

A TRIADIC WORLDVIEW? THE MISCONCEPTION AND BIAS OF UNIVERSALITY IN KNOWLES' ANDRAGOGY

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ABSTRACT: There is an ongoing debate about the omission of specific learners in modern learning theories. Most learning theories are derived from theoretical works by the dominant culture. This paper argues that despite the criticisms and shortcomings of Knowles' andragogical theory, the instructor can alter the framework as needed to meet the varying needs of adult learners who have different socio-cultural backgrounds. The paper will define andragogy, discuss assumptions, provide a brief multi-faceted review of a triadic culture worldview, a brief literature review, and examine praises and criticism for andragogy. The paper concludes and recommends that further inquiries be administered to learners of various socio-cultural backgrounds to decolonize andragogy. Andragogy is a permanent model for understanding specific aspects of adult learning. Andragogy is not the only way to teach adults from all backgrounds. It is a perspective, one piece of a rich mosaic with many pieces, all with unique qualities and benefits. The instructor needs to adjust it for the "other" learners excluded from the original framework.

Keywords: Andragogy, adult learning theory, adult learning, diverse learners, socio-cultural context, culture, decolonization

Knowles' Andragogy: The Misconception and Bias of Universality

Over the years, adult learning scholars have called for the decolonization of learning theories that are primarily from the worldview of the dominant culture. These learning theories usually address the white, male, middle-class perspectives in Western culture but disregard other worldviews and learning styles (Baumgartner, 2003; Duff 2019; Flannery, 1994). Hence, it is essential to debunk the language of *universality* and individualism in many seminal learning and behavior theories (Flannery, 1994).

Flannery (1994) highlighted that some of the most respected behavioral and learning theories, for example, Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Knowles' theory of andragogy, were investigated using white men exclusively as research subjects; they did not consider female or people of color perspectives (Duff, 2019; Flannery, 1994). The standards of "good theory" are derived from specific theoretical works by a specific group, but they are then applied as generally, if not universally, appropriate (Flannery, 1994, p. 17). An example is a distinction between adults and children in many North American or Western adult learning theories, which assume that adult learners are self-directed, independent, and resourceful (Flannery, 1994).

The dominant Western culture developed the concept of "neutral" adult learning, which assumes learners are self-directed and capable of independent learning. Western culture is used to judge and evaluate what makes good theory, but it does not apply universally to all adult learners (Flannery, 1994). Andragogy has been recognized as a critical component of 'excellent' adult education theories — such as those outlined by Flannery (1994), who claimed that this criterion was taken from works by the dominant culture to

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be considered good adult learning theory. The standards are applied as if they were universally applicable to all learners, which is not the case; instead, these assumptions are derived chiefly from Western individualistic societies that adhere to a single major religion or ideology (Flannery, 1994)

Andragogy: A Linguistic and Historical Background

In 1926, Lindemann released his seminal work, *The Meaning of Adult Education*, which denotes the beginning of the adult education field in the United States. Knowles et al. (2015) found that Lindeman developed critical assumptions about adult learners:

Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy; adults' orientation to learning is life-centered; experience is the richest resource for adults' learning; adults have a deep need to be self-directing, and individual differences among people increase with age. (p. 71)

Writings on this developing adult learning theory continued from the 1920s. However, they did not resonate with scholars and researchers until Knowles developed it into a series of assumptions in 1970 after "Knowles acquired the term" andragogy "in 1966 from Dusan Savicevic, a leading expert on adult education from Serbia" (Henschke, 2011, p. 34).

Ferro (1997) provided a linguistic background of the word andragogy. The term andragogy comes from the "Greek word aner "man," [sic], and the Greek word agogos "leader" (p. 56). The history of "the term andragogy ... dates to 1833, where a German grammar teacher named Alexander Kapp coined it during an explanation of the Greek philosopher Plato's education theory (Peltz, 2018, p. 93). The Greek philosopher described his educational philosophy as *paideia*. Teachers act like midwives who facilitate learning through knowledge transmission instead of direct instruction; they help students figure out what information is relevant for them rather than provide that information themselves. Andragogy is a response to pedagogy, which means literally "leading a boy" (Ferro, 1997, p. 58).

Definition of Andragogy

Gilstrap (2013) clarifies, "Knowles viewed the term" and the theory of andragogy as being "on a continuum where pedagogy moved toward andragogy as children developed into adulthood" (p. 503). Henschke (2011) explains that Knowles "infused andragogy with much of his meaning garnered from his already extensive experience in adult education" (p. 34). Gilstrap (2013) provides "an operational definition, andragogy is a learner-centric approach to learning, whereas pedagogy is dominated by instructor-centric theories" (p. 503).

Overall, "the defining attributes of [Knowles'] theory include acknowledging that learners are self-directed and autonomous and that the teacher is a facilitator of learning rather than [the] presenter of content" (Henschke, 2011, p. 34). However, critics have

pointed out that his use of this neologism has contributed to misconceptions about gender-related differences (Lee et al., 2003). Some suggest he should have used “adult learning” instead (Peltz & Clemons 2018) since it is non-gender specific. Lee (2003) contends that, in Knowles’ definition of andragogy, there is no clarification on how learner’s “multiple contexts and identities may affect their views of learning and ways of engagement in the learning process” (p. 18).

The Six Assumptions of Andragogy

Knowles originally conceptualized the first four assumptions of andragogy (1975, 1978, 1980); however, over time, he later (1984, 1989, 1990) expanded andragogy to six assumptions (Knowles et al., 2015). Knowles et al. (2015) split the Theory of Andragogy into six assumptions:

1. Self-directedness
2. Need to know
3. Use of experience in learning
4. Readiness to learn
5. Orientation to learning
6. Internal motivation (Chan, 2010; Knowles et al., 2015).

The first assumption is *self-direction* in the individual learner. Knowles posits that “adult learners are self-directed, autonomous, and independent” (Chan, 2010, p. 27). The second assumption is *need to know* that “adults will place more stake in and appreciation for the learning process if there is a clear understanding of why learning should take place” (Duff, 2019, p. 51).

The third assumption is “the learners’ experience. Adults understand the years of experience they bring into an academic setting through their age and life encounters” (Duff, 2019, p. 51). Knowles’ fourth assumption is *the adult’s readiness to learn*. As adults mature, they begin to understand and learn how to cope with their “everyday experiences and activities” (Duff, 2019, p. 51). The fifth assumption is *orientation or adjustment to learning*. Adults who can connect learning to problems they will face tend to be more motivated to learn.

Lastly, Duff (2019) describes “Knowles’ sixth assumption of *learner motivation*. Motivation is when adults are internally inspired to learn, sometimes because of “the desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, quality of life” as opposed to “external motivators” provided by an instructor (p. 52).

As asserted earlier, a specific segment of the population helped Knowles develop the assumptions of andragogy. As a result, women, the financially disadvantaged, people of color, working-class adults, and immigrants have suffered exclusion from the andragogical model (Lee, 2003). Lee (2003) describes that self-direction or individuality contributes to “an error of reasoning” that every learner is independent or responsible for their education. Knowles’ assumptions do not represent the experiences of all adult learners outside of the broader hegemonic culture.

The Diverse Learner in the Andragogical Environment

According to Flannery (1994), the theory of andragogy states that adults have been generalized to have individualism, linear thinking, and Anglo-European values of self-sufficiency (p. 17). While insightful, if also potentially flawed, andragogy espouses the values of “individualism, self-fulfillment, self-reliance, and self-directedness” while further assuming that these principles are held in high regard worldwide (Sandlin, 2005, p. 28). Before the mid-1990s, the traditional college-aged, 18-24-year-old student was the only learner in adult education. Adult learners have become the new face of formal education. According to Carlan (2001), these individuals are not traditional students but serve as a unique demographic that has gained prominence in the past forty years. Adult learners can come from a variety of backgrounds, experiences, skill sets and cultures. Instructors should be aware of andragogy’s assumptions as universal to all learners (Flannery, 1994). Further, Duff (2019) contends that “while Knowles may have had the best of intentions when he developed these assumptions for adult learners, they call to question whether these tenets” apply “to [the] adult black male” or anyone outside of the white, middle-class male culture (p. 52).

A Triadic Cultural Learning View of Andragogy

Peltz (2018) emphasizes that culture plays a significant role in adult learning, mainly because everyone identifies with their culture, so their cultural heritage influences their classroom behavior. Additionally, values and learning processes differ for adult learners from non-Western backgrounds (Duff, 2019; Flannery, 1994; Lee, 2003). Peltz (2018) cites the term “trichotomies” (as cited by Merriam et al., 2007), “noted that the learning dichotomy of Western versus non-Western is itself Western” (p. 101). Within these triadic worldviews, there are several learning perspectives such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Jewish, General African, African Ubuntu, Native American Dine (Navajo), Latin American, and Pakeka and Maori; however, the focus will be on the “learning trichotomy” of Western, non-Western, and Indigenous peoples (Peltz, 2018, p. 101).

Western countries typically include those located in “North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand” (Peltz, 2018, p. 101). Western culture emphasizes individuality and self-directedness in learning as an adult, with the andragogical model developed through that Western contextual lens (white male sample, omitting females of all races) (Lee, 2003; Peltz, 2018). However, self-directedness in the classroom is not the norm in other worldviews. Non-Western learning perspectives are categorized as “Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Confucianism” generally “viewed as philosophical lenses through which societies merge with certain ideologies” (Peltz, 2018, p. 101).

In non-Western cultures, there is a collectivistic view, and learners are teacher-centric and value the greater community and extol sacrifice for the greater good of their people and their religious beliefs (Peltz, 2018). In non-Western cultures, as a learner matures into an adult, the expectation is that they will make positive contributions to the collective society. Other collectivist cultures are the Indigenous peoples: “tribal Africans,

Latin American, Native American, Māori, and Aboriginal” cultures (Peltz, 2018, p. 101). The Indigenous worldview is that learners will learn by doing and listening to oral traditions and being mentored by an elder to continue traditions that will benefit the culture; these collectivist societies tend to venerate the elder and are teacher centered (Peltz, 2018). First-generation immigrants who are teaching can move between non-Western and Western cultures and can represent the intersectionality of these learning views and move fluidly between the respective worldviews while teaching (Lee, 2003).

Andragogy: A Critical Perspective

Duff (2019) assesses the educational system in the United States as having “existed for the advantage of the dominant culture and the economically privileged” (p. 52). Duff (2019) concurred with Sandlin’s (2005) five critiques that “cut through the heart of andragogy and shows how it is dominated with the overwhelming residue of European ideologies that foster an oppressive posture” (p. 53). After reviewing several studies that critiqued andragogy, Sandlin (2005) discovered five core issues that span a wide range of critical perspectives of andragogy:

1. Educational and political views are presumed to be equal in value and have no influence on a person’s mind.
2. Andragogy aims to make all adults appear similar. These individuals are indistinguishable, apart from the fact that they have predominantly white, middle-class values.
3. Andragogy disregards different methods of knowing and suppresses other viewpoints.
4. Andragogy disregards the relationship between the self and the social context.
5. Andragogy is a promoter of inequality; it perpetuates existing conditions such as “the status quo” (Sandlin, 2005, p. 27).

Sandlin’s (2005) critique of Knowles’ theory of andragogy is that there exists a generic adult learner with no context to their background. Additionally, andragogy presents the aspect of the “one worldview,” “mainstream values,” and the learner’s identity and place in society is “decontextualized” with the application of this theory (Sandlin, 2005, p. 28). Sandlin (2005) illustrates that “in andragogy, only one worldview is valued” and “andragogy ignores other value systems and worldviews” and is rigid in accommodating differences in learning styles (p. 28). Flannery (1994) criticized that andragogy as an “adult learning theory [assumes] that adults are self-directed” (p. 18). Previously, Flannery (1994) explains that the “universalizing aspect of andragogy” is “normalizing one way of being and, thus, acting to promote everyday sexism and racism in adult education settings” (Flannery, 1994, p. 22).

Sandlin (2005) had severe reservations about “andragogy’s prominence and thought it needed to be supplemented by three other perspectives: Afrocentric, feminist, and critical” (As cited in Henschke, 2011, p. 34). Houde (2006) highlights that while “Knowles discusses andragogy in the context of psychological theory,” there is what some scholars perceive as an overreliance “on older theories, such as ones from Abraham

Maslow, Kurt Lewin, and B.F. Skinner” (p. 90). Andragogy’s detractors “from the post-modern camp claim that Knowles’ model is an artifact from a” bygone era (p. 90). Draper (1998) discussed that andragogy was not a viable theory, as argued by some, and provided data as “strong evidence that andragogy [and] adult education” are unequivocally not to be considered in theories of learning due to Knowles’ definition of andragogy (p. 23).

Knowing that andragogy could be used in many ways, Knowles stated that instructors “have the responsibility to check out which assumptions are realistic in a given situation” (Knowles, 1990, p. 64, as cited in Holton et al., 2001). Holton et al. (2001) point out that Knowles “never provided a systematic framework of factors that should be considered when determining which assumptions are realistic when adapting andragogy to [a] situation” (p. 128). Instead, it was up to each instructor to consider these factors when deciding whether certain aspects were applicable during instruction.

Chan (2010) made the following recommendations to improve the effectiveness of andragogical applications while also broadening the scope of their application to other contexts:

1. The focus of andragogical practice could expand beyond that of the adult learner to also consider social, political, and cultural contexts. Learners are influenced by the surrounding contexts, which shape their thinking and action.
2. Research (or more research) on the application of the andragogical approach in Asian countries could be conducted to examine whether the approach is applicable to those in the Eastern hemisphere.
3. Andragogy could address a situation of neither adult nor children, which Marshak (1983) called *adolegogy* to describe the adolescent state.
4. Although andragogy is an art and science of teaching adult learners, it is recommended that the approach be applied in the teaching of children and adolescents, as well. It is believed that passivity in a classroom does not help students to learn more effectively. Though children do not meet the andragogical assumptions, it does not necessarily mean that the andragogical approach would not be effective with them. Active learning is more effective than passive learning, regardless of age (p. 33).

Conclusion

Despite criticism and weaknesses of Knowles’ theory of andragogy, “multiple researchers and scholars in the United States and abroad have established andragogy as a proven theory and robust method for teaching adults” (Henschke, 2011, p. 35). Knowles’ theory of andragogy has elicited a wide range of responses from academics and other researchers. According to the andragogical model, it is up to instructors to adapt their teaching style to meet adult learners’ “specific contextual needs” (Henschke, 2011, p. 35). Contextual needs include considering students’ socio-cultural backgrounds as well as other factors.

Andragogy and the triadic worldview (Western, Non-western, Indigenous peoples) refer to the process of teaching adults. These models are based on the idea that adults have abilities that differ from children's abilities; therefore, different instructions should be used with these two groups. Sandlin (2005) recommended three perspectives, Afrocentric, feminist, and critical, whereas another recommendation could be adding more intersectionality to andragogy by adding the Western, Non-Western, and Indigenous worldviews.

Andragogy, while presenting itself as being free of bias, holds to mainstream values and ideals, and so is criticized for being regressive because of the content it does not question, namely, "common-sense" assumptions about cultural, sociopolitical, and institutional constraints on learning (Sandlin, 2005). Thus, it reproduces inequalities, sustains oppressive social structures, and bolsters traditional values in learning (Sandlin, 2005). Even though andragogy was developed from a white middle-class male point of view, the theory is still essential for understanding adult learning today. Scholars, educators, and researchers, on the other hand, must make an effort to study a variety of cultures and perspectives in order to develop a better framework for instructors who may have to deal with these different learning styles.

As andragogy is proven to be a helpful learning theory with diverse groups of people in several studies, additional assumptions must be made to account for the excluded groups and worldviews that were not considered in the original theory. Using andragogical principles, instructors can also personalize instruction to meet the motivation of adult learners, develop learning goals and objectives, and address real-world issues that arise in the classroom (Chan, 2010).

An understanding of andragogy and its flaws will help instructors design more effective teaching methods. Andragogy aids in the improvement of correspondence between the student and the instructor; they work as collaborators to design learning techniques tailored to the student's needs and preferences (Chan, 2010). Learning about andragogy and its shortcomings and strengths helps instructors move beyond the misconception and bias of universality in adult learning theories such as andragogy and toward a more holistic and fully developed conceptualization of diverse adult learners. Finally, while andragogy is not a perfect solution for improving adult learning practices, it provides a piece of the puzzle that can be used in conjunction with other theories to improve the field.

Every culture's adult learning theories are a derivative of the hegemonic power structure of the society in which they are developed. Most learning theories in American culture were developed from the perspective of white males (Flannery, 1994). Some of the most well-known behavioral and learning theories (for example, operant conditioning) were only tested on white men. Females and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) were generally not considered in the studies. These theories do not need to be discarded; instead, they should be evaluated with a variety of groups in order to determine their effectiveness. It is erroneous to believe that the "universality" of Knowles' theory of andragogy is based on a sample of participants from every socio-cultural group.

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