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Andragogy: Proofs or premises?

There is both too little confusion and too much confusion about andragogy in the American adult education field. There is too little because andragogy as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, 1970) is not enough of an issue among those adult educators who assume adults are self-directed learners and that this is a proven principle. As some theoreticians now contend, tough empirical questions do need to be asked about andragogy rather than acceptance by faith.

At the same time, there is too much confusion because theoreticians who debate andragogy are caught often in an unconscious complexity about the kind of issue in which they are involved: empirical proof or philosophical premise? Whereas empirical questions about andragogy need reliable research, inescapable philosophical questions require analysis of those underlying assumptions that are not empirically testable.

This article will probe recent research about andragogy, pursue the debate among academicians and urge practitioners to examine the premises of any scholarly discussion of andragogy. We shall: 1) explain why practitioners should examine researchers' premises; 2) reanalyze the debate about andragogy; and 3) explore the implications

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for the application of research to practice.

Examining the Researcher's Orientation

In recent issues of *Adult Education Quarterly* (1985a) and *Lifelong Learning* (1985b), Davenport and Davenport offer a timely analysis of the academic debate about andragogy, point out the important need to clarify definitions before doing research, and argue that empirical research will lead to a more sophisticated discussion of andragogy. In particular, these authors advocate research on the orientation of adult learners based on an andragogy to pedagogy scale. Although probing a neglected empirical question, Davenport and Davenport never attend to a neglected philosophical dimension underlying the research on andragogy: *the philosophical orientation of the researcher*. As a result, they never focus fully on the philosophical significance of the debate among academicians, perhaps because they do not uncover how their own orientation shapes their analysis and their conclusion. They write:

It is this research-supported data base that ultimately will determine andragogy's claim to theoretical status. . . . If additional research continues to confirm such distinctions, andragogy may well possess the explanatory and predictive

functions generally associated with a fully-developed theory. . . . Future discussions of andragogy should include the growing empirical base. It is time for the andragogy debate to move to a higher level. (p. 158)

Doing what so many researchers do in American education, Davenport and Davenport (1985a) assume that empirical research will not only move scholarly debate about issues like andragogy to a higher level, but also that "resolution may be possible if discussion proceeds from established definitions of theory, method, and technique" (p. 158). Cross (1982) takes a similar stance after summarizing the decade of debate about andragogy, positing that andragogy cannot serve as the foundation for a unifying theory of adult education unless it is successful in stimulating research to test assumptions.

However, empirical research cannot resolve philosophical questions, nor dissolve the philosophical assumptions of the researcher. To move the andragogy debate to an empirical base is only to place it at a level of what Donmoyer (1985) cites as "first order" questions of empirical evidence. A higher level question is whether the empirical questions and methods are appropriate for particular purposes, and an even higher level question is whether the purposes themselves are good. Donmoyer captures the confusion in the andragogy debate and points to the need to examine theoreticians' orientations: "The reason educational scientists cannot reach definitive conclusions has less to do with the complexity of the phenomena being studied than with the complexity of the species doing the studying" (pp. 17-18).

This higher complexity is usually evaded in the dominant research model in the United States with an unquestioned assumption: the purpose of research is explanation and prediction that will lead to a fully-developed theory. With this premise, empirical research on andragogy is pushed to be value neutral; philosophical questions about knowledge as well as about purpose are shoved aside.

For example, the references that

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Davenport and Davenport claim as an empirical research base on andragogy are rooted in a framework that aims to measure individual attitudinal dimensions and educational orientations of adult educators and adult learners. Key to this research is the use of survey instruments developed by Hadley (1975) in his doctoral dissertation under Knowles, based on the definitions of andragogy and pedagogy that spring from Knowles' writing. However, the purpose of any research as well as definition are ultimately philosophical acts.

Research, with the purpose of measuring characteristics of individual learners or educators, is what the English author, Griffin (1983), calls a theory *about* andragogy—about *what is* in teaching and learning. He contends that too much of adult education fails to see the important distinction between descriptive research about teaching/learning and a philosophy of andragogy—of *what ought to be*. Like Pratt (1984), Griffin criticizes Knowles for making undeclared leaps from scientific theory about adult characteristics to a philosophy of what should be.

Griffin is even more concerned about Knowles' overemphasis on, and isolation of, the individual learner as reflecting tendencies (1) to ignore the broader context of adult experience in "differentiated social, cultural and political settings" and (2) to ignore that "adult knowledge is socially defined, distributed and evaluated in a context of power and ideology" (p. 59). This philosophical difference between Knowles and Griffin—besides showing contrasting theoretical orientations—illustrates also the significant, but neglected, contrast underlying the scholarly debate concerning andragogy in North America that began after publication of Knowles' (1970) *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy versus Pedagogy*.

Reanalyzing the Andragogy Debate

The usual analysis of the debate among theoreticians in North America divides the debate *between* those who subscribe to a unified outlook on all education and are against an andragogy/pedagogy distinction *and* those who are pro-andragogy and view adult education as uniquely different from children's education. The debate does

cut philosophically, but it can and should be seen differently than as those for or against andragogy as a concept.

The debate can and should be viewed *between* those who assume that andragogy is a "theory about" that is based on individual characteristics of adults, learners and educators *and* those that view andragogy as a "philosophy of" that entail the questions of purpose, how knowledge is defined, and the relationship between the individual and the society. If this division instead is applied to the debate since the 1970s, a different analysis results.

When London (1973) writes early in opposition to Knowles' book, London's framework becomes stingingly clear as he sees Knowles' premises as too narrow:

The assertion that if we change education, we will be able to change our society in desired directions isn't realistic. From our experience, these expectations are unlikely to occur because the primary purpose of education is to produce the kind of people that our society desires, as the major way of socializing Americans to support the status quo... the largely technical character of Knowles' volume conveys a kind of technism which reflects a more rigid and mechanical view of man than we would hope to find in a book on adult education... If the claim is made for the need to do additional research to increase the scientific character of the technology of adult education, can we automatically expect more success in our programming? We don't think so! And we must continue to ask the question, education for what? (pp. 60-66)

The academic debate about andragogy gets heated later in the 1970s, but with little of London's question of the purpose of education and its relation to the society. McKenzie (1977, 1979) and Elias (1979) debate directly with one another, but always within a focus on the nature of adult learners in comparison to children. McKenzie wants to save Knowles' concept of andragogy by arguing philosophically that childhood and adult existence are inherently different and that Knowles is opening up a new model of adults as learners. Elias argues empirically against the concept

of andragogy by asserting that research such as Piaget's and Dewey's shows that children, as well as adults, can become independent and problem-centered learners who learn from experience. Elias and McKenzie are on different sides of the andragogy-pedagogy issue, argue from different bases, but ironically share a similar framework. Neither argue for a philosophy of what *ought to be* with a focus on the purpose of education; they both argue *about* characteristics and their effects on teaching and learning.

The distinction between a "theory about" and a "philosophy of" is seen later in two subsequent pro-andragogy pieces. Knowles (1979) retracts his earlier dichotomy between andragogy and pedagogy and substitutes an empirical continuum with "assumptions to be tested not to be presumed" (p. 52). Carlson (1979) wants not only to preserve the concept of andragogy, but the dichotomy between andragogy and pedagogy as well. Arguing against an orientation that focuses only on learning, Carlson's orientation is similar to that of London, although they end up on different sides of the andragogy issue. Carlson's pro-andragogy position is strikingly different from the recently proclaimed empirical base of recent research about andragogy, his being a philosophy of andragogy, not empirical description about individual characteristics.

Perhaps it is time, not to wash andragogy away with the criticism that is built upon sands of learning theory, but to add the cement of philosophy and the gravel of politics. Efficiency, so often the touchstone of learning theory, must be tempered in andragogy by philosophy consistent with democracy. With the political and philosophical dimensions suggested here, it seems to me that we are on the way to a more profound theoretical base... (pp. 54-55)

Whether in the 1970s or the 1980s, academic debate concerning andragogy is ultimately a debate concerning the purpose of research as well as the purpose of andragogy. For example, Davenport and Davenport (1985a) criticize the Nottingham Andragogy Group of England (1983) for not utilizing the recent American research that Davenport and Davenport see as building a theo-

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the relationship between facts and values. A research paradigm that aims to build a descriptive theory about andragogy based upon quantitative measurement of characteristics tends to dichotomize facts from values. On the other hand, research that is based on a model that incorporates prescription assumes that facts and values can not be kept separate. Lather's (1986) *Harvard Education Review* article, "Research as Praxis," summarizes this latter position:

Research paradigms inherently reflect our beliefs about the world we live in and want to live in. . . . It is increasingly recognized that the fact/value dichotomy simply drives values underground. . . . What this means is that "scholarship that makes its biases part of its argument" has arisen as a new contender for legitimacy. Research programs that disclose their value-base typically have been discounted, however, as overly subjective, hence, "nonscientific." Such views do not recognize the fact that scientific neutrality is always problematic. They arise from a hyper-objectivity premised on the belief that scientific knowledge is free from social construction. (p. 259)

Like other academicians, the author of *this* article cannot escape fully from his own premises. Even to raise the issue of so-called "neutral" research, and to urge critical attention to assumptions underlying research in adult education, is to take a philosophical stance. A primary premise of this author is that debate about research, like debate about andragogy, involves philosophical as well as empirical issues. Since philosophical questions are answered ultimately by beliefs and purposes, practitioners should be wary of covert epistemology and values underlying adult education research—whether about andragogy or any other topic. AAACE

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researcher. For example, *whether* the empirical question about attitudinal dimensions and educational orientations of individual learners and educators is most important, or the question of *what* characteristics are most important, are value questions.

Even the question of research methodology (e. g., quantitative vs. qualitative), or the question of the relationship between research and practice, may reach philosophical borders at some point. If premises are not examined, there is danger that the orientation of the researcher will dictate implicitly answers to unasked philosophical questions such as those of meaning, knowledge and value.

Questions about the purpose of research and the assumptions of the researcher—especially in their relationship to practitioners—is getting increasing attention in educational scholarship. Miller (1986) targets some of the problems among researchers regarding the application of research to practice: confusing definitions; questions important to practitioners not addressed; inappropriate methodologies; lack of understanding of political and social implications; poor communication with practitioners. Merriam (1986) calls for research collaboration between theoreticians and practitioners, pointing out problems such as conflicting reward systems that perpetuate a separation between researchers and practitioners. Gordon (1985) puts the spotlight on what she calls paradigm ethnocentrism: "educators, like all social scientists, have a personal and professional interest in the paradigms and the frameworks through which they view themselves and the world. . . . This knowledge has made them 'winners' within their own disciplines and intellectual circles" (pp. 37-38). Lather (1986) not only argues that researchers should go beyond the concern for more and better data to helping "participants understand and change their situations" (p. 263), but she also cautions against researcher imperialism in the name of emancipation, where "researchers impose meanings on situations rather than constructing meaning through negotiations with research participants" (p. 265).

Differences between research paradigms that can affect the relationship between theory and practice are rooted in philosophical difference concerning

retical base. What counts as empirical evidence, however, depends upon the framework being used. The Nottingham Andragogy Group has a philosophical orientation that is different from that used by Davenport and Davenport.

Parallel to some American scholars (e. g., Mezirow, 1985; Brookfield, 1985), the Nottingham Group aims for the creation and empowerment of critical thinking and questioning, and views Knowles' andragogy as just "progressive pedagogy." Rather than working toward an empirical theory that describes individual characteristics, the Nottingham Group views andragogy as a "total embodiment and expression of a philosophy of education for adults" and states their purpose is to enable adults "to become aware that they *should be* originators of their own thinking and feeling" (p. 2, italics added).

Furthermore, the stance of the Nottingham model is not one of explanation and prediction that tries to eliminate contradictions, but rather one of "using the tension between two or more contradictory explanations as a creative force which allows for the discovery of new questions and problems" (p. 6). For scholars with this philosophical orientation, such questions and problems inherently involve a societal/historical context that is usually ignored in research that measures individuals. Popkewitz (1984) explains:

Actual experience always contains contradictions that cannot be resolved through formal logical operations. . . . To eliminate contradictions is to eliminate half of human experience. . . . The emphasis on movement and connections focuses upon the socio-historical process of individual development. . . . This notion of change has implications not only for the study of individuals, but for understanding social transformation. (pp. 63-64)

Exploring Implications

This article is not intended to discourage the practical use of research concerning andragogy; it is intended to discourage uncritical use of research. Practitioners need to be aware of the premises of the research and the re-

than faith, fad, or fancy.

Such an approach would include the many similarities between child and adult education while providing a place for the discovery of differences. For example, research results on self-directed learning by children would be included under pedagogy; conversely, results on self-directed learning by adults would be included under andragogy.

Both young and old must deal with developmental roles and stages which have implications for education. Implications related to children or adolescents (e.g., establishing autonomy) would fall within the realm of pedagogy while implications related to adults (e.g., child raising) would fall within the realm of andragogy. Additionally, differences related to biological and physiological factors could be placed in their respective categories. For example, education related to children's sexual maturation would belong to pedagogy while education which considers the aging process and its effect upon accuracy and speed would belong to andragogy. Many other examples could be given, but these should suffice for illustrative purposes.

Summary

Andragogy continues to generate discussion and to capture the imagination of many adult educators. However, early critics have been joined by an increasing number of educators, researchers and practitioners who question its theoretical and practical efficacy. Knowles has perhaps added to the confusion with his paradoxical definitions of andragogy and pedagogy and with his assumptions which lack clarity and solid empirical support. Emerging research results do not appear to support Knowles' conceptualization of andragogy as a theory or proven method. Some adult educators even argue that adult education should simply drop the word from its lexicon.

Adult education could survive without andragogy, but the term does possess significant public relations value. Andragogy also has the potential of serving as a unifying framework for adult education if definitional problems can be worked out, and if old and new assumptions are rigorously tested before possible incorporation into a larger theory. This article has suggested a

revised definition of andragogy aimed at eliminating definitional disorder and conceptual confusion while providing a base for the orderly development of empirically-supported theory. **AAACE**

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