Applying Adult Learning Theory through a Character Analysis

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze the behavior of a character, Celie, in a movie, *The Color Purple,* through the lens of two adult learning theorists to determine the relationships the character has with each theory. The development and portrayal of characters in movies can be explained and understood by the analysis of adult learning theories which were conducted. Research was conducted through the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) system, and seven peer-reviewed articles were located for this purpose. A literature review of these articles determined their relevance in the study as well as the relationship between the two theorists.   Analysis revealed that the character exhibited traits that matched the two theories where Bandura's theory seemed more prominent of the two.

Applying Adult Learning Theory through a Character Analysis

In the movie *The Color Purple* (Spielberg, 1985), Celie, the subject of this study, is an African-American woman who was forced into marriage by her father. Before their marriage, her husband-to-be needed someone to take care of him, his home, and children as his previous wife had died. He soon found and grew fond of Celie, and he would later ask her father for her hand in marriage. Being very young and new as a mother and housewife, she would suddenly realize the rude awakening of learning how to become both while living with her husband, his children, and the house, and at the same time, her sister, Nettie, was forced out of this household. Celie would quickly begin to learn how rough life would be without her sister along with her husband's abusive behavior. Celie's behavior can best be explained by two adult learning theorists, Bandura and Schon.

Social Cognitive Theory

Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory helps to explain how adults learn from observing the behaviors of others but not by imitating these behaviors; how one's behavior is affected by one's environment (Bandura, 2006; Bandura, 2009; Caprara, Fida, Vecchione, Bove, Vecchio, Barbaranelli, & Bandura, 2008; Lerner, 1990). She would have to begin learning quite quickly from others around her in order to survive.

Plausibility of Misfortune

From the time Celie became married and her sudden separation from her sister, Celie suddenly felt misfortunate as she was now being forced to learn without her sister by her side. For her to survive, Celie would have to undergo social change. Bandura's research (2009) revealed that social change requires developing resilience to adversity. In Celie's case, she would have to manage setbacks and recover from trial and error. She would find help through

friends and the community. Throughout the movie, Celie had been abused and disrespected by her husband, as well as having experienced many setbacks as a colored woman.   Towards the end of the movie, at the Thanksgiving table, Celie finally realized that she had had enough. Her husband began making fun of her, describing her as an unfit wife and mother, and she would not be able to survive in the world due to her skin color. She fought back verbally regretting having married him while almost stabbing him with a kitchen knife. Her sudden reaction would cause her to make social changes in her life as she would leave her husband and children, and start a new life with friends from that same table.

Human Agency

Celie was able to make changes for herself and apply them to the world; Bandura calls this human agency (Bandura, 2006). Bandura's research (2006) revealed four core properties of human agency which she experienced in making changes for herself. Once Celie left her husband and drove away with her friends, she would later unexpectedly inherit a home and begin operating a dress shop. She began, first, by intentionally applying her plans and strategies to leave her husband where she had argued against him for what he had done to her after all those years. As she and her friends drove away from her husband's house, her forethought, second, drove her to relax more as she began to set goals and to become motivated to begin her new life. Her self-reactiveness, third, was evident as when she inherited her new home from her late parents and opened a dress shop. One day while at her new shop, her husband appeared outside waiting to see her.   At this time, she self-reflected, forth, by making adjustments as to what she should do. To improve on her self-image, she would have to realize her own beauty and build on her self-esteem.

Modes of Agency

Having grown in a new household, Celie had always felt that she did not seem adequate enough to pride herself as a mother and wife. According to Bandura (2006) (as cited by Baltes, 1996; Brandtstadter & Baltes-Gotz, 1990; Ozer, 1995), if an individual does not have direct control of one's own life, it would be resourceful to attain another person's expertise in that field. Bandura (2006) termed this proxy agency. Shug Avery, who would later become Celie's close friend, would provide the necessary resources for Celie to improve her self-image. Later in the movie, Shug would notice Celie's shyness and would begin working to change her self-esteem. Celie was reluctant at first, but Shug would first have Celie dress more elegantly in dresses already at the house and pose in the mirror. Celie would laugh at herself while hiding her smile with her hands. With Shug's encouraging remarks, Celie began showing more confidence in herself. Since Celie had had trouble making changes to improve herself, she did spend more time reflecting on who she had always been.

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Reflection in Practice

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Material Malfunction or Backtalk

At any time reflection can allow people to ponder what has occurred and to make any necessary changes for the better. According to Yanow and Tsoukas (2009), Schon's research on reflection-in-action revealed that reflection can be triggered by backtalk or a surprise from which the materials that are being used at the time would malfunction, causing a temporary or total breakdown. The comb that Celie used as a new wife and mother would demonstrate this malfunction. Early in her marriage, as Celie combs her husband's children's hair, they begin to yell as the comb continuously gets stuck in their hair. Celie's husband smacks her across her face since he cannot stand the yelling. The comb has, therefore, malfunctioned or backtalked.

When Celie was smacked, she was surprised by his reaction. This surprise caught her off guard, causing her to let out a yell as it appeared that she was not as resilient to the surprise (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009). Not wanting to be smacked, Celie changed her tactic, and she covered the kids' mouths while continuing to comb their hair, thereby performing reflection-in-action (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009, p. 1343). As this was a time in Celie's life that she was beginning to learn how to become a wife and mother, she would later learn how to reflect on her life.

Ex Post Orientation

Later in Celie's life, she would ponder the meaning of her life as she discovered what had been kept from her for years. Schon (as cited by Yanow and Tsoukas, 2009) discussed that reflection theory involved "...*ex post* orientation or re-flecting *back* on something that has transpired" (p. 1340). With the help of Shug, Celie found a bunch of letters that her sister, Nettie, had been writing her for years from where she had been living in Africa at the time. Celie's husband had been receiving and hiding these letters, preventing Celie from learning of Nettie's new life in Africa. When Celie recovered these letters, she began pondering what exactly had been transpiring over the years as she was shocked to see so many of them. As she read one letter, she found a leaf, smelled it, and pondered over the thought of missing her sister. Having been abused by her husband, Celie would begin reflecting on her life and later try to leave her husband without success.

Reflection-in-action

Schon (as cited by Yanow and Tsoukas, 2009) discussed reflection-in-action as while the action is taking place, reflection is simultaneous with decisions made at the same time. As Celie suddenly decided to move with Shug, Celie struggled to get her belongings together.   As she began packing, she ran into him and he questioned where she was going. She quickly hid her

belongings in the hope of riding away with Shug. As they escorted Shug to her ride, Celie was in the midst of wanting to suddenly jump into Shug's vehicle and take off. But Shug's vehicle took off quickly, leaving behind Celie. Since Celie suddenly could not join Shug, this sudden realization causes her to collapse.

Bandura and Schon

Through analysis of Bandura and Schon's adult learning theories and applying these theories toward Celie's behavior, it seemed that she had been involved more with reflecting throughout her marriage and raising of his children. Research revealed that Celie had reflected more through the years of her marriage and raising her husband's children. These reflections were explained as part of Bandura's theory (Bandura, 2006; Bandura, 2009; Caprara et al., 2008). It was clear that she did grow up, which was explained by Schon's research (Kinsella, 2006; Romer, 2003; Yano & Tsoukas, 2009), but she also reflected more in order to understand what she was facing and what obstacles she encountered.

Conclusion

It is quite clear that Celie experienced a great deal of reflection as she was new to becoming a mother and housewife. Donald Schon's theory of reflection appeared to best describe her journey as she continuously reflected as she dealt with her new husband and children. Celie appeared to learn quite quickly how to work with certain materials that would malfunction or backtalk and how to make them work for her. She experienced ex post orientation when she found that her sister had been writing her for many years and reflected on how life must have been in Africa. Her last effort to make changes for herself came about in reflection-in-action as she began a new life without her husband and his children. In order for

her to survive, she had to make changes due to her misfortune with her husband. She also

learned how to cope with her problems and apply these skills to the world.

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