

## INTIMACY AND ETHICAL ACTION IN ADULT EDUCATION

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### Abstract

This article suggests that thinking about the nature of intimacy, especially sexual intimacy, is a good way of deepening our understanding of how deep-seated psychic vulnerabilities play an important role in adult education contexts. Drawing on psychoanalytic accounts of human development, the paper outlines how the capacity for ethical action in adult education rests on the ability of adult educators to develop identities that can recognize and accept their own imperfections. Rigid, narcissistic, and omnipotent identities are incapable of understanding and nurturing the pro-social identity development of other people. Viewing human development issues through the lens of intimacy helps clarify not only what is at stake in contexts like adult education but also helps illuminate the qualities of generativity most conducive to the development of other people.

*Saying yes to sexuality is saying yes to all in life that defies control –  
to passivity and surprise, to being one part of a very chancy world.*  
(Martha Nussbaum, 2001, p. 709)

It is interesting and perhaps a bit revealing that reference to intimacy, especially sexual intimacy, is rare in the literature of adult education. Certainly, for most of us, the deep privacy (closeness, boundedness, exclusivity) that seems an ineluctable part of intimate personal relations places it outside of the more public purview of adult education. What legitimate (non-defiling) reason, we might wonder, would an adult educator have for thinking that something as private as intimate relations is important to our field? There is, in fact, an interesting link between intimacy and adult education that is very worthwhile exploring. Stated plainly, our capacity for ethical action as adult educators is shaped by many of the same personal qualities that enable and constrain our capacity for mature intimate relations. Thinking about intimacy is fruitful because, in this most compelling of human encounters, fundamental aspects of our human condition, particularly our great vulnerability and our need for recognition, come into focus. While an exploration of intimacy (both on paper and in real life) cannot teach us *everything* about the basis of ethical action in adult education, it can reveal some deeply important things that are difficult to learn otherwise, especially if we admit that “feeling” is a part of what we learn.

### Paulo Freire Holding Hands

Let us begin with a small story of intimacy. During a discussion of the challenges of cross-cultural relations, Paulo Freire (1985) related how a male colleague in Africa, in a gesture

of friendliness common in his country, once took him by the hand as they walked together. Despite knowing of this particular cultural practice, Freire could not help feeling uneasy as the man interlaced his fingers with his, as if they “were lovers strolling through the gardens of the university” (p. 182). While men are more physically demonstrative in Freire’s homeland of Brazil than in many other places – shaking hands, putting a hand on the shoulder, and the like – a gesture like his African friend’s signaled a level of intimacy uncomfortable for a Brazilian man. Not wanting to appear impolite, Freire waited patiently for his colleague to release him on his own accord. All the while, however, Freire wanted to pull his hand away.

This story is particularly important in that it reveals a very human side to Paulo Freire. We all experience discomfort and embarrassment at times, so it is easy to relate to Freire’s very human predicament. Importantly, in addition to its charming, quotidian quality, this story is interesting in that it is at odds with the main thrust of Freire’s critical theory of adult education.

In his pivotal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2003), for example, Freire asserts that our capacity for reflective action is what makes us most human. Our “vocation” (p. 43) as human beings, he contends, is to “name” our world and to change it (p. 88). As subjects we are capable of transcending the determining force of objective existence and of acting freely to transform our circumstances. And it is this nature, this depiction of who we are, that Freire upholds as a normative standard against which different pedagogical forms can be evaluated. Thus, pedagogies that nurture and support this higher nature, that treat humans as capable of reflective action, and that strive to engender cultural, social, and political circumstances consistent with this nature, are ethical. On the other hand, according to Freire, pedagogical forms that disregard and disrupt this higher capacity, that treat people as objects capable only of reacting and adapting to their world, or that reproduce circumstances that diminish or destroy their fullest capacities, are pathological.

Given this ontological account, however, how might we understand Freire’s story of holding hands? Actually, it is doubtful that anyone would see Freire’s reflexive withdrawal from his friend’s touch as example of the higher human capacity for reflective action. His was a body response, a reaction that preceded any naming of the world. There was no transcending of objectivity. Despite his reflective efforts (“Paulo, is there something wrong with your own culture that rejects an affectionate gesture?” [1985, p. 182]), his body (at least its autonomic components) continued to act quite on its own. In Freire’s theory, though, reactive, non-reflective forms of response are not our historical vocation. In fact, the purpose of an emancipatory pedagogy is to enable humans to become critically reflective, raising them far above the need for blind animal reactivity.

But, why then did Freire tell this story of his own failure to transcend? Did he want to tell us of his own oppression (his homophobia, perhaps) that he hoped to overcome someday through continued reflective action? This is unlikely. Although Freire probably would like to be able to change his reactions to situations like this, to learn how to control the reflexive upsurge of discomfort at having his body touched in this rather harmless way, it is doubtful that this was his primary reason for telling this story. Much more likely, Freire’s reason for telling this story was to share with us a sense of who he is, a person just like the rest of us with insecurities and vulnerabilities that impel unpredictable and involuntary emotions. He wants us to know that,

while they might make us feel uncomfortable, situations like this just happen in our daily lives, and that it is acceptable to be imperfect and out of complete control. In fact, it is because we see that he can accept (and even laugh at) his own faults that we understand Freire to be a man capable of accepting us and our faults, a man of empathy and compassion.

This story of Paulo Freire signals something largely missing from, or at least underemphasized in his more substantive pedagogical theory. Of course, as many people have pointed out (Berger, 1975; Bowers, 1983; 1985; De Lima, 1979; Facundo, 1984; Griffith, 1972; Misgeld, 1985; Plumb, 1989; Youngman, 1986), Freire's account of human nature, offered in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and then reiterated with minor elaborations throughout the remainder of his oeuvre, is wanting in a number of respects. In comparison to other more robust theories even of his day (cognitive and psychoanalytic theories, for example), it provides little of substance to help us understand the nature of identity and identity formation. Despite its rather anthropological tenor, particularly explicit in his early text, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1973), Freire's theory does not explain how our species has acquired its ontological vocation for reflective action either historically or phylogenetically. Nor does Freire provide a satisfying account of the process whereby humans develop our capacities for reflective action throughout the lifespan (the absence of childhood in his theory is why we presume to claim him as an adult educator). And, other than an admittedly moving account of the oppressive effects of colonization, it provides little specific analysis of how political economic processes, particularly capitalism, work to destroy our essential nature as human beings. But, while they are related, these concerns with the normative foundations that Freire offers for his pedagogy are not exactly the point raised by his story of holding hands.

In a nutshell, the thing that is present in Freire's small story of intimacy that is so important but largely missing from his pedagogical theory is his message that there are things in life that irrevocably escape our control and that, in fact, largely cannot be named. Freire's message here is that, in the end, we are vulnerable and imperfect and that accepting this fact is a basis for being compassionate towards others. This is a very different message than the much more strident one that predominates in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* of a subjectivity denied its true (perfect) nature by external oppressive forces, that, as Martha Nussbaum (2001) states, "with its exorbitant demands, is seen with suspicion, as a possible accomplice of self-hatred and the hatred of others" (p. 709). The story of holding hands turns us towards a very different normative foundation for a critical and emancipatory pedagogy. Mark Bracher (2006) summarizes the basis for the turn very well:

An identity that simply rejects and excludes shameful elements of the self – such as impulses of aggression, dominance, or greed, or qualities such as fear, weakness, or laziness – will ... be victimized by the return of these repressed elements in the form of externalizations, projective identifications, and disguised enactments, which are at the root of many social problems and which also interfere with learning and personal well-being. (p. 179)

The foundation for a truly radical pedagogy, it turns out, rests much more in the development of identities that can recognize and accept their own imperfections than on those that project their own internal impulses onto an external oppressive foe. Our capacity to

acknowledge our own vulnerabilities is what supports our ability to understand and nurture the pro-social identity development of other people, whether they are passive and ashamed, aggressive and imperialistic, dominated or dominating. As Martha Nussbaum (2001) insists, “the root of hatred is not erotic need.... It is, rather, the refusal to accept erotic neediness and unpredictability as a fact of human life” (p. 709). It is precisely within contexts of intimacy, especially the deeply embodied contexts of sexual intimacy, that we (like Freire holding hands) experience our human vulnerabilities most movingly. And just as Freire picked this story to help convey the difficulties of being truly open to another person, we might attend to intimacy to understand how we might acquire identities most fully capable of sustaining ethical action in adult education.

### **Vulnerability and the Emergence of Emotions**

Helpful insight into the nature of intimate relationships, including sexually intimate relationships, can be gleaned from psychoanalytic thought. Despite the belief amongst early psychoanalysts (including Freud, himself) that “the dynamical qualities” of education and psychoanalysis are “indistinguishable” (Britzman, 1998, p. 33), educators have drawn remarkably little on psychoanalytic theory to understand teaching and learning. Recently, however, important work by educational theorists like Deborah Britzman (1998) and Mark Bracher (2006) reveal the substantial power of psychoanalytic theory to deepen our understanding of teaching and learning and to raise important questions about what constitutes an ethical educational practice. For these authors, one of the most important contributions of psychoanalytic theory is its insight into the dynamic effects of vulnerability in processes of human development and learning.

According to neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio (1999), in his groundbreaking account of how the brain produces consciousness:

The drama of the human condition comes solely from consciousness. Of course, consciousness and its revelations allow us to create a better life for self and others, but the price we pay for that better life is high. It is not just the price of risk and danger and pain. It is the price of *knowing* risk, danger, and pain. Worse even: it is the price of knowing what pleasure is and *knowing* when it is missing or unattainable. (p. 316)

One of the more difficult consequences of being fully conscious as human beings is that we can understand the vastness of our own vulnerability. Life, with its stream of dark dangers and losses, wounds and aggrievements, constantly reminds humans of the limits of our powers “to create a better life for self and others.” The difficulty with being so cognitively alive is that we clearly appreciate the many contingencies of existence that operate far beyond our control. As much as we might wish otherwise, and as fantastic as our own powers might be, we are far from perfect.

As psychoanalysts of the “object relations” school like Melanie Klein (1975) and Donald Winnicott (1971) relate, we do not start our lives with such a dark sense of things. An infant spends the first weeks or perhaps even months of its life in swaddled bliss with a nebulous, all encompassing sense of things. It feels no fear or anger, love or shame. With no prior experience

to guide it and with only a nascent self-consciousness (which Damasio calls “proto-self” [1999, p. 153]) the infant is unaware even of its own body boundaries and cannot tell what is inside or what is outside of it. For all intents and purposes, an infant is not in the world but *is* the world.

When its personal powers for what Damasio (1999) calls “core consciousness” (p. 169) begin to consolidate, and its capacities for controlling its environment begin to develop, the infant makes “the step from an absolutely self-sufficient narcissism to the perception of a changing external world and the beginning of the discovery of objects” (Freud, 1922, p. 104). It begins, for the first time, to experience itself as an entity cut apart from the world. At first, of course, the infant is so self-centered that it has no sense of the limits of its powers. As Winnicott (1971) and others describe, the small infant experiences itself as “omnipotent” (p. 11). Soon, however, when needs are not immediately met, the infant also realizes that not all lies in its control and that it is, in fact, desperately dependent.

According to Martha Nussbaum (2001), it is this growing recognition of its helplessness, this primal and unhealing wound, that stimulates the emergence and development of human emotions in the infant. Emotions, Nussbaum contends, are not simply biological drives but, rather, are ways humans come to think about things that are deeply important to them but are irrevocably beyond their control. The emotions of anger and gratitude, for instance, develop early in life as infants confront the delay that occasionally exists between the upsurge of need and its gratification by the world. The omnipotent infant reacts with rage and shame when the things it desires are withheld, revealing its profound helplessness. Then, when finally fulfilled, the infant feels suffused by the emotion of gratitude. Later, when growing cognitive abilities allows a child to differentiate objects and is able, for instance, to recognize key people in her life, gratitude can blossom into love. When her loved one disappoints her, moreover, she can react, at this point, with more complex emotions like hatred, envy, and jealousy and, when torn by the ambiguity of both loving and hating at the same time, can feel the first pangs of guilt. As a child discovers her own body edges and begins to locate herself within the boundaries of her own skin, she becomes increasingly aware of her own physical vulnerability, particularly apparent in those parts of her body less distinctly separated from the world. She comes to react with the emotion of disgust at substances (spit, vomit, urine, feces, blood) that pass one way or another across her body boundary, substances of uncertain status, neither quite inside nor outside of who she is (Nussbaum, 2001).

Emotions like these run through us like rivers, fed by the unending source of our sense of vulnerability. We are washed over by fear, awe, loathing, disgust, love, shame, longing, and grief throughout our entire lives. Emotions, Nussbaum (2004) relates, are lifelong “ways in which we negotiate deep tensions involved in the very fact of being human, with the high aspirations and harsh limits that such a life involves” (p. 70). Emotions are how we deal with our experience of utter vulnerability and helplessness.

### **Good Enough Holding: The Role of Communities of Practice**

Despite the support of our emotions, the fact of our ultimate contingency leaves us deeply wounded. In the case of young infants, the anguish of vulnerability can be lessened when the people who care for them, using Donald Winnicott’s (1971) wonderful choice of words, “hold”

the child (p. 11). For Winnicott, “good enough holding” keeps the infant from feeling like it is “infinitely falling” and helps it brave its first experiences of being cut from the wholeness of the world (p. 10). The caregivers recognize and meet the infant’s needs quickly enough to prevent an overwhelming storm of anguished feeling but not so quickly to prevent it from experiencing both reality and the effectiveness of its own emerging powers. Good enough holding is essential at this stage if the infant is to learn to trust both itself and its world. It helps the infant learn that it is acceptable to be dependent, that it does not need to be all-powerful, and that it need not be ashamed of its weakness.

As the child grows, it is held in other ways. For instance, Winnicott (1971) tells of how “transitional objects” (p. 5), like a favorite blanket or teddy bear, helps the child retain the feeling of attachment she has even when separated from her caregiver. As related by Layton (2006), Winnicott also describes “play” as a kind of “holding and facilitating environment” within which the child can learn to “bear and metabolize [her] painful affects and to help it process vulnerable feelings” (p. 144). As Winnicott (1971) relates, “whereas inner psychic reality has a kind of location ... somewhere within the bounds of the individual, and whereas what is called external reality is located outside of these bounds,” playing transpires in a space that grows between a child and her caretaker (p. 53). It is a context within which the child can explore new cognitive and physical powers, realize the limits of its own abilities, and accept its helplessness and dependence. It is within this space between the child’s internal psychic and external realities, this “thirdness” as Jessica Benjamin (1988) refers to it, that the child gradually finds her entry into society.

It is most intriguing that Winnicott’s (1971) concept of a holding and facilitating environment captures so wonderfully key qualities of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of communities of practice. According to Wenger (1998), a community of practice is a bounded space of human interaction within which people draw upon a shared stock of cultural objects and meanings to negotiate shared understandings and coordinated practices. As such, just like the space between mother and child, it too is a thirdness that enables people to exercise their powers of personal and collective agency without being overwhelmed by the chaos of the world. As Wenger relates, in the process of intertwining their lives in communities of practice, people acquire a sense of personal identity, produce and reproduce new meanings, and forge bonds of care and solidarity with others. It is within the boundaries of these intersubjective spaces, Lave and Wenger contend, that humans learn most deeply.

If conditions are favorable, all along the trajectory of our life course, we are held and nurtured within these “transitional” spaces of our culture. Like newborns at a family gathering, we are handed from the arms of one community of practice to the next, each time sheltered from the darkness of wild contingency, and each time learning more about our personal and collective powers for action. In our earliest communities of practice, we are coddled and sung to. We fall into the harmonies of intersubjective life and develop capacities for understanding the feelings and points of view of other people. Later, when we acquire what Michael Tomasello (1999) asserts is our species unique capacity to “share attention” with other people, we can begin to participate fully in intersubjective contexts (p. 5). From our immediate family community of practice, to extended family and friends, to childhood playgroups, to same-sex peer groups, to multi-age work groups, we make our way, our communities of practice weaving together like a

braided cord. At the same time as we develop adult capacities to participate in (and be held by) multiple, complex, and shifting communities of practice, we also seek out and explore deeper, less fleeting, and more intimate forms of thirdness. Our participation in intimate adult relationships, especially sexual relationships, at this stage, becomes a particularly vibrant context for learning profoundly and poignantly about ourselves. It is in our most intimate relationships that we confront our vulnerability and our need for recognition most starkly. It is within them that our lifelong struggle to acknowledge and accept our imperfections and, at the same time, the imperfections of others is experienced most deeply.

### **Our Residual Defensiveness**

Lave and Wenger's rather cognitivist formulation of communities of practice (especially as articulated in Wenger's 1998 book) misses, indeed perhaps even suppresses, something deeply important. Lave and Wenger (1991) focus on what happens inside the boundaries of the community of practice but rarely speak of the darkness beyond. Ironically, one of the things that ends up being most present in their notion of communities of practice is the mysterious external absence, the nameless and inescapable vulnerability, that, in fact, is the primal constituting force of the community of practice that can never finally be excluded beyond its boundaries. As a consequence of Lave and Wenger's melodramatic presentation of communities of practice (melodramas reinforce our sense of selves but rarely unsettle us), they hide from view an important part of what takes place when we participate and learn in an intersubjective thirdness. The psychoanalytic perspective continues to be helpful here.

Winnicott's (1971) hopeful image of the holding and facilitating environment is offered as one way a person can work through the anguish of her helplessness. As psychoanalysts generally realize, however, humans never fully escape the dreadful sense of their own separateness and vulnerability. The image of a baby handed from thirdness to thirdness does not and can never protect us from our fundamental human plight. Although we may not always be miserable, we never fully escape the itch of our primal wound. As a consequence, we develop defensive styles of living that aim to protect us from the worst.

As part of her attempt to come to terms with the rise in what she calls retaliatory political sentiments in the USA, Lynne Layton (2006) describes the psychic defenses that develop and prevail when people are insufficiently held by their social context. Elements of these defenses include:

an overwhelming sense that vulnerability is a shameful weakness that cannot be psychically tolerated; an inability to mourn losses; a need for certainty that arises from an inability to bear ambiguity and ambivalence; a predominance of defensive splitting and projection, through which one assigns blame to others while claiming unsullied innocence for oneself; a predominance of humiliation and other forms of shaming; and an either omnipotent or submissive mode of conceptualizing relations to others. (p. 145)

As Layton (2006) observes, "Since no one escapes the slings and arrows of narcissistic wounding, no matter how gentle the culture, most people's psyches are apt to revert on occasion to narcissistic modes of relating" (p. 146). Importantly, it is within intimate relationships, where

people most avidly seek recognition and consequently where they are most vulnerable to rejection, that psychic defenses acquired early in life often become most apparent.

### **Learning to Hold: Mature Sexual Intimacy**

While all intimate personal relationships are fertile ground for confronting and working through our vulnerabilities, sexually intimate relationships are particularly powerful contexts for personal development. As Martha Nussbaum (2001) relates, despite Plato's claim that we attain our deepest capacities for love when we escape the contingency and particularity of our sexual appetites, in the end, it is only, she argues, when we become most intensely aware of our own physical and emotional vulnerability, when we most fully experience ourselves as imperfect and contingent and when we confront and accept our abiding physical erotic neediness, that we become most open to the fullness of other people. It is in this context, likewise, that we abundantly experience the sensuous power of our bodies to transform the world. While love as an engaged, physical, creative, and generative power is most immediately obvious in a context like sexual intimacy, the deeply connective, embodied, and emotional character of human existence in all of its forms is ultimately impossible to transcend. At the same time as sexual intimacy reveals our profound neediness and vulnerability, it also reveals our most impressive human power to recognize the one we love and to shape circumstances to most fully support his or her thriving.

Due to the gendered nature of contemporary society, the particular reactions of men and women to their "narcissistic wounding" are often distinct. Typically, although certainly not always, women attempt to minimize their sense of vulnerability by experiencing "their agency as selfish and so ... submit themselves pathologically to men" (Layton, 2006, p. 147). Men, on the other hand, strive to escape their helpless feelings by experiencing "connection as a humiliating form of dependence, to which they have responded by seeking omnipotent control over women" (p. 147). All of this, one can imagine, plays out in interesting ways in the thirdness that forms when people become sexually intimate.

In his in-depth exploration of intimate sexual relationships, psychoanalyst Otto Kernberg (1995) offers important insight into some of the more dynamic ways people defend themselves from the anxieties they inevitably encounter in sexually intimate relationships. Normally, he observes, within the homoerotic context of their teenage peer groups, young men defend themselves from insecurities about their male identities by splitting off and denying need for emotional connection. Sexuality is fantasized as a context within which a man can obtain recognition by controlling the pleasure of his partner. In his fantasy, the young man reduces the sexual act to its starkest physical aspects with little emotional connection. Circling just beyond the boundaries of a man's fantasy of all-powerful control, however, is his deep longing for connection and recognition and his great fear of being seen as imperfect.

Contrarily, within the homoerotic context of their respective teenage peer groups, young women normally defend themselves from insecurities about their female identities by splitting off and denying need for physical agency. Sexuality is fantasized, in their case, as a context for romantic emotional connection through which a woman obtains recognition through attaining true love. In her fantasy, the young woman reduces the sexual act to a rather warm, emotional

experience with nebulous physical detail. Again, just beyond the bounds of this fantasy of passive romantic connection lurks the young woman's longing for autonomy and control and her great fear of being seen as aggressive and desiring (Kernberg, 1995).

Although Kernberg's (1995) depiction seems rather dichotomizing (not to mention, heteronormative), it helps us understand the psychic ambiguity that lurks just below the surface when human beings pair up. Certainly, whatever the case, the fantasies that people bring to their sexual partnering only constitute a starting place for their relationships. In fact, the reason sexual intimacy is particularly important for adult educators to consider is that it is within this context that the great opportunities and hindrances for deep and transformational learning come most clearly into view.

Within the context of mature sexual intimacy, human beings have a wonderful opportunity to learn to exist with others in, what Martha Nussbaum (2001) identifies as the hallmark moral state, "mature interdependence" (p. 224). She describes this state as one in which a person:

is able to accept the fact that those whom she loves and continues to need are separate from her and not mere instruments of her will. She allows herself to depend upon them in some ways, but she does not insist on omnipotence; and she allows them, in return, to depend in certain ways upon her; she commits herself to being responsible for them in certain ways. (p. 224)

The reason sexual intimacy has such potential to shape this attitude (and, equally, why it can be the context of equally destructive, pathological force) is because it generates a play space within which the couple will confront some of their deepest insecurities. While there are many ways of forming a healthy, mature sexual relationship, a few things are essential.

First, the couple must form a bond of trust within which they are able to reveal vulnerabilities. This is particularly so given that the sex act itself involves physical crossing of body boundaries (most saliently, but not only, experienced by women). As Luce Irigaray (1988) relates, in the sexual act, the space for play, is as close as a mere skim of mingled mucous that the couple produces and delights in together. Passion obliterates our solitude, for a moment mixing our souls. But, we do not lose ourselves completely. In love, Irigaray insists, we move into what she calls, a "chiasmus," a properly dialectical space, within which we exist with and recognize the other but at the same time stay ourselves.

Second, the couple must develop a tolerance for ambiguity. The rigid splitting that people bring to relationships, deeply shaped by gendered cultural norms, can be gradually softened and shifted in the mature sexual relationship. Men (and women, too) learn, as Hegel (1977) long ago insisted and Honneth (1995) now reaffirms, that deep recognition comes not through control but through yielding to the other's freely given embrace. Women (and men, too) overcome their fear of being obliterated by their partner's and their own aggression and learn the pleasure of acting assertively in the sexual partnership. In this way, rigidly held definitions of masculinity and femininity, subordination and domination, shift, and with them entire life scripts.

Third and finally, drawing on things learned within the frame of their intersubjective thirdness, the couple must face outwards with new capacities for love, tolerance, and responsibility. Ideally, a context of mature sexual intimacy will help prepare the hearts of its inhabitants to tolerate the monstrous ambiguities of the external world. Kernberg (1995) observes, for instance, how mature sexual intimacy can provide partners with a basis for accepting the contingency and inevitable dissolution of the very intimacy that nurtures them. “In the final analysis,” Kernberg relates poignantly, “all human relationships must end, and the threat of loss and abandonment and, in the last resort, of death is greatest where love has most depth; awareness of this also deepens love” (p. 63).

The wonder of intimacy, and particularly sexual intimacy, is that it is both the context within which we are deeply vulnerable and, if things are right, the place where we can feel comfortably held. Emmanuel Lévinas (1979) concurs and writes that, “The Other precisely reveals himself [sic] in his alterity not in a shock negating the I, but as the primordial phenomenon of gentleness” (p. 150). Certainly, the potential of intimate relationships to promote the growth and development of more capacious and open identities is not always and probably all too seldom realized. Our psychic defenses can attract us to relationships within which we do not reveal ourselves – well-established identity contents can be protected, old scripts can be maintained, rigid self representations preserved, and comfortable moods and emotions managed. In this instance, our experience or treatment of another person may be far from the ‘primordial phenomenon of gentleness.’ Sexuality, for example, is often a stage for violent encounter, in which the other remains unrecognized. Still, while our own intimate relationships may not be perfect, we continue to see them, sometimes ideally (although more often realistically), as a thirdness within which we might yield our need for control, reduce our tendency to externalize suppressed and prohibited desires, and expand our capacities to accept our faults and the faults of other people. Most importantly, when we achieve all of these things, when we soften our sense of ourselves, we find suddenly that the partner in our arms is sustained by us and that we can contribute a context that best supports his or her flourishing. We become, in essence, more deeply capable of truly ethical action that enables another person to expand their personal capacities for compassion and care. Moreover, as Mark Bracher (2006) observes, to the extent that we can provide a play space within which the other person can allow him or herself to accept and integrate shameful aspects, we can open them to new ways of relating to and learning about the world at large. As Bracher observes, our identity structures tightly constrain what we allow ourselves to risk learning. Shifting these structures removes defenses and opens us to new vistas of learning.

### **A Basis for Ethical Action in Adult Education**

Thinking about intimacy is relevant for adult educators as it helps convey the depths of what might actually be at stake in adult education contexts both for educators and for their students, what might count as ethical action in adult education, what often gets in the way of ethical action, and what might best support adult educators to acquire capacities to act ethically. Each of these four areas is now further discussed.

*What is at stake in adult education contexts?* As Britzman (1998) relates, by its very nature, “education must interfere” (p. 10). Education, including adult education, “asks students to

confront perspectives, situations, and ideas that may not be just unfamiliar but appear at first glance as a criticism of the learner's view" (p. 11). As Callahan (2004) observes, "As invaders of life spaces, educators are in a position of power over learners" (p. 80). Learning, especially any serious expansive or transformative form of learning, requires that learners "risk their resistance" abandon well-healed images and characterizations of self, and adopt a new perspective (Britzman, 1998, p. 11). The difficult thing about learning new things (about our world, about each other, or about ourselves) is that it simultaneously requires us to place in abeyance things that already constitute part of who we are.

The magnitude of what education asks students to risk is reflected in the controlling instrumentalism of many educational contexts. If education was easily accomplished, there would be little need for the massive and elaborate schemes and mechanisms that strive to ensure student learning. At the same time, if education were easy, there would be little reason for student resistance to unwanted interference – hostility, compliance, withdrawal, boredom, negativity, bickering, distraction, and so on – that hooks (1994), Ellsworth (1989), and Dlamini (2002) document so powerfully in their writing. Something is clearly at stake in educational contexts. Significant learning is not easy, and a good part of this has to do with the high stakes of what must change if learning is to take place.

Although differences between contexts of adult learning and intimacy, particularly sexual intimacy, are apparent, they share an important commonality: they both have the potential to threaten our identities. As Mark Bracher (2006) relates, our resistance to learning and our willingness to learn depends deeply on the extent to which "new knowledge students encounter ... either supports or threatens their identity" (p. 25). It also depends deeply on the extent to which students can find ways (or are provided ways) to work through the anguish they feel when they must give up one way of thinking or of being and of adopting another. As Bracher observes, "A major problem for educators is thus how to help students protect their threatened identities in ways other than resisting the identity-threatening knowledge" (p. 25). The final outcome of education hinges deeply on the capacity of educators to support their students' deepest capacities for learning.

*What counts as ethical action in a context of interference like adult education?* Again, our reflections on intimacy help frame an answer to this question. In the case of sexual intimacy, for instance, a key requirement for the growth of "mutual interdependence" is for partners to confront and then to accept their own imperfections so they can begin to tolerate the imperfections in another person. Acting ethically, in this case, means working through one's own psychic defensiveness to the point that it is possible to accept and nurture one's partner as an independent being, worthy of being loved despite his or her ultimate incapacity finally to satisfy the longing we will always have for absolute recognition. Practically, this means generating a nurturing thirdness that holds both members of the intimate relationship closely enough to support the relaxation of rigid boundaries, but not so closely as to threaten the independent existence of either member.

Although the intimate connection in educational contexts is not as deep, the overall requirements for ethical action remain largely the same. First, to act ethically in adult education, it is imperative that educators understand that education interferes with the identities of both

teachers and students and that educational contexts are fraught with the difficult and emotionally risky task of learning. All too often, perhaps in defense of their own imperious need for the safety that comes from asserting rigid and omnipotent control, educators deny the emotional riskiness of learning and underestimate just what is at stake in meaningful learning contexts. To act ethically, however, a deeper and more emotionally attuned view of teaching and learning is necessary. For one thing, Jagodzinski (2002) argues that ethical action requires that educators must “acknowledge and retain the unknowability of ‘difference’” that they confront in educational contexts (p. 85). Armed with a more empathic and compassionate sense of both their own imperfections and the dynamic, emotional needs of their students, teachers can begin to act ethically to establish a proper pedagogical play space. As our reflections on intimacy have revealed, a key element of this space will be to hold its participants closely enough that they can begin to relax, so they might begin to accept their own vulnerabilities and, thus, open up to a new sense of themselves, other people, and the world.

Bracher (2006) offers Erik Erikson’s final stage of identity development, the stage of “generativity,” as an identity structure that best supports ethical pedagogical action. For Erikson (1964), generativity represents a deep-seated instinct possessed by humans to care for and nurture the development of other humans. Central to this is the human desire to teach. It is because we can recognize each other’s consciousness and can tune into each other’s practical and intellectual engagements that we can pass on what we know and gradually weave the fabric of culture.

As important as teaching is to the production and reproduction of culture and, hence, the survival of our species, we do not teach *just* to reproduce culture. As Erikson contends, our desire to teach is deeply connected to our desire to help other people grow and develop in ways that deepen their own capacity for generativity. Given this, it is easier to understand Lacan’s (1992) enigmatic contention that, to be most ethical, we must follow our deepest desire – our desire for recognition. As Hegel (1977) pointed out in his famous discussion of master and slave, our only possibility for being deeply recognized and affirmed is if the person whom we want to desire us can understand us fully, is completely uncompelled, and is capable of compassion and care. Thus, in a surprising and curious reversal, our deepest personal desires are best met when we act in a generative way to support the desires of others by nurturing conditions within which their understanding, freedom, and compassion can grow.

*What gets in the way of ethical action in adult education?* As we have seen in our discussion of intimacy, a main outcome of normal development are psychic defenses that work to protect us from our primal sense of vulnerability but that ultimately restrict our capacity for openness to the fullness of both ourselves and other people. Depending on many factors (our gender, perhaps, being one of the most apparent), humans develop an elaborate range of defensive structures that enable and constrain further learning and development. Basically put, in different ways these defenses restrict our capacities for ethical action.

Interestingly, as Bracher (2006) insists, many educators are drawn to teaching precisely because it provides rich opportunities for maintaining rigidly held identity contents, thus avoiding deep-seated psychic vulnerabilities. Bracher describes how educators can adopt haughty and “authoritarian” (p. 85) demeanors to secure student admiration for the educator’s

identity; they can strive to inculcate dominant or “establishment” (p. 89) knowledge or worldviews consistent with and affirming of the educator’s identity contents; or, alternatively, they can criticize dominant discourses (“resistance of protest pedagogies” [p. 95]) to get students to recognize and sympathize with how external forces are to blame for insufficiently recognizing and valuing the identity elements of the educator (or subordinate group with whom the educator identifies). In their own way, each of these pedagogical strategies bolster the rigid and omnipotently held identity contents of the educator at the expense of (or, at the very best, regardless of) student identity development needs. Rather than generating conditions where students might become open to exploring alternate possible identity elements, these pedagogical approaches tend to do one of two things: they confirm and further ossify identity contents of students who share the educator’s omnipotent view of the world, or they threaten or depreciate the students’ sense of themselves. In both cases, these pedagogical approaches are unethical in that they undermine the capacities of students to deepen their own capacities for generativity. As Ellsworth (1989) and Callahan (2004) relate, unethical, omnipotent actions by educators stir deep and conflicting emotions. On the one hand, educators gain the satisfaction of having their identity contents confirmed and preserved. On the other hand, however, given that they are haunted by repressed identity contents, they can become plagued by emotions of guilt and shame.

*What might best support ethical action in adult education?* In our reflections on intimacy, we learned that, when it is experienced most fully, intimacy generates a context that can foster mature interdependence. Even in contexts of intense vulnerability experienced in sexual intimacy, people can learn to soften boundaries and to accept their own imperfections and weaknesses. In doing so, they increase their capacity to accept the faults and idiosyncrasies of their intimate partner and, when conditions are right, in a widening spiral movement, accept the faults of other people.

It is precisely because education must interfere that it has the same potential to support personal growth and development, for both students and teachers. The difficult thing, of course, is that, in reality, many teachers enter the pedagogical scene poorly equipped for ethical action. Instead of supporting a context ripe with potential for enabling deep learning, they enter with defenses that produce contexts that harm. Although the harm caused by teachers is more obvious when they are domineering, even critical educators who claim an interest in the emancipation of their students are capable of traumatizing their students. As Callahan (2004) relates, “Facilitators of learning can cause a great deal of harm to learners by stirring up emotions and failing to manage those emotions” (p. 80). For the sake of maintaining and getting recognition for rigid identity contents (in this case, having students recognize them either as oppressed and victimized, themselves, or not responsible for authoritarian oppression), they deny students opportunities for growth.

Curiously, insisting in any authoritarian way that adult educators simply act more ethically by imposing, for example, an external code of ethics, only makes the situation worse. This strategy for fostering ethical action mistakenly assumes that people are largely in control of their emotional reactions and that they can just will their way into caring more for their students. In fact, an authoritarian demand for behavior change would likely be met by resistance that might very well make educators even more rigid and controlling.

Given what has been considered above, a much better strategy would be to help adult educators come to recognize that, despite their best intentions, their habitual practices as educators might actually be contributing to contexts that harm their students. While Callahan goes so far as to suggest that it might be helpful for educators to pursue formal training as therapists so they can assume “ethical responsibility to manage the change process they initiate” (p. 81) and Jagodzinski suggests that educators have “‘therapy’ ... as part of their program of studies” to support a “‘different’ understanding of ethical pedagogy” (p. 96), there are other, more feasible options. Bracher’s (2006) strategy of engaging teachers in a systematic identification and working through of their own identity needs is especially promising. This, he contends, is largely possible through self-analysis based on the processes of psychoanalysis. The purpose of self-analysis is to recognize that our ways of relating to others is shaped by psychic defenses. The extent that we can ease the rigidity of our identity contents and begin to accept shameful or imperfect parts of ourselves will shape our capacities for recognizing and supporting the identity development needs of our students.

None of this is likely to appeal too much to adult educators as long as we reject out of hand the potential contribution that psychoanalytic theory might make to our field. Our reluctance to consider insights and suggestions like Bracher’s (2006) is understandable: they test our belief that adult education is invariably a positive force dedicated to bettering the lives of our students. To become best able to act ethically as adult educators, however, it is imperative that we acknowledge our own imperfect humanness.

Certainly, while psychoanalytic approaches are not be the only way we can work to expand our capacities for ethical action in adult education, they do constitute an important, underappreciated resource that adult educators have, for too long, rejected out of hand. The capacity of psychoanalytic theory to help us understand the nature of ethical action in adult education and appreciate the different ways our own identity needs can actually interfere with our capacities for ethical action is reason enough for adult educators to consider it more seriously. The fact that psychoanalysis also offers many practical ways we can work through our psychic defenses and expand our capacity for caring interaction with others recommends it even more strongly. However we might approach it, be it through reading texts like Bracher’s (2006), by engaging in a deeper exploration of its rich and manifold theory, or by actually undergoing some form of therapy, psychoanalysis promises to deepen our ability for ethical action in adult education.

### **Conclusion**

Thinking about intimacy, it turns out, is a particularly powerful way to clarify not only what is at stake in adult education contexts but what constitutes ethical action in adult education. All too often, adult educators view learning as a process that transpires outside of the embodied, emotionally interconnected, psychically dynamic, and materially grounded realm of engaged and situated human existence. All too often, adult educators view their students as people who must love them and become just like them; as open and unhindered sponges for knowledge the educator most values and esteems; as privileged, oppressive foes or dominated, oppressed allies in need of critical enlightenment.

Thinking about intimacy, especially within the powerful frame afforded by psychoanalytic theory, reveals the fallacy of these views. It helps us understand how, to act ethically, adult educators must gain a deepened sense of our own neediness and vulnerability and of the vulnerability of all students who join us in our pedagogical contexts. In the spirit of generativity, we must strive to offer learning situations within which students (and us as well) can explore the edges of who they are, to soften and yield rigidly held identity contents, and to open themselves to the unfolding processes of existence. It is only in circumstances like these that our students can realize their own capacities for generativity and for supporting others in truly meaningful processes of lifelong learning. It is precisely this kind of educator that is revealed in the story of Freire holding hands. This is the Freire we need to emulate most fully in our field, the Freire of compassion and open dialogue, of trust and gentleness, of commitment and care.

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