women’s experience affected by the experience of class, race and gender, gave rise to an understanding of the more radical nature of the changes that needed to be made, those at the level of language and culture, and their effect on the subjectivity of women. The argument for radical feminism is based on the analysis that patriarchy is the problem that needs to be addressed through means of collective action.

Feminism has to be relevant to poor women. Any critical consciousness must be based there. This is what will make feminism relevant to working-class, black, and poor women. As hooks says: ‘feminism is for everybody’ (ibid, p. 110). This analysis helps us understand why every woman might not embrace feminism. A consciousness-raising process can proceed without it, but it will be reformist rather than radical. While reformist pedagogy might be liberating for individual women, it does not alter the material conditions of poor women. The radical aim can be understood as ‘liberation’, but not just for individuals. When the emphasis is on individual change, education is for ‘domestication’, enabling the individual to fit into society but leave the status quo intact (Freire, 1970).

Irish educators have considered the question of the extent to which adult education achieves liberation or domestication. Slowey (1987) used the concepts to examine the experience of women participating in diverse forms of adult education provision in the 1970s. Connolly (1997) applies the question to the fields of community education and development, especially women’s community education. Galligan most recently examined statutory community education courses provided by the Vocational Education Committee in Co. Donegal to explore the extent to which they were focused on social change outcomes. Her study found that only 25% of the provision could be deemed ‘radical’ (Galligan, undated). Connolly (1997) identifies problems with the ability of community education and development as practised in Ireland to achieve the emancipation of women because, while it is underscored by Freirean philosophy and principles, it has to be mediated through liberal discourse. Connolly argues that working for gender equality requires learning from feminist theory and the processes and practices that have emerged from feminist groupwork, research and women’s studies, especially those informed by insights from poststructuralism.

The women’s community education groups that were formed in the 1980s were influenced by images of second-wave feminist activism of the 1960s and 1970s in the Republic of Ireland. We have the memorable image of the ‘Contraceptive Train’ in 1971, when the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement organised a visit to Northern Ireland for the purpose of buying contraceptives that were illegal in the Republic (Connolly, 2003, p. 120): very public, very exciting, quite vociferous and receiving media attention.

However, English's study of contemporary women's nonprofit organisations claims that the women in such organisations are '21<sup>st</sup> century agents of change, from within the grassroots' (English, 2011, p. 217). English claims that this is a quiet, 'postheroic' form of activism that is more relevant to people who experience more risks; it is a strategic form of activism, with actions carefully discussed and considered. It is a grassroots form of resistance to power from above: 'Through participation and informal learning, the women in this study become seasoned actors and informal learners' (ibid, p. 218).

Connolly identifies the problem in community education and development work: it has not achieved the emancipation of women because it has not had any impact on power structures in society (Connolly, 1997). Walby (2009), however, would identify Ireland's poor structures of democracy that marginalise women's contribution as the reason for such failure to impact on power structures. A deeper type of democracy is needed to achieve, for example, a change in Ireland's low levels of female representation. Connolly's questions, however, indicate the type of reflexivity in radical forms of adult education that extend reflection to examining its overall social change mission.

Connolly describes community development's aim to bring about social change by fostering the ability of groups to collectively define problems and solutions to them. This is an educational process. Community development can be seen as a social movement that aims to include marginalised groups into mainstream society. When it is regarded or used as a means of modernising communities, community development is domesticating if it creates 'passive, self-regulating citizens who do not criticise institutions of power' (Connolly, 1997, p. 42). There are a range of community development strategies in Ireland evident since the 1960s, some of which emphasise the process as much as the content of development programmes. These, however, fail to recognise power issues in relation to gender, and how they may even be supporting the status quo (ibid).

Connolly's argument is that the existing power relations in society will not be changed by education, if the dominant discourse in that provision is liberal and individual. There is a radical trend that works towards social and political change, 'but it is not overt about how participants will be agents of that change', so that how processes and programmes lead to social and/or political change 'are not clear' (ibid, p. 43). Connolly states: 'Community education responds to the needs of the community. It imparts the knowledge and skills the community needs in order to become agents of change' (ibid). The response through community education is the provision of three types of learning – technical skills acquisition, practical in terms of communication and social interaction, and thirdly, critical reflection. Critical reflection, Connolly states, 'aims to empower people to take control of their lives, by examining how attitudes and values are formed' (ibid, p. 44). This acknowledges the aim to empower people, but there is no certainty that it actually does this. Community education is here stated to be responsive; this entails providing what people say they want. What happens when those aspirations are limited by cultural contexts? To what extent can responses to needs be directed towards social action for change?

'Social change, in this person-centred perspective, is the cumulative effect of individual, personal change rather than a coherent movement' with equality for individuals assumed to result from that type of change (ibid). Connolly states that this is implicitly a modernist and liberal-humanist view of both society and individual, which de-emphasizes the role of the social/structural in the conditioning or socialisation of the individual (ibid). This reflects a dualism, separating the individual from society. Dualisms need to be overcome so that the individual-society link can be examined. A poststructuralist approach tries to do this (ibid, p. 45). Feminism and community development are linked by an aim to 'bring about social change, to endeavour to empower

people [...] to act collectively to change the power relations which created the inequality' (ibid, p. 47-48). The radical ambitions of community education and development require thinking in three main areas: pedagogy, collective action processes, and the types of outcomes sought (ibid, p. 48).

A critical pedagogical approach does not necessarily enable women move from the personal to the political in terms of action for social change, nor might it necessarily enable a group to work together in a way that enables them to act collectively. If it fails to focus on social change, the effect will be the 'self-regulating citizen', one able to fit into society rather than challenging its unequal relations. A gender model, on the other hand, celebrates women's attributes, 'whether these are natural or socially proscribed' (ibid, p. 49). The gender model of analysis, however, is also criticised for a lack of attention or awareness of the role of collective and political consciousness. Feminist pedagogy is the combination of both the gender and liberation models (ibid).

Adding the dimension of difference to feminist pedagogy depends on using a poststructural approach. Poststructuralism recognizes the role of subjectivity: something individual, formed by conditioning and social structures (ibid, p. 50). If it is individual, then each individual has their own truth, has constructed their own knowledge but not in circumstances of their own choosing. If prior knowledge is accepted as a personal construct influenced by culture, class and gender, this opens up possibilities for different types of action, or for modifying or expanding that knowledge.

Feminist pedagogy, in Connolly's terms, enables power structures to be understood so that routes for equality of power can be identified. The methodologies of this pedagogy consist of 'dialogue, discussion and a supportive learning environment, in addition to input on the social institutions and power relations' (ibid). Groupwork is essential in enabling the skills and education for acting collectively to be acquired (ibid, p. 52). How does groupwork relate to collective action? 'Tremendous personal development' can be achieved by individual participants but unless connection is made with other members of a group, 'it will not translate into social change' (ibid). The bridge between the personal and the political, the essential component in enabling an individual work for or effect social change, is connecting with others, as members of a group. Connolly states that it is only the social model of community education that 'connects the personal with the political' (Connolly, 2008, p. 35).

Connolly shows the relationship between inadequate thinking and failure to change the status quo. She claims a role for feminist poststructuralism in enabling work that encompasses difference, including the varied experiences of women by virtue of multiple forms of oppression and marginalisation. Connolly shows the weaknesses in feminist pedagogy, but also points to ways to deal with it. The poststructuralist approach is presented as the solution to 'inadequate thinking', and will be dealt with again further on.

Work at the personal, micro level, or Personal Development as it has become known in the field of adult education, is the essential starting point for work for social change, according to Murphy (1999) who claims that the starting point for action in the world is action on and in the self. A 'personal psychology of inertia' must be addressed, and then addressing a group psychology of inertia can follow (Murphy, 1999, p. 15). This micro-level work makes certain assumptions: a willingness to take risks; that changing understandings and taking actions will change a worldview (ibid, p. 60); that learning is individual and subjective (ibid, p. 78); that a good outcome of education is that the individual can cope with the fact that culture is constantly changing (ibid, p. 81). Change starts with the individual, but needs to be fostered by educational processes and practices. There is an assumption here that the agency of individuals needs an outside actor or

organisation for it to be released, or at the very least, help people overcome the fear of change. Change is recognised first and foremost to be a subjective experience.

For both Connolly and Murphy, critical and feminist pedagogy involves a relationship between the person and the group. The liberation process is a dynamic one and an interactional one. Connolly states that women's liberation needs feminist theory: we can therefore ask: how feminist is women's community education?

Ryan (2001) contends that attending to subjectivity is a political activity. Poststructuralism gives theorists a way of overcoming the dualism between a sociological understanding of practice and a psychological one. The sociological understanding emphasises the group, the social, and structure; psychological understandings can explain the individual experience of identity and self, and its effect on agency. Psychological approaches are criticised for seeing gender as natural, fixed at birth; sociological approaches are criticised for over-emphasising the social processes and structures that impact on identity. The concept of subjectivity contains the possibility of reconciling two different ways of seeing and knowing. A poststructural approach to subjectivity enables us to examine how the individual and the social are connected.

While community development organisations originally developed as a response to issues caused by poverty, the state now sets policy objectives for them rather than groups setting their own, or at the very least, the goals of the community development organisation must align with the state's objectives in order to receive funding under the new Local Community Development Programme (LCDP), which started in January 2010 and replaced the older Community Development Programme (see [www.pobail.ie](http://www.pobail.ie)). Not all established community development projects were able to do this. Many transformed themselves into providers of further education, delivering certified programmes for adults who feel under an obligation to attend programmes or lose their social welfare payments. Ironically, the establishment of a coherent, accessible and flexible further education structure for adults was sought by community education organisations to enable access for working-class adults to education, training and qualifications. Now that it exists, it has given the state a means of directing funding to the delivery of certified programmes, and the outcomes of these programmes are to be individual progression into employment or higher levels of education, known as Labour Market Activation ([www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie)). 'Education has become orientated towards the market' (Grummel, 2014, p. 128), and providers of informal community education have had to adjust. Providers are required to show outcomes in terms of numbers progressing into employment or higher education. Progression is individual and linear, expressed as 'individual achievement, products and performance rather than the communal or participative aspects of learning process' (ibid, p. 130), discouraging 'the sense of collective responsibility, trust and action necessary for civil society' (ibid, p. 134).

These changes illustrate the increasing influence of neoliberal values on state support for the independent community development and community education sector, and suppress public discourse about approaches that may be essential in preparing adults for participating in such individualised and competitive processes. State support for funding community groups to identify problems and take collective action on them, as a core part of the original Community Development Programme, has disappeared. We are not alone. The experience of neoliberal state policies that are turning feminist organizations into service-providers is a global phenomenon, according to English and Irvine (2015). Feminism is 'ghettoized' into the personal sphere, with the loss of its political agency (ibid). That loss threatens the ability of 'thinly-stretched' feminist organisations (ibid) to 'disrupt patriarchy' (Hegarty, 2016, p. 82). As bottom-up community development is replaced by programme funding targeted at labour market

outcomes, it becomes a vital defence to identify what practice is actually achieving. As the discourse of pedagogy shifts to ‘how’ questions related to Lifelong Learning, research provides an opportunity to link the ‘why we educate question’ to the ‘how’ of a specific learning culture before audit culture ‘crowds it out’ (Finnegan, 2016, p. 47-48).

Connolly and others, as considered above, prescribe a particular pedagogical approach to foster social development and social change. Much of this relies on individual facilitators having the required consciousness, analysis, pedagogical and facilitation skills, and environment to do so. What else is required? How does an organisation organise this, especially an organisation that claims to attend to the needs of the women who participate? What is going on for the women who participate: what do they see as significant?

### The Investigation

The organisation claims to address barriers experienced by marginalised women in participating in different forms of public life: formal education and training, employment, politics, and Irish society generally. The women themselves identify the barriers, which include parenting alone, being dependent on social welfare, having low education levels, lack of confidence in their ability to cope with the demands and the skills involved in formal education, and having childcare and other social care responsibilities. There is also an awareness of the effect of domestic violence on women of all classes. There have been many individual instances of women saying how their participation in the organisation has changed them. These statements were never systematically recorded, so that the staff and facilitators carry a sense that something is being done well, but what exactly is it? What is it that the organisation does that helps the women who participate?

Bourdieu’s concept of field and habitus came into play to frame the investigation. Bourdieu states that a culture, or field of practice, acts to provide norms around how to be, which become internalised in individuals as their habitus. Habitus is the set of dispositions shaped in and by a social field of practice, is deep, beneath and beyond the reach of consciousness. Relations of domination and subordination ‘inhabit each of us, whether man or woman ... so familiar and self-evident that they pass unnoticed’ (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 54). Culture is the field of practice that gives us these meanings, embeds them deep within us and requires us to perform them in different ways: through divisions based on gender, class, race and other forms, which are ‘culturally arbitrary’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000), varying from place to place and time to time. These performances serve to reproduce existing social relations. This view is that we are made by culture, and we reproduce culture through performance. This performativity is controlled by power relations. Those relations are rendered so invisible due to the taken-for-granted nature of them within the culture. They form doxa, that which ‘goes without saying’ (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu (2001) states that habitus cannot be shifted by cognitive means alone: this challenges the possibilities for change in pedagogies relying on rational cognitive approaches. The organisation could be looked at as a culture with distinct practices that happens beyond the rational, or in addition to it, for identifying elements that enabled participants to change their thinking and actions.

To get at the ‘doxa’ involved using Smith’s idea of Institutional Ethnography (2005). Smith states that institutional ethnography allows structure to be seen in agency, showing the impact of cultural and political forces in individual accounts. The researcher, a voluntary member not known to the participants, acted as an ethnographer for a period of four weeks, noting comments of participants, asking questions of individuals during



their breaks or when invited to meet a group, and observing the activities within the organisation. Institutional ethnography requires the researcher to provide a social map, and identify what is indicated by the data. The data provided themes for discussion with a focus group of staff and facilitators. The presentation of the themes below includes quotations from participants and the reflections from the focus group of facilitators and staff. Names of speakers were not recorded. The quotations selected are those that most illustrate the theme.

### **The Social Map of the Organisation**

Some participants are women referred to the organisation by local doctors, other community groups, social workers and state agencies. Others are self-referred, hearing about programmes on the basis of word-of-mouth, or having been encouraged by a friend. Before joining a group, the development worker meets each woman individually, and a relationship is established. Many who attend meetings go on to form a pre-development group, the needs analysis is done, and funding applications are made that reflect what the women need and want. Women with childcare needs can avail of places in the crèche to support their participation.

Groups are involved in collective activities such as celebrating International Women's Day each March and the annual Sixteen Days of Action against Gender Violence. They are also supported to attend local, regional and national conferences. Staff members and voluntary members have been involved in an exchange programme with women's groups in Tanzania. Each group appoints two representatives who attend management meetings.

The organisation is managed by a voluntary management committee made up of different groups of women: some are the founders of the organisation, others represent the current groups, and working groups include staff. A feminist model of participatory democracy has developed which enables the groups to be part of the decision-making through working groups and have a say in the overall direction of the organisation. This is also recognised as building capacity for external representation at local, regional and national level on relevant structures which voluntary members attend (Murphy, 2011). The hope is that participation fostered at micro and meso levels can be transferred to a macro level once working-class women have the space to find and use their voice.

Women's needs are kept central to the work, keeping a feminist analysis to the fore, where power is shared and reflective practice is extended beyond the daily work of the project to all areas including the organisational culture. The organisation's reports convey the nature of the activities and the various roles that participants are supported to take. Such reports do not convey a sense of the relationships they have with staff, voluntary members and each other, hence this reflexive investigation.

### **Features of the Organisation**

Participants described being ill-at-ease or unaccustomed to talking about themselves before starting in the organisation: 'I was asked for my opinion. No-one had ever asked me for an opinion'. 'If I was out in company with someone I felt had a good education, I'd hold myself back and feel stupid.' This indicated that a social and supportive connection with other people had been missing in the lives of those participants. Facilitators spoke about the background of some participants and the effect of talking in

groups or to the development worker: ‘One woman frequently says that when she comes here she feels important. She has a place to be, a purpose beyond her everyday roles, and a sense of belonging.’ This is not true for all women who participate, only for those whose confidence levels are low. It would not apply to those who are more used to group situations. However, it was stated that ‘They may have individual connections but not the collective connections that they get here.’

This ‘feeling important’ enables needs to be expressed and normalised. The organisation exists to address those needs and provide the supports that they can. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1997, p. 26) claim that without social interaction, ‘individuals remain isolated from others’, which seems obvious, but they go on to say ‘without tools for representing their experiences, people also remain isolated from the self’. This indicates that the oppression of isolation is not just about isolation from others, but causes a lack of self-knowledge due to the absence of a space or opportunity to discover more about the self through relational activities such as the discussion groups. The outcome of such groupwork enables self-discovery, the relationship with the self to change, as well as the relationship with others outside of the immediate family or neighbourhood. The group becomes a bridge to something outside of their own life: ‘such interchanges lead to ways of knowing that enable individuals to enter into the social and intellectual life of their community’ (ibid, p. 26). The participants conveyed their awareness that the organisation is a different space for them, enabling them to make a type of connection with others that was new.

Participants were enthusiastic about being involved in groups. They state that the welcome they receive, the recognition they get, and being given a turn to speak, is significant. ‘Listening to people talking, I realised everyone had problems, some a lot worse than mine’; ‘I don’t feel intimidated in the small groups’. Facilitators stated that the welcome is fundamental, from the time a woman first comes to the organisation. If a welcome is not there, the woman will not come back, and the welcome has to be maintained. This is work that is invisible:

It’s the nothing stuff, but it’s huge. It goes against social norms: Society does not recognise for instance, being a mother, and therefore doesn’t allow your voice to be heard. The group recognises this and values the work you are doing and that gives you the sense you are worth listening to.

Dialogue with others enables the woman to become aware of herself as a knower. She can then feel less subject to the ‘whims of external authority’ (Belenky et al, 1997, p. 13). She has the opportunity to listen to the voices of others, and once she is able to listen, she hears the voices of peers and facilitators. She can see them as knowers because they are like her in many ways – age, class, race, or even circumstance. She can start to see herself as a knower because of this.

If she claims that she is not capable of knowing, she is reminded of what she has already provided evidence of: her own thoughts, her own feelings, and her own experience. For a woman who has had a view of herself as ‘mindless and voiceless’, these conversations break isolation so that the perception of the self can be reconstructed. Her sense of herself as a knower changes. She is ‘coming to voice’ (ibid).

The groupwork element is perceived as empowering, because of what is discussed but also because of the way it is facilitated: ‘nothing stuff’ that is everything. The facilitators say that their job is to keep the space safe for these discussions, and mind the relationship of each member to the group. This enables becoming a co-participant, performing differently, and the women enjoy the respect and recognition they receive. Belenky et al (1997) identify how women in stages of knowing use the metaphor of voice.

The women in this research used the metaphor of voice and sight, finding that they were affirmed by being seen and being recognised as a competent person.

The physical environment was also identified: 'The building is like a home from home.' Other participants agreed enthusiastically with this speaker. What does the building convey to them? 'Starting out here, it's not as daunting' was the explanation of one facilitator. It is not only how the space looks, but how it feels. Facilitators mind safety within the group, and safety within the building can also be taken for granted. The space is domestic in some features, and so provides familiarity of scale and setting but in a quasi-public space. Men who are on the premises are working for women, and participants observe this. Women are not there to support men: men are there to support women. This is a new experience for many participants, and provides a picture of what could be possible elsewhere. This is an argument for maintaining women-only programmes, or spaces that prioritise women and where men are there to support them. It counters the cultural practices that are outside the premises. Such spaces give 'women the ability to resist power relations elsewhere' (Etienne & Jackson, 2011, p. 235).

It can take a 'fair bit of encouragement' to challenge a woman to take on a new experience such as representing their group in management meetings. This identifies how facilitators might challenge as well as support participants.

Challenging someone to think well of herself is support. You have to challenge in such a way that you don't set people up for failure. As women we have been conditioned to put ourselves at the bottom of the list, and we challenge each other to go against the conditioning.

It is not just individuals who get challenged by facilitators: 'I challenge cliques. I keep the space safe.' Worldviews are challenged. Fear is examined. Enabling and encouraging a woman to become an active subject in the world requires a shift in habitus at the subjective level. The facilitators' comments illustrate the care and thought that is needed to do this.

Staff face the challenge of finding ways to justify to funders the amount of time an individual woman may need to be involved in a group or programme. As one participant said:

What I like about it, there's no-one pushing you saying you're here for six months and you have to move onto the next group. As I'm going along, I'm discovering my needs. If the (organization) was set up a different way, I'd be after running a mile already.

Facilitators say: Unlearning takes time. It increases a woman's self-confidence to have control over something like pace because many of the women have very little control over anything. It says I matter.

Time, in this sense, is another resource to be used and appropriated as each participant needs, reflecting a 'care-full' model and providing 'nurturing capital' (Lynch, Baker & Lyons, 2009) for as long as is necessary. It takes time to practice a new way of being, to re-write one's biography, and practice a newer way of acting as a subject and expecting to be treated as an equal. Alheit and Dausien, examining learning processes within transitions, refer to this process as 'biographicity', the project of redesigning or repositioning the self within specific contexts, which depends on perceiving these contexts as shapeable (2007, p. 66). Some contexts provide resources that allow it, others constrain it. This context provides time. Time enables praxis: it is not just abstract knowledge that is handed over, it is reflecting on experience, discussing different problems, exploring solutions, and testing things out. It is also performing differently,

and managing how that feels. A primary habitus is kept in abeyance for this period, and a provisional one is being tested out. The length of time for a provisional habitus to take hold and become permanent will vary from person to person.

The effect of a changing sense of the self can relate to increasing a sense of agency: for example, 'When you know what you want, no-one can push you around.' Facilitators state that significant change in feelings and understanding has to happen before collective action is possible. However, personal development 'Is not about fixing yourself. It's about challenging society. It's about taking personal responsibility, but not taking responsibility for decisions that have been made before you were born'. This social model allows emotional, social and cognitive elements to be treated equally, which stands in contrast to the neglect of the emotional sphere in dominant educational discourse and formal learning environments as described in Burke and Jackson (2007).

Facilitators say that the kind of personal development approach they take 'is in the context of a critical analysis of society, not the counselling model, or the healing model, or the therapeutic model'. This reflects the poststructuralist approach to facilitation, encompassing the psychological and the sociological, the personal and the political, the individual and the social.

Ó Tuama uses the concept of identity capital in exploring how lifelong learning opportunities can work for more vulnerable adult groups. The social learning and the relationships that are constructed 'are enhanced through the accumulation of identity capital' (Ó Tuama, 2016, p. 113). Identity capital underpins the acquisition and accumulation of other types of capital. It is linked to people's capacity to avail of transition opportunities. Overcoming the oppression caused by such critical factors as class and gender requires a learning culture that understands and challenges low levels of self-confidence and self-esteem. When that is successfully challenged, links can then be made to wider social networks that enable 'progression' by seeing barriers from a different and more empowered perspective. Ó Tuama reframes this approach as 'reflexive activation' rather than other forms of labour market activation that are being promoted by the state (ibid, p. 110).

Ó Tuama argues that identity capital is the 'essential foundation', and is in turn reliant on 'recognition' (ibid, p. 115). According to Fleming (2016), Honneth's treatment of the concept of recognition has the promise of enabling community educators to reconcile the individual and the social elements. Attending to the affective equality element (Lynch et al, 2009) is one level of recognition that can result in establishing self-confidence, a precondition for 'involvement in a democratic society'; other levels of recognition, such as the type of recognition that is gained through work, may be missing for many working-class women who have a poor record of adherence to the workforce (Fleming, 2016, p. 14).

## Reflection

Some of the women who participate in programmes may have grown up in an environment where their voice was never sought, or if it was used, they were disparaged for it. Some participants present a sense of being a knower as 'Silent' in Belenky et al's (1997) *Women's Ways of Knowing* framework. 'Received Knowledge', the next stage or mode of knowing in this framework, also involves passivity, but the difference is the sense of capability that now exists. The woman sees herself as able to receive knowledge, but does not yet see herself as a knowledge-creator. Many women in community education are at this stage of dependency, relying totally on a tutor or facilitator to direct

the learning, and giving the power of expertise to the tutor. They do not expect to have their own experience acknowledged, never mind have it seen as learning that is as valid as the learning of any other person. When their experience is heard, they value this. It is significant for them.

Belenky et al state that 'Subjective' knowing means a move to a new stage, in which a woman trusts her intuition, or emotional reaction, more than knowledge from an external source. Knowledge must be made personal and concrete before the woman views it as knowledge. It must have meaning. Abstract knowledge is seen as pointless. The woman's own experience and emotion is seen as her best or most reliable guide to future action (ibid). This attention to the emotional aspect of learning and transformation is what informal education seems to have more autonomy for. It is a more 'care-full' model of education argued for by Lynch et al (2009, p. 38), who state that if an individual has not received sufficient nurturing capital, they are unable to work in solidarity with others. Feeley (2009) states that lack of nurturing capital impedes the ability to benefit from formal education and learning opportunities. This indicates the need to provide nurturing capital by attending to affective equality aspects before an individual can be expected to work in solidarity with others.

For these first three stages of knowing in this framework (Silence, Received Knowledge, and Subjective Knowledge) there is no particular willingness or motivation to work with abstract concepts. The dominance of the Piagetian view that the ability to work with abstract concepts is the final stage in cognitive development results in thinking that is done in these three modes being seen as unreliable. The woman who operates in any of these modes is seen as less than intellectually capable, or childlike. The remaining two stages (Procedural Knowledge and Constructed Knowledge) underpin successful formal undergraduate study. Objective criteria can be applied to concepts; there is a different, more evaluative, relationship to knowledge. There is more than one truth. There is an openness to hearing the voices and opinions of others, which can then alter the woman's own frame of reference. The woman's relationship to knowledge has undergone a fundamental shift: knowledge is seen as created through dialogue, with objective and subjective criteria being applied to evaluate it. Building or constructing knowledge is fundamentally a relational or social activity (Belenky et al, 1997, p. 144-150). The social model reflects these shifts in habitus or epistemological stages that can be facilitated. The social and emotional aspects indicate how to get beyond the limits to transforming habitus defined by Bourdieu (2001) earlier, that habitus is not changeable by cognitive means alone.

The strength of Belenky et al's (1997) research is its inclusion of women in what they called 'invisible colleges' in community settings, where learning is nonformal or informal in nature. The particular attraction of these invisible colleges is that they are spaces devised and run by women, for women. They therefore had the potential to show what kind of pedagogy women can devise for themselves, if free to do so (ibid, p. 12). *Women's Ways of Knowing* was criticised for essentialising such stages as inherent in or natural to women. However, this is the criticism of psychological explanations that assume certain characteristics are natural to one gender rather than the other, ignoring the impact of culture on habitus, or the impact of structure on agency. Ryan (1999) states that *Women's Ways of Knowing* was popular as a psychological study because it stood against dominant conceptions of the female as deficient, but we need to be able to develop more sophisticated understandings through poststructuralist analyses.

These stages of knowing may not apply only to women: they may have a more universal applicability to other social groups who have not had the opportunity to develop along the path identified by Perry's (1970) study of undergraduate men that prompted

Belenky et al's investigation. Lovett (1975), for example, writing about adult learners in Liverpool, identified the need for these men and women to make concepts personal and concrete. The earlier stages of knowing may have a stronger relationship to class rather than gender. The comments of participants and facilitators in the study suggest that the intersection of gender with being working-class means that if the Silent stage of knowing is prevalent in Irish society, it could explain why formal educational opportunities are availed of least by those who are seen to need them the most. Reframing this as a cultural issue rather than an individual one could help working-class women and men avoid being penalised for not 'progressing' through formal further education.

Lifelong learning, in the dominant discourse, depends on the supported and able learner, identified by Warren and Webb (2007) as the 'responsible learner'. *Women's Ways of Knowing* shows that several stages of cognitive development are involved in being an adult (man or woman) able to avail of formal learning opportunities. Women who do not have a sense of themselves as knowers are unlikely to put themselves forward as potential students; women who have sense of themselves as able to receive the knowledge of others will be able to access opportunities, but may not be the self-directed mature learner of the dominant discourse. However, given access to informal networks, their sense of themselves as knowers and learners can change and develop. Gaining a sense of ability for formal lifelong learning will not be enough unless the material aspects such as childcare and social care supports are available so that the extra costs of participation in formal education are manageable.

## Conclusion

The vision and practice of Freire's anti-poverty work is now translated into a critical feminist pedagogy for 21<sup>st</sup> century women, with facilitators reflecting a poststructural understanding of the self, the social, and society. Attending to the discursive aspects of practice (Ryan, 2001) is useful in naming what needs to be held onto, to counteract the lack of attention on the collective and social aspects of enabling change. The need to understand the subjective experiences of women who are marginalised by class as well as gender must be given a voice rather than let neoliberal policies make them further marginalised in society. Resistance to the 'Culture of Silence' (Freire, 1970) around class means naming the effects of class and gender.

This women's community education organisation can now see itself as a field of practice enabling habitus changes and a new sense of agency to be acquired and practised. The original expectation of participants becoming radical agents of social change is reframed in light of the understanding of the subjectivities of working-class women, and the care-full model of community education needed to provide nurturing capital and affective equality. However, in Bourdieu's (2001) view of cultural reproduction and cultural transformation, all individuals and groups receive culture and both reflect it and transform it. The more women stop the 'Culture of Silence' (Freire, 1970) around gender and class, the more will oppressive relations diminish.

The process of gathering the data and reflecting on it enabled the organisation to re-value the 'nothing stuff' that underpins good practice that was becoming suppressed in the neoliberal discourse of individual 'progression' and 'outcomes'. The goal of enabling working-class women work for social change is still held, but this is alongside the reality of what is possible, given the depth of conditioning to be 'unlearned' and a new agentic sense of self to be practiced. Habitus change does happen, but this change is provisional. It may be temporary or it may become permanent.

The feminist and radical aspect of the organisation is now understood to be the provision of an 'invisible college' (Belenky et al, 1997, p. 12) where attention is given to women's subjectivity and where oppressive patriarchal relations are kept at bay, giving participants the experience of being recognised and respected, and being involved in a participatory democratic management structure. The criticism of community development's failure to produce groups actively working at local and national level to represent issues and the need for change is accepted. The tension between education for domestication or liberation is also accepted and outcomes are no longer seen as being either one or the other but on a continuum of change for 21<sup>st</sup> century feminists.

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