

Personal Reflexivity and Adult Education

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Abstract: Drawing on recent work by Margaret Archer, this paper explores the role personal reflexivity plays in mediating the relationship between human beings and society. Archer's account of four forms of reflexivity – communicative, autonomous, meta reflexive, and fractures – helps clarify the different ways people think about and balance concerns arising from their engagement in natural, practical, and social contexts.

British sociologist, Margaret Archer (2007), asserts that social and cultural transformations that accompany globalization are rapidly undermining traditional or habitual ways humans interact with the world. Increasingly, personal reflexivity is important in shaping how we “make our way through the world” (p. 5). According to Archer, however, while in our everyday lives we easily acknowledge our experience of mulling things over, over the past decades social theorists have paid remarkably little attention to the nature of reflexive thought. “The process denoted by reflexivity,” she observes, “has been underexplored, undertheorised and, above all, undervalued” (p. 1). A vocal minority of adult education theorists (Brookfield, 1987; Mezirow & Associates, 1990), observe that personal reflexivity (and its cognates, critical thinking and critical reflection) plays a particularly powerful role in adult learning. Lingering debates, in the field (Collard and Law, 1989; Tennant, 1993; Pietryksowski, 1996), about the role of critical reflection in mediating the relationship between agency and structure suggest, however, that, to this point, adult education does not possess a convincing account of why reflexivity counts as “one of the most important personal emergent powers” of human beings (Archer, 2003. p. 9). We have yet to tease apart the ways social and cultural structures impinge upon our thought processes and the ways reflexivity contributes to the persistence or transformation of these structures. Thus, Margaret Archer's exploration of reflexivity and her investigations into the ways different modes of reflexivity enable people to mediate between their personal concerns and their objective circumstances is particularly important for adult education.

The Ontology of Critical Realism

In Margaret Archer's view, our ability to learn more about the emergent properties and powers of reflexivity has long been hampered by broadly held assumptions about the nature of reality, and, in particular, about the nature of the relationship between human beings and social and cultural structures. The critical realist philosophy of science articulated largely by Roy Bhaskar (1978; 1979; 1986; 1989), she argues, outlines an ontology (a conception of reality and the nature of being) that is capable of sustaining a particularly robust and satisfying theory of reflexivity.

Against prevailing anti-realist trends in the social sciences, Bhaskar (1978) agrees with the general position of realism that a reality exists independently of our thoughts about it. Unlike prevailing accounts of the nature of reality, Bhaskar suggests that the world is composed, not of sensible objects, but of clusters of what he terms “generative mechanisms” which have the power to produce events (p. 51). Given that there are a plurality of generative mechanisms that variously constrain and enable each other's powers, the actual events that generative mechanisms produce are always fewer than is their potential. As a consequence, he suggests that we

understand reality to be variously comprised of the real (generative mechanisms), the actual (the events these mechanisms produce), and the empirical (the events that we can experience) (p. 56).

In addition, Bhaskar argues that reality is stratified (Collier, 1994, p. 110). The interaction of generative mechanisms in one strata can result in the emergence of new generative mechanisms with their own, distinct and non-reducible generative powers in another. Once a new generative mechanism emerges, it can interact with other generative mechanisms both within and across the varied strata of reality.

This conception of reality as comprised of emergent generative mechanisms that are arranged in strata permits an interesting notion of causality. For the most part, our common sense notions of causality, affirmed and promoted by the 18th century philosopher, David Hume is successionalist. Thus, we think that, when one event regularly follows a second event, the first caused the second. Critical realists hold a very different view. Events are caused by the actions of generative mechanisms whose powers are variously expressed depending on how they are constrained or enabled by a multiplicity of other generative mechanisms. Consequently, Andrew Sayer (2000) relates, “for realists, causation is not understood on the model of regular succession of events.... Explanation depends instead on identifying causal mechanisms and how they work, and discovering if they have been activated and under what conditions” (p. 14).

Importantly, given that we have no direct epistemological access to the generative mechanisms underlying actual events, the explanations we give of these mechanisms are inevitably fallible. As Sayer asserts, “Critical realism accepts ‘epistemic relativism’, that is the view that the world can only be known in terms of available descriptions or discourses” (p. 47). While critical realism denies we can develop positive knowledge that corresponds to the actual nature of the world, it does not agree that all claims we might make about the world are equal. Again, as Sayer insists, critical realism, “rejects ‘judgmental relativism’ – the view that one cannot judge between different discourses and decide that some accounts are better than others” (p. 47). Just because our claims are fallible does not mean that we are without any means to judge them as being true (or at least truer than competing claims). In our dealings with reality – when we bump our shins, misread intensions, misplace our trust, and so on – we are provided with ample means of determining whether our claims about it are valid.

The ontology of critical realism lends itself to a naturalistic explanation of reality, including, significantly, the nature of both human beings and social structures. The powers and properties of human beings, critical realists argue, are natural in that they emerge from but are not reducible to the biological processes that subtend them. Social and cultural structures, too, are natural. Just like with other strata, the emergent properties and powers of cultural and social structures cannot be reduced to the generative mechanisms (including human powers) that subtend them. As Archer (1996; 2000) insists, while human thought and action are essential to the emergence of social and cultural structures, once these structures emerge, they acquire powers and properties that cannot be reduced to these thoughts and actions. The important thing to keep in mind, Archer argues, is that the powers and properties of human beings and social/cultural structures influence but do not determine each other. Just like other aspects of reality, understanding social reality requires us to identify the properties and powers possessed by both people and social/cultural structures (resisting any temptation to conflate one stratum into the other), and to explore the interactions between these strata. Our knowledge about the properties and powers of social structures, like our knowledge about the physical world, is fallible. According to Alex Callinicos, this particular feature of critical realism is extremely important: “In its insistence on the duplicity of the real, its multi-layered structure, and the

constitutive gap between how things appear (the empirical) and how they really are (the real and the actual), critical realism provides a philosophical motivation for precisely the kind of suspicion of appearances necessary for any social critique” (p. 180).

Resisting Conflation

According to Archer (2000; 2003; 2007), to this point, the social sciences (and in this I would include adult education) have failed to sustain a satisfactory theory of personal reflexivity. The underlying problem, in her mind, is that the “flat” ontology presumed by most theorists presses them to conflate (meld together) the distinct emergent powers and properties possessed by human beings with entities on other strata of reality. This is evident, for example, in the tendency of empiricist psychology, sociobiology, behaviorist psychology, neurobiology, etc. (that constitute a vast and largely unquestioned foundation for much adult education theory and practice) to conflate emergent human powers into the biological strata that subtend them. Any substantial notion of personal reflexivity is foreign to this view. At best, human thought is epiphenomenal, an illusory vestige generated as the brain (or, in behaviorism, the responding organism) effects its relations with the environment.

It is also evident in the tendency, on the other side, to conflate human powers into the strata of culture and society that encompass them. In this case, human powers and properties (aside from a vestigial biological substrate) are considered a “gift of society” (Archer, 2000, p. 4). According to perspectives like social constructivism, “we are nothing beyond what society makes us, and it makes us what we are through our joining society’s conversation” (p. 4). In adult education, this latter tendency prevails in many postmodern approaches to adult learning, paradigmatically in social constructivist approaches (for a critique, see Plumb, 2008). This perspective does boast concern for reflexivity but only to the extent that, through reflection, a person comes to realize that their sense of themselves as a person is a manifestation of their position in society. The outcome of personal reflexivity is to dissolve any sense a person might have of their own distinct personhood other than being an artifact of culture (Bagnall, 1999).

It is not only human powers that are lost or at least obscured through conflation, however. The emergent power and properties of social and cultural structures, too, are often occluded by theories that reduce them to being, simply, the aggregate effects of human actions. In this broadly “liberal” or “Enlightenment” view, because humans ultimately produce society, they are in no way actually constrained by its forms (they are free to change it how they wish). In adult education, this view is fully present in the prevailing view of the learner as an autonomous and self-directing agent unencumbered in his or her dealings with the world. A key requirement for “Modernity’s Man” (Archer’s tag for this conception of the person) to be most successful, is to maximize their authentic and inborn capacities for formulating accurate conceptions of the world as a basis for effective action (p. 3).

The ultimate consequence of this latter conflationary view is that it inflates and distorts human powers far beyond their actual bounds and, at the same time, reifies social structures as an inevitable and natural consequence of historical human interactions. We are not, in fact, unconstrained by social and cultural structures, nor are they natural phenomenon outside of the influence of human thought and action. Moreover, given that social and cultural structures exist independently of our thoughts about them, our knowledge about what they entail for us is necessarily fallible. Even so, *this does not suggest that, in the final instance, we are determined by our circumstances*. Much more accurately, we are variously *constrained and enabled* by the natural and social worlds.

In Archer's view, all of these different conflationary views have the same ultimate effect: they obscure and depreciate important and distinct powers and properties possessed by human beings to shape both their biological and sociocultural contexts. The main thing a critical realist view of human beings in the world affords us then is the irreducibility of structure and agency to one another.

Personal Reflexivity and the Internal Conversation

So what does Archer propose to be these "*sui generis* properties and powers" that emerge in humans as a consequence of their embodied interactions with the world? In addition to fundamental capacities for consciousness and a sense of selfhood that emerges as part of our practical dwelling in the world (Plumb, 2008), Archer (2003) identifies our capacity for "internal conversation" as the point of contact between our internal powers of reflexivity and the powers possessed by the external world. The very fact, she insists, that we can reflect on our external reality in relation to our personal concerns, and, given that external social influences are not insulated from our internal reflexivity, the internal conversation becomes an important means through which human beings can both sustain or transform their natural and social contexts.

To unpack what Archer means by the "internal conversation" it is necessary to come to grips with a couple of essential qualifications. First, as part of our internal deliberations, Archer suggests, we constantly work to address and balance concerns that reflect different aspects of our engagement with the world – our physical, practical, and social encounters – one against the other. We do not do this in a vacuum, however. By fate of birth, we are thrown in particular ways into a world that variously constrains and enables us. At the same time as we deliberate the relative balance between our varied concerns, we must also confront and negotiate the different ways the world impinges upon us. The final results of this engagement Archer (2003) characterizes as our unique "*modus vivendi*" (p. 149).

Second, while Archer recognizes the important contribution of language to our internal conversation, we do not think just with words. In fact, the conversations we have with ourselves are quite different from the conversations we have with others. Perhaps most crucially are the ways we utilize a vast range of tools in our thinking that are absent in our conversations with others, like images, symbols, personal and public codes, and so on. She approvingly quotes Charles Saunders Peirce's insight "that the more multi-media 'booty' is incorporated from the outer world, the richer the life of the mind becomes" (Archer, 2007, p. 76).

Archer identifies some other distinctive features of the internal conversation: 1) our internal conversations are conducted in silence and, as such, are private: no one can know for certain what we are thinking except ourselves (p. 73); 2) our internal conversations can be compact and elliptic, moving at lightning speed, or, like an accordion, expansive and deliberate, dwelling incessantly on a single pressing point of concern (p. 75); 3) given our personal history, our internal conversations develop a personal, even idiosyncratic character that contributes much to our uniqueness; and 4) because our internal conversations focus on our own concerns and contexts, depending on the extent to which we share the same contexts with other people, communicating the results of our musings with other people may be more or less difficult. This is important, Archer insists, because it shapes the extent to which our internal conversations are connected with our external conversations with other people. When our contexts are continuous with those of others, our internal conversations dovetail more neatly with our external conversations than when our contexts diverge. This feature contributes much to the various ways different people conduct their internal conversations.

Modes of Personal Reflexivity

In her most recent work, Archer (2003; 2007) has engaged in empirical explorations of the modes of personal reflexivity that prevail in contemporary times. Consistent with the tenets of critical realism, she admits that the four modes she now distinguishes may not fully capture the full range of possible ways people engage in their internal conversations. Her empirical investigations may, in fact, only tap a few of the actual ways people talk to themselves about their concerns. As well, it may also be that, under different circumstances, the real power of personal reflexivity (like all generative mechanisms) might support other actual modes.

With these caveats in mind, Archer identifies four principle modes of personal reflexivity: communicative reflexivity, autonomous reflexivity, meta reflexivity, and fractured reflexivity. Communicative reflexivity is a mode often utilized by people in contexts of strong contextual continuity (static or unchanging social contexts). The internal conversations of communicative reflexives are strongly intertwined with their external conversations with others to the point that they, “require completion and confirmation by others before resulting in courses of action” (Archer 2003, p. 93). For good or for ill, communicative reflexivity tends to reproduce static social and cultural structures.

Autonomous reflexivity is a mode more commonly encountered in contexts in which there is discontinuity where people increasingly turn to relying upon their own internal resources to make their way in the world. In this case, rather than requiring external conversations to confirm actions, autonomous reflexives can think through practical strategies and embark on independent courses of action to address their own concerns. Autonomous reflexivity tends to enhance the disconnection already experienced by people in discontinuous contexts. Archer suggests that, very often, this disconnection makes it easier for autonomous reflexives to avoid or overcome constraints or to seeking or taking advantage of enablements that would not be pursued by communicative reflexives. As a result, autonomous reflexives often achieve social mobility. Collectively, their actions tend to further aggravate contextual discontinuities.

Meta reflexivity is another mode that transpires in contexts that are discontinuous. The difference in this case is that, rather than focusing on thinking through autonomous courses of action, meta reflexives “are critically reflexive about their own internal conversations and critical about effective action in society” (Archer, 2003, p. 93). Meta reflexives also can experience increased disconnection from their contexts, in this case, because they are increasingly skeptical of and uncommitted to taken-for-granted cultural and social structures. When they aggregate, meta reflexives can generate great impetus for social and cultural change (although, very often, they require the participation of more strategically oriented autonomous reflexives to orchestrate effective action).

In the case of fractured reflexivity, contextual discontinuity results in an abandonment of the internal conversation as a power that is causally efficacious for addressing personal concerns. While people still think about issues, in this case, their thinking simply further exacerbates the sense that reflecting on things will not make a difference. This mode, increasingly common in today’s churning social and cultural contexts, provides few options and little impetus for personal transformation or social change.

Implications for Adult Education

The full implications of Archer’s defense of personal reflexivity for adult education stand before us as a rich field of inquiry. First, her work reveals the profound advantages of adopting the

ontology of critical realism as a foundation for the further theoretical development of our field. Critical realism can help prevent us from conflating entities (like human beings and social structures) that need to be held apart in order to understand the role of adult learning in mediating their interactions. Second, her defense of personal reflexivity as a causally efficacious power of human beings provides strong support for the idea that a goal of adult education should be to support the development of our capacities to think critically about our world. Third, her characterization of personal reflexivity as an internal conversation that is well-endowed with flexible thinking tools, that is intensely private and unique, that is deeply contextual, and that is capable of being both blisteringly fast or ploddingly thorough, challenges us to think again about the ways we have tended in recent years to privilege external dialogue in our field at the expense of recognizing and helping people develop their solitary capacities to think deeply and well about their world and their place in it. Fourth, her recent description of four different modes of reflexivity raises questions about whether we have mistakenly assumed in adult education that people think in rather similar ways when, in fact, they think very differently depending on the extent they experience continuity in their contexts. Fifth, Archer's four modes provide a helpful way to assess our response in adult education to recent social transformations. Growing trends towards contextual discontinuity that are resulting from rapid social and cultural transformations are creating great pressure for people to adopt autonomous and meta reflexive modes to continue to make their way in the world. Archer challenges us to think hard about we might help prevent people from adopting the desparate alternative of fractured reflexivity which entails abandoning thinking as a viable way of addressing personal concerns.

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