European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults, Vol.4, No.1, 2013, pp. 33-47

A theory in progress?

Issues in transformative learning theory

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Abstract

The scholarship about transformative learning theory has continued to grow exponentially, although much of the research is redundant with a deterministic emphasis while overlooking the need for more in-depth theoretical analysis. Explanations for this oversight are numerous, including a failure to ground research in primary sources, an over-reliance on literature reviews of transformative learning, lack of critique of original research; marginal engagement in positivist and critical research paradigms, and a lack of involvement in transformative learning by European adult education scholars. In order to stimulate theoretical development, this paper discusses five specific issues that will hopefully provoke further discussion and research. They include the role of experience, empathy, the desire to change, the theory's inherently positive orientation, and the need for research involving positivist and critical approaches.

Keywords: transformative learning; empathy; experience; research designs; methodology

Transformative learning theory first emerged on the academic landscape over 35 years ago. Early influences included the work of Kuhn's (1962) on paradigms, Freire's (1970) conscientization and Habermas's (1971, 1984) domains of learning (Kitchenham, 2008) followed by much theoretical critique (e.g., Clark & Wilson, 1991; Collard & Law, 1989; Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton, 2006; Hart, 1990; Merriam, 2004; Newman, 1994, 2012; Tennant, 1993). In addition, research about the theory has continued to grow exponentially. A recent search of the term on the ProQuest Database (a leading educational database in North America) for publications that included transformative learning have doubled every five years over the last fifteen years. In fact, over the last

ISSN 2000-7426

DOI 10.3384/rela.2000-7426.rela5000
www.rela.ep.liu.se

five years 119 articles used the term in the title and over 1300 referred to the theory in the text of the article. Based on this cursory search it would seem logical that the level of theoretical analysis would be correspondingly significant and many of the most fundamental questions concerning transformative learning would have been addressed or be presently under investigation. Although transformative learning was optimistically called a "theory in progress" in 2000 (Mezirow & Associates, 2000), recent discussions note that 'much of the research is redundant, with a strong deterministic emphasis of capturing transformative learning experiences and replicating transformative learning in various settings, while overlooking the need for more in-depth theoretical analysis' (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 12). The optimism for this theory appears to be growing thin and researchers seem to be stuck on a treadmill, repeating the same research over and over again, and making less than satisfactory theoretical progress (Taylor & Snyder, 2012). New approaches to the theory are not adequately integrated with previous approaches (as would be implied by a "theory in progress") (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). We have come to the point where scholars are questioning whether transformative learning is a useful concept at all (Newman, 2012). This is not to say there hasn't been some effort to analyze transformative learning theory in greater depth (e.g., Newman, 2012; van Woerkom, 2010) but it has been on the margins and has not led to an opportunity to enhance the theory.

Explanations for this oversight are numerous, including a failure to ground research in primary sources (Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow & Associates, 2000) and paying attention to critiques of transformative learning theory (as previously mentioned). This is particularly problematic for research outside the field of adult education involving transformative learning that has overlooked or is not aware of these foundational sources. In addition, there has been an over-reliance on literature reviews of transformative learning by scholars with little effort to critique original research both in establishing a rationale for a study and analyzing it in relationship to new findings. Methodological concerns can be raised as well and are discussed later in this article, such that most research about transformative learning is framed in interpretive research designs, overlooking the advances that could be made through the engagement of positivist and critical research paradigms.

Furthermore, most research on transformative learning has taken place among North American scholars despite its significant theoretical grounding in Habermas's work on critical theory and more specifically the theory's close connection to his three domains of learning (instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory). This also might explain the over emphasis of research about individual transformation and the lack of significant attention concerning the relationship of positionality and non-western ways of learning and transformative learning (e.g., English & Irving, 2012; Johnson-Bailey, 2012; Ntseane, 2012; Mejiuni, 2012).

Recently Kokkos (2012) conducted a review exploring the degree to which European adult educators incorporate transformative learning as a framework in the development of their research. He concluded:

> that the theory of transformative learning does not have concrete roots in the conceptual formation of the European adult educators … most [work] … mainly build on European theoretical paradigms and the authors do not see the need to place their work within the relatively new theory of transformative learning theory. (Kokkos, 2012, p. 297)

This is unfortunate; particularly considering that European adult educators' rich scholarship focuses on the social and critical dimensions of adult learning (Bourdieu,

Foucault, Illeris, Mayo), and would have much to offer the study of transformative learning theory.

In response to some of these concerns, stagnation and lack of theoretical development in transformative learning theory we examine five specific issues that will hopefully provoke further discussion and research. Each of these issues emerges out of conference discussions, research studies, and earlier critiques that have not been well addressed in the literature so far. Rather than focusing on familiar themes such as the importance of critical reflection or the issue of social change in relation to transformative learning we chose issues that we felt were provocative—issues that have the potential to renew the energy that the field currently needs.

Three of the issues we selected focus on central constructs within transformative learning—constructs that are ever present but rarely deconstructed or explored in depth. These are experience, empathy, and desire to change. We all write about "making meaning out of experience", and use the concept of experience as the foundation for understanding transformative learning, but rarely do we explore what it is that we mean by experience. Similarly, empathy seems to be a necessary component of fostering transformative learning, but again, it has not been examined in depth. Desire to change refers to that step that individuals must take to move from reflection to transformation.

The fourth issue focuses on a question that is often raised about transformation concerning its inherently positive orientation and outcome. Why is that the case and how is it significant to transformative learning theory? The fifth issue we chose to address is methodological and we call into question the over reliance on an interpretive research approach to transformative learning and the need for research involving positivist and critical approaches. We hope that by publishing this article in an international adult education journal that it is read predominantly by our European colleagues, we might encourage them to bring their expertise to the table around a topic that we believe is significant to the study of adult learning.

Experience

A concept that is most central to transformative learning and adult learning in general is experience. It is experience, particularly prior experience (that happened in one's past), that is the primary medium of a transformation, and it is the revision of the meaning of experience that is the essence of learning. 'Learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action' (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162). It is also experience that forms the basis for habitual expectations (ideologies, beliefs, values), creating the lens from which learners perceive, interpret and make meaning of their world (Mezirow, 1991). As the core substance of a transformation, in concert with dialogue (self and with others) and self-reflection, experience, 'constitutes a starting point for discourse leading to critical examination of normative assumptions underpinning the learner's … value judgments or normative expectations' (Mezirow, 2000, p. 31). Despite the centrality of experience to transformative learning theory, as a construct it is rarely defined or critically examined in research about transformative learning. Questions are raised, such as: What constitutes an experience (which should lend insight into what is not an experience)? What gives meaning to an experience? What distinguishes a transformative experience from other types of experiences?

Turning to scholars who have grappled with this construct, Dewey (1981), for example, used experience 'to designate, in a summary fashion, all that is distinctly

human' (p. 331). Similarly, Lindeman (1961, p. 7) referred to 'experience as adult learner's living textbook.' Essentially experience is everything that has happened to a learner between birth and death. Jarvis (2005) more specifically defines experience as 'the process of creating an understanding of or perception of a situation, which often appears to be a direct participation in an event,' and 'the accumulation of previous experiences, both conscious and unconscious, and stored in the mind' (p. 72). However, MacKeracher (2012) sees a need to distinguish experiences 'that our minds have made sense of and given meaning to from those that languish unattended and senseless in our unconscious mind …. waiting for my further attention' (p. 343). She further identifies two types of experiences: those that individuals experience directly (for example, an automobile accident) and those imposed through cultural and social heritage (for example, hearing about the Depression from our parents). Fenwick offers a more encompassing perspective where 'experience embraces the reflective as well as kinesthetic activity, conscious and unconscious dynamic, and all manner of interactions among subjects, texts, and contexts' (Fenwick, 2000, p. 244-245). These definitions as well as Mezirow's conception of experience seem to imply that what is an experience, and what gives meaning to an experience, resides in the individual, similar to Dewey's (1981) lament when he wrote: 'in the sense of the psychological … which is intrinsically psychical, mental, [and] private' (p. 362).

This psychological orientation is also the basis of much of the research about transformative learning theory (Taylor, 1997, 2007). It is reflected in the exploration of significant prior experiences, the impact of more immediate experiences (individual and group) created in the classroom designed to foster transformative learning, and the degree of experience and its relationship to transformative learning. This approach of analyzing experience as an individual endeavor raises a number of concerns about understanding experience as a construct. One, it assumes that experience can be interpreted by an individual unproblematically, overlooking the non-unitary and fragmented nature of the self and that individuals can hold both multiple and contradictory perspectives of an experience simultaneously (Kilgore & Bloom, 2002; Merriam & Kim, 2012). Second, through an over-reliance on retrospective interviews, research on transformative learning has attempted to lift "experience" from the individual in totality, frozen in time and space stripped of context (both the original context where the experience was generated and the context where the experience is being recalled) which as argued by some includes the very mediating structures (cultural, historical, social) that give meaning to that experience (Clark & Wilson, 1991). A good example of the impact of context, past and present, is found in a series of longitudinal studies of how HIV-positive adults make meaning of their lives (Courtenay, Merriam & Reeves, 1998; Courtenay, Merriam, Reeves & Baumgartner, 2000; Baumgartner, 2002). The challenge facing these studies involving HIV positive participants, who over time, transformed their view of themselves (e.g. coming to terms with the illness, developing confidence, helping the others), is how to account for the change in society over the same period (greater tolerance towards HIV positive individuals, improvement in medical treatment) and how this contributed the interpretation of experience—transformation (Taylor, 2007).

Not only is the interpretation of an experience mediated by context, but also the personal and historical context is significant to the evolution and outcome of a transformative experience. For example, in a recent study, Nohl (2009) identified the importance of "social recognition"—the recognition of acknowledgement and appreciation as critical for transformative learning to take place. This study raises the question and helps better define what is a "transformative experience", such that: Can

any experience be a transformative experience unless it is recognized by others, both by acknowledgement and/or change in behavior in response to the individual's transformation? In other words, can a transformative experience occur without the recognition of others?

For future research on transformative experiences, it is imperative that researchers recognize the dialectical nature of experience and context—it is a reciprocal process of the sociocultural and historical setting, others (social recognition, relationships) and the personal interpretation of change. This means that when exploring transformative experiences, it needs to be understood in the context (exploring mediating factors) in which it unfolded originally, and how context in which the experience is being recalled shapes the telling of the experience. In summary, experience is described in some interesting ways that can help us focus research and theory development:

- Past experience that shapes who we are and our meaning perspectives and habits of mind
- Cultural experience and/or social/historical experience that may be unarticulated but still shapes the meaning of perspectives
- Contextual experience, related to organizations, workplace, and the nature of a job
- Discrepant experiences that contradict our past and cultural experiences that lead to reflection

Empathy

Historically, three constructs have been seen as central to transformative learning theory, critical reflection, dialogue, and experience (Mezirow, 1991). Learners' experience, as previously discussed, is seen as socially constructed, as constituting the starting point for dialogue, as the essential medium through which a transformation is promoted and developed, and as leading to critical reflection where learners question 'the integrity of deeply held assumptions and beliefs based on prior experience' (Taylor, 2009, p. 7). Missing in this tripartite of core components of transformative learning theory is "empathy" which typically is seen as the ability to 'subjectively experience and share in another psychological state or intrinsic feelings' (Morse, Anderson, Bottoroff, Yonge, O'Brien, Solberg & McIlveen, 1992, p. 274). As a construct, empathy has been mentioned in the literature as significant to transformative learning, although it is rarely defined or discussed in much depth, particularly in its relationship to the central constructs of transformative learning (Gum, Greenhill & Dix, 2011; Stevens-Long, Schapiro & McClintock, 2012; Taylor, 2007, 1997; Willis, 2012). An example of how empathy is generally referred to is seen in an article by Mezirow where he embeds the term in a list of other facets important to transformative learning. Here he discusses its significance when participating in critical-dialectical discourse of 'having an open mind, learning to listen empathetically, "bracketing" prejudgment, and seeking common ground' (Mezirow, 2003, p. 60).

Helping raise the import of empathy has been the recognition of the significance of emotions to transformative learning (Stevens-Long, Schapiro & McClintock, 2012; van Woerkom, 2008, 2010), particularly in relationship to critical reflection. However, despite this foregrounding of emotions, scholars have overlooked the role empathy plays in engaging the emotive nature of transformative learning. It is empathy that: provides the learner with the ability to identify with the perspectives of others; lessens

the likelihood of prejudgment; increases the opportunity for identifying shared understanding; and facilitates critical reflection through the emotive valence of assumptions. It is likely that a major outcome of a perspective transformation involves an increase in empathy towards others (Gravett, 2004; MacLeod, Parkin, Pullon & Robertson, 2003). To better understand the significance of empathy in relationships requires exploring empathy in more depth and recognizing its relationship to the growing research and theoretical discussion on the role of emotions and its relationships to fostering transformative learning.

Empathy has its origin in the German term 'Einflung' which means 'feeling within' and is associated with two Greek roots *em* and *pathos* (feeling into) (Mercer & Reynolds, 2002, p. S9). However, the term has evolved beyond its narrow and particularistic nature of experiencing the feelings of others, to a much more complex construct. A discipline that has given considerable attention to empathy is the field of nursing, where some scholars see it as an inherent human quality encompassing additional components, beyond just the emotive, including, moral, cognitive, and behavioral aspects (Kunyk & Olson, 2001; Morse et al., 1992). Building on the humanistic work of Rogers (1962) and others, empathy is seen as motivated by an "internal altruistic force" based on an unconditional acceptance of others, 'a belief in the universality of the humans needs and sense of obligation to assist others' (Rogers, 1962, p. 274). Cognitively, empathy is an intellectual ability used to comprehend another's perspective, mental state (Bailey, Henry & von Hippel, 2008), inclusive of 'reasoning, analyzing, and critical thinking about another individual's behavior' (Morse et al., 1992, p. 275). Behaviorally, empathy is seen as the ability to communicate with others, both verbally and nonverbally, demonstrating concern and understanding. This more comprehensive understanding of empathy provides the basis for demonstrating its inherent relationship to emotions and transformative learning theory. As previously discussed, emotions are significant to learning; they focus attention and provide guidance and motivation for action. Emotions also are inherently linked to critical reflection, because 'purely objective reasoning cannot determine what to notice, what to attend to, and what to inquire about' (van Woerkom, 2010, p. 248). However, despite the significance of emotions, they require self-awareness and management by the learner, to make the most of them in the process of learning. It is in the context of dialogue, critical reflection, and experience that the role of empathy comes to life. It is empathy that provides the motivation (altruistic interest) to "listen" to others; the means to better understand the perspective of another, an awareness of their feelings and understanding of their mental state, and the ability to accurately demonstrate that understanding.

Research is needed to better understand how empathy fosters transformative learning, such as by teachers who engage in the practice of transformative learning in their classroom. It means asking: Are emphatic teachers more effective at fostering transformative learning and if so how? What is the relationship between critical reflection and empathy in transformative learning? Does transformation lead to greater empathy?

Inherently good transformation

Surprisingly, little is written in the transformative learning literature about either the inherent goodness of the outcomes of transformative learning or the often-painful process of moving toward those outcomes. In analyzing Freire's (1970) writing,

Baptiste (2008) questions Freire's notion that sharing is always ethically superior to coercion, and the idea that freedom is an 'unqualified good' (Baptiste, 2008, p. 10). Baptiste goes on to say that this concept of the unqualified goodness of freedom is based on two assumptions: 'that voluntarily chosen paths are never harmful, and that the benefits derived from voluntarily chosen paths always outweigh the injuries inflicted by more coercive alternatives' (Baptiste, 2008, p. 10) and that neither assumption is valid. In other words, Baptiste is critically questioning what he calls the "romantic notion" of freedom from constraints, a notion which is a premise of transformative learning theory.

Naughton and Schied (2010, 2012) also call into question the inherently good nature of transformative learning. They are interested in 'learning trajectories which frequently lie outside of what is right, good and beautiful but are nonetheless animated by new insights and negotiation of one's own purposes, values, beliefs, feelings, dispositions and judgments' (Naughton & Shied, 2010, p. 338). They challenge the discourse on transformative learning theory—whether as a process or an outcome—that delimits transformation to a direction of positive growth.

Critical questioning is a central component in transformative learning theory, but this process is not usually turned onto the theory itself. There are negative components to the theory (for example, emotional upheaval, shame, and guilt), but the outcome is always "good"—more open, more permeable, better justified (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). A closer look at the foundations of transformative learning theory sheds some light on this.

Transformative learning theory is founded on both humanist and constructivist assumptions. From a psychological perspective, humanism presupposes that human nature is intrinsically good and that humans are free and autonomous beings. The emphasis is on the self; the self has the potential for growth, development, and self-actualization, which, in turn contributes to the good of humanity in general (Merriam & Brocket, 1997). Constructivism comes from the work of Piaget (1952), Dewey (1938) and others. In adult education, Candy's (1991) landmark work on self-directed learning is written from a constructivist perspective. Generally, constructivism describes learning as a process of creating meaning from experience; however, there are a variety of strands that make up this broad perspective, including a distinction between individual construction of meaning and social construction of meaning. The former focuses on learners developing perspectives that help them adapt to and understand experience; the latter is based on dialogue from which people learn the culturally shared ways of understanding the world (Vygotsky, 1978). Both humanism and constructivism reflect Western and particularly North American values and beliefs—anyone can achieve anything, anyone can and should have the opportunity for freedom and happiness, if only they work hard enough to overcome all obstacles.

In transformative learning theory, we can see how the humanist and constructivist perspectives have led to the perpetuation of the "inherently good" notion. Mezirow writes:

> Transformative learning is learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change. Such frames of reference are better than others because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (Mezirow, 2003, pp. 58-59)

By definition, then, transformative learning is seen to be good. Although this definition may be culturally bound, most agree that being "open" and "better justified" (for

example) are good things to be. In some cultures, this is not the case; but even so, people from "closed" cultures seem to work toward openness in some way. It raises the question—is openness a universal "good"?

Before we go on, we need to differentiate between the outcomes of transformative learning and the process of transformative learning (Cranton, Stuckey & Taylor, 2012). The outcomes of transformative learning are listed in Mezirow's definition; most theorists do not argue with these outcomes, though they do see that there are different ways of getting to them. In the first comprehensive description of transformative learning theory the central process of transformative learning was the uncovering of distorted assumptions—assumptions about the reasoning process, about the nature and use of knowledge, about social norms and the way we use language, about psychological premises that cause us pain (Mezirow, 1991). The phases of transformation involve pain, discontent, guilt and shame. The event or events that precipitate transformative learning are often traumatic. Cranton, Stuckey and Taylor (2012) found that among the most common life-changing events were: death of a loved one or loved ones, life threatening illness (self or loved one), divorce or separation, loss of a job, and living outside one's country or culture. So, the outcomes of transformative learning are described in positive terms, and the path for getting there can be painful.

Theorists working with transformative learning often critically question the strategies used to foster transformative learning and the ethics of asking learners to examine their assumptions (e.g., Ettling, 2012). In his initial presentation of the theory, Mezirow (1991) also raises this ethical dilemma. Some theorists (e.g., Brookfield, 2000; Newman, 2012) question the validity of transformative learning itself. Brookfield argues that the phrase is overused to the point of having no meaning, and Newman says that fostering transformative learning is no more than "good teaching". But none of these points of view examine the premise that transformative learning is inherently good. Since transformative learning is about examining the premises that underlie our thinking and behavior, it seems paradoxical that transformative learning theorists do not turn that critical eye onto their own work. Perhaps it is time that we engage in a discussion of that nature.

Desire to change

The assumption is generally made that individuals cannot be forced to transform, but rather that people need to be willing and able to engage in activities that have the potential to lead them to shifts in perspectives. Mezirow (2012) is careful to distinguish between indoctrination, for example, and transformative learning. Those who write about ethical issues in transformative learning nearly always mention the care that a practitioner must take in helping learners question their values and beliefs (Ettling, 2006). Cultural suicide (Brookfield, 1995) can result from people moving away from their communities and cultures through transformative learning. We see examples of this in the film, *Educating Rita* and the novel, *Ella Price's Journal* (Byrant, 1972), along with the conceptual literature on transformative learning.

The idea that there needs to be a desire to learn or a willingness to learn raises several interesting issues for theory, practice, and research related to transformative learning. Although the assumption is generally made that transformative learning is voluntary and individuals need to be open and willing to engage in the process, this is not clearly addressed in the theoretical descriptions of transformative learning. Mezirow (2012) says that the goal of adult education is to 'help adults realize their potential for

becoming more liberated, socially responsible and autonomous learners' (p. 92) and that adult educators 'actively strive to extend and equalize the opportunities for them to do so' (p. 92). Adult educators are not neutral or value-free; they are activists who work toward freer participation in discourse and democracy. Yet, they can only set up situations in which the potential for transformative learning exists and, it seems, hope for the best. This is an issue to which theorists should pay attention.

Surprisingly, this is an area that has been rarely included in the empirical research on transformative learning. Although some researchers concern themselves with "readiness to learn" and the stages of readiness literature, especially in the research coming from health professional education, this is a more mechanical, staged, and linear process than is the concept of "desire to change". In a recent study, Hoggan and Cranton (in press) studied the role of fiction in promoting transformative learning in higher education settings. Participants were 131 undergraduate and graduate students from two universities in the United States. Participants' written reflections were collected following a learning activity in which they read a short story that exposed them to alternative perspectives and discussed their reactions. Fifty-five of the participants experienced a "desire to change" following this activity (this was one of five major themes in the results). Considerable research has examined the process of engaging in transformative learning, but little is known about what brings learners to the "edge" of the learning, or if they need to be already at that edge before learning will occur.

Those writing about teaching for transformation, or the practice of engaging learners in transformative experiences also tend to neglect this beginning stage of the process. In Mezirow and Taylor's (2009) edited handbook on transformative learning in practice, there is an admirable collection of practices in a variety of contexts (for example, higher education, the workplace, online courses, adult basic education) using a variety of strategies (for example, arts-based activities, mentoring, dialogic teaching, storytelling, and collaborative inquiry), but again, there is little mention about what comes just before the engagement begins. Weimer (2012) asks some important questions about transformative learning in practice, for example: 'Can learning experiences be designed so that transformative learning happens more regularly? What sequence of activities best transforms dependent learners into independent learners?' (p. 439). These are the kinds of things that all practitioners would like to know, along with the more fundamental question of what brings learners to a position where they are open to engagement in such learning experiences and activities.

Motivation is a construct that appears to have the potential to contribute to an understanding of these issues. It is a broad hypothetical concept – invented to explain a wide variety of behaviors including persistence, retention, and a readiness or desire for learning (Wlodkowski, 2005). It can be extrinsic (when people engage in an activity for an external reward such as a grade or a salary increase) or intrinsic (when the behavior itself is satisfying). However, it is the latter we are interested in here, and the explanation is not only not very convincing, but it does not seem to address the question of what leads people to the desire to change. Perhaps it is Habermas's (1971) concept of emancipatory human interests (one of three basic human interests) that is more relevant. Early on, Mezirow (1981) emphasized that emancipatory interests are those that lead people to want to become free from forces that limit their options and their control over their lives, or, in other words, gaining freedom from self-imposed constraints through ideology critique. That is, if we follow Habermas's (1971) thinking, perhaps it is a fundamental human characteristic to want to be free from constraints.

Methodology

A final issue of transformative learning theory concerns its stagnation and lack of theoretical progression. As previously discussed in the introduction, the theory hascurled into itself—not evolving due to a lack of ongoing theoretical analysis. This stagnation is the result of several phenomenon: a confusion about research paradigms, an overreliance on a research methodology in which participants are interviewed retrospectively and a thematic inductive analysis is conducted, the misinterpretation of kinds of data as research paradigms, the reliance on secondary sources and the subsequent narrowing of the field, and, at the same time, the expansion of theory into a number of directions with little attention being paid to how the expansion contributes to previous works.

The typical methodology in research on transformative learning falls into the basic interpretive methodology; that is, the researcher interviews a small number of individuals in a specific context or related to a specific issue (retrospectively), does a thematic analysis of the interview data, and reports on four or five themes that appear in the data. This is fine, of course, and it has contributed to our understanding of the process of transformative learning, but it has come to a point where we are no longer learning anything new. Yet, study after study follows this model. There are no (or few) longitudinal studies, studies done in the time when the transformative learning occurs, studies that are in the positivistic paradigm, or, perhaps most importantly, studies that are in the critical paradigm (for example, participatory action research).

Looking at the nature of research paradigms is helpful in understanding what has happened here. Empiricism is based on observations and experimentation; with the assumption being made that human behavior can be viewed and described objectively (Glesne, 2011). When theorists began to realize that the application of objective scientific methods was not leading to the correction of social ills, transformative learning was in its formative years. In the interpretive paradigm, the purpose of research is to understand human behavior from the perspective of individuals. Reality is not objective, but rather it is subjective; reality is socially constructed (Glesne, 2011). As is now the case in transformative learning research, data is usually qualitative—based on interviews, observations, or stories.

The critical paradigm in educational research is more recent. As is the case with the interpretive paradigm, the critical paradigm was a reaction to positivism. In the interpretive paradigm, researchers ask, “what is”, but in the critical paradigm, researchers ask, “what could or should be”. Critical researchers challenge the status quo, question social norms, and look for ways to improve practice through action and the involvement of those people who are affected by the situation being investigated (Merriam & Simpson, 2000).

As can be seen in the discussion of these three paradigms, subjectivity and objectivity are central in understanding different approaches to research. The positivist paradigm assumes that objectivity is possible and uses methods based on that assumption. The interpretive paradigm assumes that knowledge is socially constructed and, therefore, subjective. The critical paradigm also assumes subjective knowledge, but it takes this one step further to assume that participants are co-researchers. That is, they not only construct knowledge but they engage in the understanding of others’ knowledge construction.

There is an unfortunate tendency in transformative learning research (and adult education research in general) to confuse kinds of data with research paradigms. Qualitative and quantitative data do not describe a paradigm; they describe a kind of

data. Paradigms are worldviews, or least broad perspectives on the meaning of research, including the assumptions underlying the research, as outlined above. Generally, quantitative data is associated with the positivistic research paradigm, but not always, and generally qualitative research is associated with the interpretive paradigm, but not always. The critical paradigm often includes a variety of kinds of data.

Transformative learning research no longer transforms itself. A few scholars in the field have conducted reviews of the literature on transformative learning theory (e.g., Taylor & Snyder, 2012) or have written about transformative learning in the context of a general review of learning in adult education (e.g., Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Other researchers then utilize these reviews as a way of setting up their own research, rather than consulting the primary sources. One example of this is the way that Mezirow has been consistently critiqued for not paying any attention to social context in the development of his theory. It takes only a quick reading of Mezirow's (1975, 1978) original report to see that he pays close attention to the social context, including the feminist movement at the time. Mezirow also clearly states that he is an educator, not a politician or a social change agent.

The problem with this is that an elite few scholars have the power of determining the future of the field, if it is only secondary sources that new researchers consult. This sets boundaries around the study of transformative learning that are not only unhelpful, but are strangling the progress of the theory.

Summary

We selected five somewhat neglected but provocative issues related to transformative learning theory development and research to discuss. In order to rejuvenate the field of transformative learning, rather than simply observe its demise, we encourage scholars to think in new ways about the directions we can move in. We asked: What is the nature of experience? How does experience unfold in the context of transformative learning? How can we describe people's experiences? How can we foster new experiences that have the potential to lead to transformative learning?

Similarly, empathy, the ability to subjectively experience and share in another person's psychological state or intrinsic feelings, surely is a key to fostering transformative learning that has been neglected. It means asking: How do educators establish empathic relationships with learners? How do learners see the role of empathy (from educators, but perhaps more importantly from others) in their transformative learning experience?

In the various descriptions of how people engage in transformative learning, there is also an ignored gap between a disorienting event and revising a perspective, or perhaps between engaging in critical reflection and revising a perspective. We have labeled this as a "desire to change", but we need to explore this in much more detail. Why do some people revise their perspectives and others not? Is it a characteristic of the person? A characteristic of the event? Or where the person is in his or her life?

In almost all of the literature, transformative learning is assumed to be inherently good. This is an assumption that needs to be examined. Transformative learning theorists need to turn a critical eye to their own assumptions. How do we explain the experiences that otherwise resemble transformative learning but have negative consequences? If transformative learning can be negative, how can we deal with the ethical issues of fostering it?

Research methodologies in the field of transformative learning have settled into a routine where people conduct retrospective interviews in an interpretive paradigm and do thematic analyses of those interviews. There are many innovative and interesting methodologies that could be applied to research in our field: arts-based research, narrative inquiry, action research, and participatory action research. How can we expand the way we do research on transformative learning? Can positivistic paradigms provide us with another perspective?

We encourage readers to consider these questions and any other questions that fall outside of what has become the traditional approaches to understanding transformative learning. We need to go back to a "theory in progress".

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