

Warming Up Higher Education's Chilly Climate: A Model for Supporting Adult Female Learners

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Abstract: Adult female learners are constantly juggling roles amidst a chilly climate plagued by gendered stereotypes and their implications. Bronfenbrenner's interactive development model, encompassing the four components of process, person, context, and time, provides a baseline to understand how interactions between family, school, and work impact adult female learners. Beyond this, the model and recent adaptations fall short. Neither Bronfenbrenner's original ecological human development model nor Renn and Arnold's (2003) reconceptualization of it applied to college students adequately depicts the experience of adult female learners. This paper used poststructural feminist perspectives alongside personal lived experience to offer a new adaptation of the ecological development model.

Keywords: adult female learner, ecological development model, poststructural feminist pedagogy, chilly climate, nontraditional student success

Adult female learners (AFL) are a unique higher education population with specific needs and demands that influence their development. These learners have diverse learning needs (Kerka, 2002), compounded by experiences of a chilly climate (Renn & Reason, 2013) as well as socially constructed gender expectations of role multiplicity (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). Despite grounding in the psychological field, Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) Ecological Development Model and its adaptation into an interactive model by Renn and Arnold (2003) for college students does not account for the unique developmental experiences of AFLs.

This paper uses the words *female* and *women* interchangeably; in every instance, we are referring to any learner that is female identifying. In recognizing that societal norms of femininity apply across intersections of women's identities (Gatens, 1998), we can build a foundation of understanding of the adult female experience to build upon with future investigation of additional intersections.

This paper discusses the climate of higher education faced by adult female learners and what impacts existing scholarship has found this climate to have. Because neither Bronfenbrenner's original model of ecological human development nor Renn and Arnold's (2003) reconceptualization of it applied to college students adequately depicts the experience of adult female learners, this paper will also apply poststructural feminist perspectives, alongside personal lived experience, to offer a new adaptation of the ecological development model for adult female learners.

Background

Institutions today promote heteronormative masculinity in a system of genderism that mandates every student have a single gender identity (man or woman) and behave in a way that socially

suits the subsequent gender expectations of that identity (Renn & Reason, 2013). That said, Lester and Harris (2013) note that female learners’ “pressure to maintain femininity causes identity conflicts” and “pressures to perform and maintain socio-historical gender norms” (p. 152) can negatively impact their experiences in higher education. This chilly climate encompasses experiences and perceptions of things like sexual harassment, sexist jokes, and lowered academic expectations for women, which can impact female learners’ cognitive gains in their first two years of college (Renn & Reason, 2013). Socio-historical gender norms and pressures to maintain femininity feed into the chilly climate, causing identity conflicts and pressures to perform that directly impact the experiences of female students.

Women in higher education classrooms experience greater levels of stress, negative perceptions of support in their classroom environments, and perceived pressures to perform gender as defined by the expectations of their instructors when compared to the experiences of male students (Lester & Harris, 2015). Richardson and King (1998) note that explicitly, adult female and other minoritized learners “are subjected to an interactive web of entrenched values from long-standing elitist systems” (p. 67-68). In a study of working-class female students, Reay (2003) found that women students, especially those with children, were constantly balancing school, work/financial, volunteer, and family commitments. Instead of the lifestyle experienced by younger students, these adult women expressed a sacrificed social life and a scarcity of time for self-care (Reay, 2003).

According to Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007), the changes adults go through as they age are relative in load (both external and internal expectations) and power (resources, supports, skills, social value). AFLs experience different margins of power depending on their marital status, work flexibility, or access to childcare in addition to their postsecondary undertaking (McClusky, 1970). The implications of increased roles, demands, and time conflicts on nontraditional female students are often associated with higher stress, anxiety, and depression (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). Coupled with experiencing a chilly climate for learning, adult female learners have the deck stacked against them in higher education.

Approach

In 1979, Urie Bronfenbrenner published *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* to understand human development related to their environments and interactions with others (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner (1977) describes the ecological environment as “conceived topologically as a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next” (p. 514). They are separated into four systems: the macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem. The nesting of these systems within one another is depicted as the macrosystem being the outer layer and the microsystem being the innermost layer. Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010) explain the interaction of these layers by saying,

“The four levels of systems—micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems—are inextricable, interactive, and complexly related. What happens in one affects the others as well as the developing individual. They provide stressors and buffers, creating opportunities for increasingly complex activities in which the student can participate, while supporting and rewarding sustained commitment to those increasingly complex endeavors” (p.165).

Research has shown that gender stereotypes and engendered societal expectations impact learner outcomes (Lester & Harris, 2013). These factors, alongside what we know about the

multiplicity of roles (Reay, 2003) experienced, meaning that the decisions an adult female student makes within every/any level of context are consciously or subconsciously impacted by these social norms and expectations. Chilly climate, in addition to micro and macro aggressions, can be enforcers of the macrosystem but play out at every level and change over time as a woman ages. Because of this, the Ecological Development Model and recent adaptations fall short for AFLs. It is necessary to redesign the depiction of the macrosystem to permeate all layers of context through to the central *individual*.

To refine Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Development Model for adult female learners, Tisdell's (1996, 1998, 2000) poststructural feminist pedagogy is applied. Poststructural feminist pedagogies help account for differences among learners, the role of power in the construction of knowledge itself, and how the positionalities of students and faculty members impact the environment (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). The combined pedagogy helps us consider an individual capacity for agency, macrosystem factors that affect learning, and the power relations that influence how official and personal knowledge is constructed and shared (Tisdell, 1996).

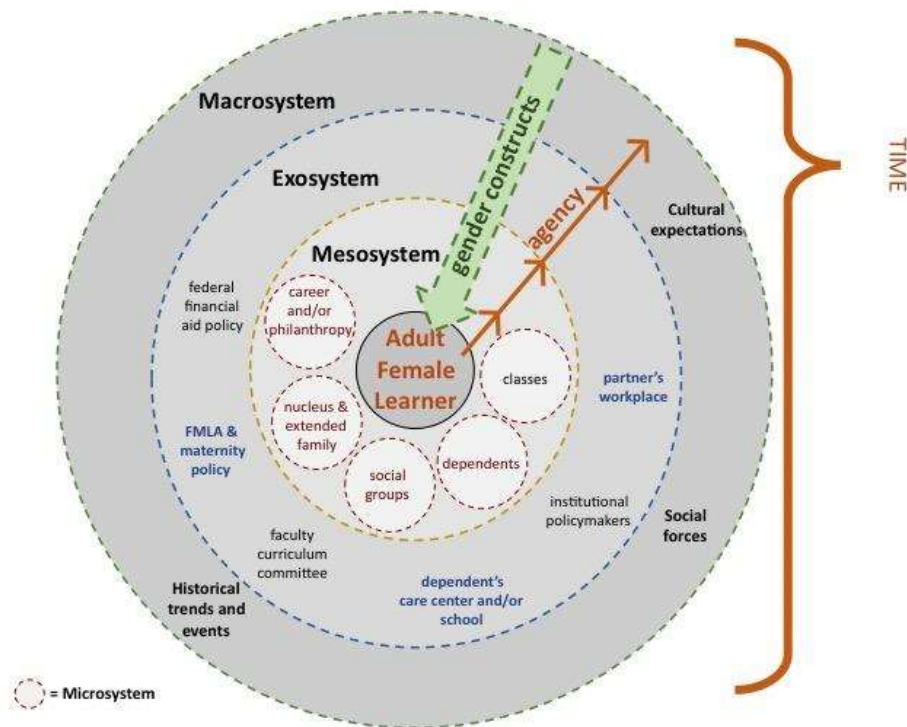
Major Themes

The core critiques of Renn and Arnold's (2003) adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Development Model for college students while introducing the Poststructural Feminist Ecological Development Model for Adult Female Learners (depicted in Figure 1) meant to address the critiques through model adaptations. "The person, and not the environment, is the center of later iterations of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of development" (Dalla, 2006, p. 207). The loss of the individual adult female learner at the center of recent models is the first key critique. In Figure 1, dotted lines represent the fluidity and connection between the four systems. A solid circle is intentionally employed to recognize the unique AFL at the model's center.

Renn and Reason (2013) state the importance of noting "that process interactions are two-way: the person and the environment influence one another" (p. 124), and yet their adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's model for college students does nothing to signify this interaction. Specifically related to adults in higher education, some scholars advocate that adult education is responsive to context while also affecting that same context, a similar two-way interaction (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Poststructural feminist pedagogy emphasizes the role of individual agency in the learning process, which captures this interactive process. The inclusion of a layered agency arrow is a recognition of the AFL's agency and capacity for more than a passive and isolated human at the center of her environment in the new iteration of the model. It has an arrow on each context system to represent how an AFL might choose to take action at any level system to change its ecological environment.

Figure 1

Poststructural Feminist Ecological Development Model for Adult Female Learners



The second key critique of Renn and Aronld’s (2003) adaptation for college students is the exclusion of a chronosystem—a way to acknowledge the time in society that adult female students are attending postsecondary education and the time in their lives as adult women that they are becoming students while managing other roles. Including the originally intended chronosystem is necessary in this model’s new iteration because social norms and times of life events (including attending postsecondary education) are incredibly impactful on AFLs.

Because Ecological Systems Theory, and thus Renn and Arnold’s adaptation of Bronfenbrenner’s model, is grounded in a psychological rather than an anthropological perspective, the focus of development is on the individual and not the cultures in which they are embedded (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2010). Based on what we know about AFLs, the engendered sociocultural expectations of women are pervasive throughout all layers of the ecological system. Scholars have shown the adverse impacts of social, cultural, and historical gender norms on female students and we know that female students are considering these norms when choosing disciplines (Lester & Harris, 2015). The cross-system pervasiveness of gender norms and constructs is the next critique of Renn and Arnold’s (2003) adaptation of ecological development for college students. Poststructural feminist pedagogies recognize the “psychological and social and political factors that affect learning” (Tisdell, 1996, p. 311).

The addition of a gender constructs arrow helps account for the impactful effect of gender constructs in every system of the AFL’s ecological development context. This arrow is dotted to indicate its interaction and impact on any/all layers. It goes from the macrosystem—where gender constructs live on through socially reinforced expectations—to the individual AFL.

Discussion

Adult learners in higher education are here to stay (Ross-Gordon, 2011), and the prevalence of women enrolling in postsecondary programs is higher than the rate for men (NCES, 2007). Adult learners are often overlooked in higher education institutions (Newbaker, 2012) despite being a prominent and diverse student population (Richardson & King, 1998). The Poststructural Feminist Ecological Development Model for Adult Female Learners is a starting point for understanding the development of the female-adult learner intersection. It is also important to note that this only provides a starting point to recognize the inherently varied development experiences for adult female learners compared to other learners. It is *not* meant to imply that all adult female learners are the same, as different intersecting identities can significantly impact an adult woman's environmental contexts, role expectations, and developmental experiences.

Faculty and administrators could use this model to think beyond the traditional, masculine modes of postsecondary teaching and learning toward poststructural feminist pedagogies for a more supportive learning environment for adult female learners. This model also provides a structure for higher education institutional leaders and student affairs professionals to frame conversations around policy, services, and the unique needs of adult female students. The Poststructural Feminist Ecological Development Model for Adult Female Learners is not a one-stop solution to the challenges that adult female learners face in higher education. Still, it reframes the development conversation in a way that is critically conscious of the presence and individuality of this population.

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