

Austere Lives: Marginalised Women Gaining a ‘Voice’ in the Former Durham Coalfields

Jo Forster has undertaken different roles in both urban and rural disadvantaged areas of North East England to provide learning opportunities to those suffering from the long effects of de-industrialisation. She is currently a PhD student in Education, Community and Society at Moray House School of Education. This article is based on research for her thesis, which has been carried out in the former steel and mining communities of County Durham where she was born.

Background

The role of women in former mining communities in County Durham has undergone significant changes since the time of the Miners’ Strike (1984-1985). The miners’ defeat was followed by the closure of the collieries and the redundancies of 50,000 men (Beynon et al, 1991, p.160), an event which radically changed family life as role reversal took place in the home when work disappeared for men. Cockburn (1977, p.179), a decade previously, had recognised that where deindustrialisation occurred ‘capital has actually defined the very shape of the family’. This was certainly the case in mining communities in County Durham.

The demise of the workplace and decline of trade unions also contributed to a breakdown of social and cultural life as it was work in the mines that knitted these communities together. Kinship and solidarity which these communities relied upon was undermined by the Thatcherite ideology of ‘individualism’, of looking after yourself, at the expense of the collective good. People were encouraged to take individual responsibility to seek solutions to problems that had been socially created through economic disorder (Beck, cited in Bauman, 2000, p.50). These communities became places of joblessness and material hardship with large numbers of households dependent on welfare.

The workplaces that replaced the traditional industries offered insecure, short-term jobs that were non-unionized and low paid. Some women were attracted to this work out of economic necessity, and they became the main (if meagre) breadwinners in the home. However, many women did not integrate in to these workplaces for ‘being at home with their children and families and friends is better than being at the neoliberal site of the ‘working poor’ on low waged work’ (Skeggs,2009, p.39).

Initially, one way in which policy facilitated these communities was through funding the local state to provide community engagement models. A vibrant Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) grew out of this funding. In some of these VCS organisations, women-only safe places were created and here women were able to seek solutions to their private problems and to return to learn through community adult education. However, these opportunities were not to last due to deep cuts to the VCS when the Conservative-Liberal Coalition Government came to power in 2010 and announced public sector cuts of £120 million (6.7% GDP) which at the time of writing had risen to £210 billion (10.3% GDP) (T.U.C.2014, p.13). The closing down of VCS women-only spaces that were needed more than ever in times of austerity caused outrage (North East Women’s Network, June 2013p.1). According to O’Hara (2014, p.249) ‘In the North East, the region most hit by cuts and austerity, the impact on voluntary agencies was shattering’.

The women’s VCO where this study took place went into administration with the loss of 1,800 learning places and support services that helped 600 women in 2011-2012. Two workers from this VCO resisted changes and became activists in establishing a new social enterprise that provides a vital community adult education service to marginalised women living in former mining communities in County Durham.

The study

Firstly, this article examines the effects of de-industrialisation on the life experiences of two women who had participated in community adult education, offered through this women’s learning and support centre. Secondly, the study poses the question of whether community adult education has shaped the position, disposition and identity

of the learners and changed their lives for the better. The study uses Hirschman's (1970) framework of 'Exit, Loyalty and Voice' for understanding how communities react in times of economic crisis. 'Exit' and 'loyalty', in his view, were developed to encapsulate individualised responses to the problem of economic recession workers faced in a company or firm. 'Voice' is a collective response as workers attempt to articulate their demands and common interests. The sample focused on in this paper is related to the aspects of 'voice' and 'loyalty', where marginalised women learners are committed to the women's learning and support centre. This provides women- only safe spaces for them to challenge their experiences of patriarchal oppression through community adult education. The findings indicate that 'loyalty' is working through a strong attachment by learners to this learning community where women act as a lifeline to each other. In doing so, their loyalty enables them to reclaim their respectability and a reinvigorated sense of purpose. Through this process their often unheard 'voices' are strengthened as they unite with each other in challenging patriarchal oppression to define who they really are.

Participants and methodology

For this article I have selected two of my research participants to represent the experiences of women from a sample of data collected for my doctoral study. The women, both in their fifties, were born in mining communities that experienced the process of industrial decline. They have participated in community adult education for three to five years. Both have experienced poor mental health, and both have a child with mental health difficulties.

Data was collected through semi-structured narrative-based interviews exploring the life history of each learner. These interviews aimed at understanding the views and experiences (past and present) of how social and economic structures and the culture of de-industrialisation had shaped and determined their life course (Dollard, 1935.p.8).

Data analysis for narratives was conducted through a grounded theory methodology as narratives require a rigorous approach (Crang, cited in Bold, 2012.130). Grounded

theory involves ‘inductive reasoning’ in that it enables us to generate ideas from the data, look for patterns and relationships across the data, and then progress from the data and observation to build theory (not test a hypothesis) (Charmaz, 2006:103).

Theresa’s story

Theresa is 59 and divorced with two grown up children. Her son, who lives with her, has mental health difficulties.

The lack of economic opportunities for men meant that Theresa became the main ‘breadwinner’. She recalls, ‘my husband just picked up jobs when he could’. Theresa, like many women of her generation, came to shoulder multiple roles of responsibility: as a wife, worker and mother of two children. A major life changing event brought significant change into her life. She recalls:

I had a breakdown... I had really lost all confidence. I mean everything was a mess in me life you know I was getting divorced and I was on the sick from work, I then packed me job in and I handed me notice in because I couldn’t cope with work. I had left me marital home and I was on me own and socially isolated and it was probably the worst part of me life really. I was very low and I had no self-esteem and no confidence. I was on tablets and anti-depressants. I was handing a sick note in when I passed the women’s learning centre.

Theresa freed herself from her marriage as part of this life-changing experience and took control of her life with support from the women’s education centre. The centre provided a safe space where she could begin to reflect on her life. Theresa recalls, ‘me dad thought I was stupid for going back into education at that stage in me life’. She dissociated herself from this male dominance by refusing to accept his remarks and proceeded to prove him wrong. She explains the main barrier to her participation ‘was my educational background’. At aged 11 she was segregated from her primary school classmates by the 11-plus that defined children’s ability at a very young age. Theresa

explains: 'That was something that scarred me for life in a way but me family did not have aspirations for me it was always me brothers.... I knew I could do better'.

With the support of committed tutors from the women's centre, Theresa was able to identify her learning needs and began to engage in community-based informal learning for personal and social development. In the company of women at the centre she was able to share her feelings and concerns and review what was happening in her life. Theresa achieved long-awaited qualifications that have enabled her to take a different career path. She recalls her learning journey:

When I first started I did nothing academic I did all interest courses. Aromatherapy, the New Me Course and confidence building courses. Therapeutic courses for a couple of years and when I got my confidence back I did Maths and English at 'O' level at Market College to bring me up to some sort of standard. I continued to study at the college and achieved the Counselling level 2 qualification and then I went up there to do my Certificate in Education so I could be a tutor at the centre.

Theresa has found a different aspect of community life in this centre.

She explains:

It is such a community that had given me so much and so I wanted to support it. I did the 'drop in' service through offering one-to-one mentoring support, listening service as it had enhanced my life. Now I have a job which is satisfying to me as I support other women who have difficulties. I am a tutor and I teach Counselling and Personal Development and I have undertaken volunteer work in the Mental Health Sector.

Theresa's story has been one of loss, but also gain, in a new found freedom that has allowed her to become a loyal and confident learning champion and a role model to

women who have suffered similar mental health difficulties. She claims she has a new self-belief, 'I now know who I am [and] I don't feel inferior at all to anybody'.

Cathy's story

Cathy is 50 and divorced and lives with her two teenage children.

Cathy recollects her home life in a mining village during her formative years and how it has had a strong influence on the rest of her life, especially on her mental health. She recalls:

I did not have a very good relationship with my father he was a drunk ... me mam was like lots of women who were totally dependent on their husbands ...me dad beat me mother up regularly... I was beaten as a child... but my mam killed herself when I was 19... from being about 20 I first went to get help [from mental health services].

Cathy's life has replicated her mother's troubled life of a violent relationship, marital breakdown and mental health difficulties. She explains:

My first boyfriend was very like my father [he was] violent... [he] put me in hospital several times. It was just the norm. I was married [to another man] for 20 years. I had alcoholism [for] about 10 years. My husband did not hit me but he was very emotionally abusive and constantly put me down. When he left me I lost the plot. I have got two children and one of them has Asperger's [syndrome]and it was [a] bad two and a half years so I did seek help [for mental health] then because I lost it.

These circumstances contributed to a 'mental breakdown' and to her becoming a welfare benefit claimant. This position has increased her anxiety, and as she explains they [Job Centre] are always sending letters 'we are going to take it off you... it is in your mind all of the time'.

This crisis caused Cathy to find support through a local women's learning centre. She explains that this was a time when '[I] hated myself and I wanted to love myself, [and] build my confidence that's why [I came]'. She has participated in community adult education at the centre which she describes as a 'capsule' [a safe place] for the last 5 years. Although the centre is a comfort zone, it also offered a place where Cathy could learn how to move from being a victim to a survivor.

Cathy recalls:

Before attending adult education when I was in conversation with anyone I would think that they would see me as inferior to them but since attending adult education I have been educated to know that I am on a level playing field to everyone I come into contact with and I now recognise that I have value and a reason for being here as I am now valuable in other people's lives which I did not feel before.... it's changed my life. When I came in here... I assumed people hated me....5 years later and I have done a hell of a lot of work [courses]... I know people don't automatically hate me anymore.

Cathy is now a volunteer at the women's centre offering a Listening Service to other women with poor mental health. She claims community adult education was a lifeline at a time when she was struggling:

I would have gone under... it has saved my life back then and that's no exaggeration, I believe my children may have ended up in care if not for community adult education... it saves the NHS millions.

However, her anxiety increases as she awaits the arrival of the brown envelope in the post from Job Centre Plus to invite her to an assessment interview regarding her welfare payment. She explains: 'I wish they would say this woman is doing her best here she is doing voluntary, she is doing education... but they don't'.

Analysis

These stories require our understanding of the long term effects of de-industrialisation on women's mental health and the need for a welfare state, not austerity measures, when women are in crisis. They also enhance our understanding of the need to provide women-only safe places for learning in deprived areas. It is in such sites that women can bring their private problems to share with others in times of crisis, and return to learning. In doing so, marginalised women reclaim their respectability through community-based informal adult education.

In the aftermath of economic decline, the patriarchal culture of oppression that was previously masked by a traditional masculine structure of work became more visible. This visibility was often accompanied by domestic violence, drug and alcohol addiction which has been on the rise since austerity measures were implemented in 2010.

The effects for the women in this study impacted on and, in Theresa's case, caused her to leave her family home. These women have lived austere lives in County Durham which offers only a few insecure, low-paid economic opportunities for women, and a life of domesticity. Their low levels of self-esteem come from a culture of no confidence that is part of the negative historical cultural capital endemic in these pre- and post- industrial communities, and is also a consequence of poor education.

Marriage in both cases was not an escape route as the marital home became a place where patriarchal oppression intensified, causing deterioration in the mental health of both women. Without the financial support of welfare benefits they could not have participated in learning opportunities that offered a recovery pathway. In both cases they needed a safe place outside of the home to review their lives. Kinship had been replaced by the Voluntary and Community Sector that provided a different community model whereby women could begin to reclaim back their lives and their respectability.

This new community model was found at the women's learning and support centre that provided women-only safe places where they can share their past destructive experiences with each other and participate in counselling and listening support services and community adult education. In doing so they have the opportunity to turn their lives around from being victims to being survivors, by reclaiming their independence and respectability and, ultimately, their voice.

According to Hill Collins (2000, p.101):

Safe places are prime locations for women to resist the dominant culture's definition of them ...and provide the opportunity for self-definition which is the power to name one's own reality.

Theresa's story reveals that she challenged not only a dominant working-class patriarchal culture of oppression that has caused psychic damage but also poor education which is part of her cultural capital that restricted her life opportunities and left her feeling inferior and demoralised from the age of 11. Little consideration was given in schools to working-class pupils such as Theresa. They were expected to perform with the same degree of confidence as middle-class children and aspire to middle class aspirations. When they did not they were cast aside as having no value. For Theresa this experience marginalized her educationally and economically until she reached the women's centre in her late forties. Community adult education has liberated Theresa from her feelings of low self-esteem.

According to Reay (2009, p.24-26):

this lack of confidence and feelings of inferiority were the consequence of over a 100 years of state schooling that did not value the working class and so today the inferior other resonates in the present.

Cathy's story gives testimony to a life of being subjected to domestic violence, both physical and verbal. This contributed to feelings of inferiority, of being of no value, a hatred of herself and the belief that others also hated her. Initially this was a barrier to

her participation in community learning as she was unable to share her problems with other women and learn alongside them. Five years later she has overcome feelings of worthlessness and now sees herself as '*on a level playing field to everyone*'. This healing process has taken place over many years in a 'safe place' which she describes as a '*capsule*' and sees community adult education as having '*saved my life*'. She supports other women attending the centre, but all this is at risk due to changes in welfare reform that seeks to remove Cathy's financial support.

Community adult education has enabled these women to overcome their feelings of inferiority and be restored to the people they wanted to be. In doing so they have become 'subjects of value' (Tyler, 2013, p.214).

Through a process of 'self- definition, the power to name one's own reality', this has enabled these women to 'journey from victimization to a free mind which enables oppressed women to see life as open to change' (Hill Collins, 2000, p.114). The stories show that it is possible to begin a healing process towards achieving status and respectability that does not require traditional domesticity for women. This emerged through loyalty to the women's centre, and to other women who have experienced oppression. When the traditional role of women disappeared and family life became fragmented they needed to find a new way of becoming respectable. Insecure, precarious employment was not the solution to finding respectability.

By proving that they could learn and provide education, care and emotional support to others a new source of respectability emerged that was different to the traditional role of women in the home. By supporting others, the women in these stories were able to overcome their limiting and negative beliefs about themselves and to begin to see themselves as no longer inferior to others. According to Skeggs (1998, p. 1), 'respectability is usually the concern of those who are not seen to have it...it is something to desire, to prove, and to achieve'. Respectability, in this context, is closely related to 'loyalty' in a specific way. In the framework by Hirschman (1970) 'loyalty' is a reaction that reaffirms an individual sense of dis-empowerment, of not speaking out, and not taking the 'exit' route. In these cases, 'loyalty' to the

community, to the web of relationships that people have grown into and seek to reaffirm in these changed circumstances, involves a genuinely empowering process of transforming identities through benevolent acts of giving and receiving support. This works to challenge the culture of individualism, that is, the culture of capitalism and the sinews of patriarchal oppression that have oppressed the past lives of these women. Through these social acts people achieve a sense of power and control, of acting individually and collectively in constructive ways to restore what Freire (1972, p.20) might call their ‘ontological vocation’ to be fully human.

The women’s learning and support centre has created a safe space for the spiral of decline to be challenged. According to Sennett (1998, p.138) the ‘hostile economic order’, is making people yearn for community life, where they can find emotional support from others. These women have internalised the oppression that they have experienced and have come to this centre for emotional support in trying to understand their situations, so they can decide what action is needed to change their lives. It is only through good practice in community adult education that one finds that one is given time to learn to analyse one’s life and challenge internalised oppressive experiences so that one can begin to live life to its full potential.

References

- Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beynon, H., Hudson, R., Sadler, D. (1991) *A Tale of Two Industries: the contraction of coal and steel in North East England*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Bold, C. (2012) *Using Narrative in Research*. London: Sage.
- Charmaz, K. (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage Publications.
- Cockburn, C (1977) *The Local State: Management of Cities and People*. London: Pluto Press.
- Dollard, J. (1935) *Criteria for the Life History*. New Haven: Yale University Press
- Freire, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Middlesex: Penguin Books
- Hill Collins, P. (2000) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Hirschman, A.O. (1970) *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- North East Women's Network (Report, June 2013) *The Impact of Austerity Measures on Women: A Case Study of the North East of England*.
- O'Hara, M. (2014) *Austerity bites a journey to the sharp end of the cuts in UK*. Bristol: Polity Press.
- Reay, D. (2009) Making Sense of White Working Class Educational Underachievement. In *Who Cares about the White Working Class?* Runnymede Perspectives.
- Sennett, R. (1998) *The Corrosion of Character*. New York: W.W.Norton & Company
- Skeggs, B. (1998) *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*. London: Sage.
- Skeggs, B (2009) 'Haunted by the spectre of judgement: respectability, value and affect in class relations'. In *Who Cares about the White Working Class?* Runnymede Perspectives.
- T.U.C (2014) A Summary of Austerity in the North East and a Case Study of Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council.
- Tyler, I. (2013) *Revolting Subjects*. London: Zed.

