

## **A Sociological Imagination: The Neglected Concept in Transformation Theory**

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### **Introduction**

Malcolm Knowles visited Teachers College as I commenced studying there in 1978. But Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* opened the possibility that adult education could be radical and transformative. In the same year Jack Mezirow (1978) published his theory of perspective transformation. Andragogy was useful but a paradigm shift in the field of adult education had occurred and through multiple iterations over the following decades we are the inheritors of these exciting developments. Mezirow borrowed from Jürgen Habermas whose theory of communicative action he creatively integrated with the theory of transformative learning (TL). Adult education, that traditionally linked itself with the project of democracy, had a new critical theory inspired understanding of adult learning that works towards democracy. It is this connection that makes TL important in a world facing multiple (connected) crises – climate change, radicalizations, the rise of the far right and wars.

### **1. What elements constitute the identity of the theoretical field of Transformative Learning?**

TL is an indigenous theory of adult learning created by adult educators for adults. John Dewey provides the most important source of ideas for TL (e.g., habits of mind, reflection, etc.). Jürgen Habermas, Thomas Kuhn (paradigms) and Paulo Freire (critical consciousness) are also foundational. Insights from many more were borrowed and applied by Mezirow and others. Ideas were adapted from George Kelly (personal constructs), Herbert Fingarette (transformation), Herbert Blumer (symbolic interactionism) and developmental psychologists (Gould Kohlberg, Kegan).

TL also implies ways of teaching. It has also informed research in adult education and beyond. TL offers sensitizing concepts and opportunities to test the theory and develop new areas of education in which TL helps enhance how learning is understood. TL has been less successful at inspiring public policy. All of this is set against a background where lifelong learning has become the dominant construct in which adult learning is promoted, especially within the EU policy environment.

A set of concepts and how they are inter-related defines TL and gives it its identity. These include experience (Dewey), the dilemmas posed by conflicts and contradictions within our meaning making, (critical) reflection on experience, linking individual problems and experience with social issues and through imagination discovering and adopting new constructs more inclusive and integrative of experience. And, taking action on the basis of new assumptions. When linked together in a learning process this set of ideas brings to the fore unquestioned assumptions underpinning actions, thoughts, feelings, values and ideas. TL is so defined. For Dewey, education is the reconstruction of experience. For Mezirow, TL is the transformation of experience. Experience is central to TL – and Dewey and Freire too. Without experience there is no TL.

## **2. What supports and what hinders the formation and development of this field?**

The current dominance of neoliberal capitalism, its impact on individuals and on education, its reductionism, the related mantra of lifelong learning all provide strong head winds for TL. The demise of the public sphere and the lifeworld - colonized by commercial interests - along with the rise of radicalizations are also major forces of resistance. There are also the additional urgencies of climate change, wars, pandemics that reduce the opportunities for time consuming discourses that are essential for TL, thus increasing the urgency of acting decisively and the challenge to transform.

The most recent edition of the well-established *The Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* provides a list of the 'philosophical foundations of adult and continuing education' (Rocco, et al., p. 13) without mentioning Mezirow. Such errors indicate the remaining work to be completed by those in search of a really useful understanding of adult learning – in theory, practice, research and policy formulation.

Having reviewed manuscripts for over 30 journals over 15 years, it appears that there is a decline in how critical theory and social change are addressed by scholars and an increase in attention to individual experience – with a dramatic increase in manuscripts dealing with experiences of one individual. The imbalance is concerning. TL has over-engaged in the subjective and individual nature of learning. Instead of taking experience as the basic ingredient for creating and developing a social theory about how society and individual experiences are connected, a sociological imagination seems to be missing in TL. In addition, the dominance of functional and instrumental versions of adult education shows how the pressure to keep TL continually developing faces an uphill journey, if not active resistance. Finally, the full potential of the allies on which TL relies has not been sufficiently exploited.

### **3. How do you understand the concept of “living theory of TL”?**

Living implies alive, developing, progressing, expanding and then borrowed other disciplines, e.g., law, health education, spirituality, clinical psychology, music, higher education, etc. It implies that both theoretical and practical aspects of TL are moving and deepening by relentless, philosophical and methodological discussions, applications and scholarship. A gradual increase in scholarship emerging from Africa is encouraging.

### **4. How do you perceive the "deep change" that Transformative Learning can bring about?**

Day-to-day changes in understandings that are incremental and iterative so that over time, and when taken together, they can transform frames of reference. I also include dramatic, revolutionary and radical changes in the world view of learners. These are always closer to the kinds of changes originally described by Mezirow but maybe experienced less frequently. Psychoanalysis and critique of ideology continue to best express the process of achieving ‘deep change’. Added to this are the deep changes that include and integrate social transformation as part of TL. These connections are more thoroughly made in critical theory than in TL theory.

## 5. What would you propose to enhance the progress of living theory of TL?

My first student research project, supervised by Jack Mezirow, was to gather (in Butler Library at Columbia University) everything needed to update his (and my) thinking on critical theory. The focus of interest at the time was on Habermas. Discussions over the following 30 years led to published works on expanding the connections between Habermas and TL. This shared commitment to critical theory is the direction in which I suggest TL progress if it is to avoid dominance by the psychological imagination.

The critical theory of Axel Honneth holds promising understandings of recognition and emancipation that help re-define TL in ways that address versions of TL that were overly rational and individualistic. Honneth also helps reconstruct the meaning of emancipation and democracy that are important in TL. In addition, and from the same critical theory perspective, the pedagogical work and adult learning theory of Oskar Negt (with his film producer colleague Alexander Kluge) have allowed a rethink about the importance of the sociological imagination. Critical theorist help reconnect individual and society in our TL thinking.

The psychological imagination holds a dominant position in the theoretical and practical working through of TL. This is an opportune moment to re-integrate the sociological imagination with TL. Though hardly intended by Mezirow, the minor role of the sociological imagination, has led to a gap in the progression of TL. Alfred Schutz and C Wright Mills, both well known to Mezirow, are considered the originators of the theory of sociological imagination as well as pedagogies that support such perspectives. I have attempted to identify the progression routes that are still possible in order for TL to become a critical theory of adult learning and education. I call this a sociological turn in TL.

This work has allowed us understand that the social environment is not just an interesting add-on to experience (see Dewey again) and the process of transformation (e.g., one's individual problems are connected to broader social issues). According to Hegel, on whom Freire relied, these connections are essential and dialectical – one cannot fully comprehend one's own situation, one's experience, one's disorienting

dilemmas without taking into account how the social dimension is in dialectical connection with the psychological. The political is personal.

**6. What is the position of Mezirow's Theory and other perspectives, within this process?**

TL has clearly expanded and been re-interpreted in a diverse universe of possibilities. Important and original re-makes include work that outlines the role of disorienting dilemmas and edge emotional (Green & Mälkki); integrates Heron's theory of personhood (Yorks & Kasl); connects Jung (Boyd & Myres) and soul work (Dirkx and Tisdell). All adapt, borrow, acknowledge, expand an ever-broadening matrix of approaches and produce welcome iterations of TL that enrich the trajectory of the original theory, expand its currency and progress the understanding with which adult learning is understood and facilitated.

**Conclusion**

As successive crises now impose themselves for consideration, only through social transformation is survival possible. If history (implying the destructive process that got us here) is not on our side, maybe the obstinacy (that Negt identifies) may prompt and motivate necessary transformative changes. For those who see in adult education at least a significant part of the response to crises, what is at stake is the very survival of the planet.

**References**

Rocco, T.S., Smith, M.C., Mizzi, R.C. Merriweather, L.R., & Hawley, J.D. (2021). *The Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education: 2020 Edition*. Stylus/AAACE.