

IN AN ERA OF NEOLIBERALISM
AND INEQUALITY CAN SELF-
TRANSCENDENCE FOSTER
CONSCIENTISATION FOR SOCIAL
CHANGE?

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ABSTRACT

In an era of neo-liberal ideology, this thesis examines the impact of a paradigm which promotes the ideals of a self-regulating global market and the privatisation of state assets and services. An epoch where humanity's existence is reduced to mere 'clients' and 'consumers' of services and products. Whereby the promise of 'freedom of choice' means the freedom to; exploit workers, charge extortionate interest-rates for public and private debt, poison our natural habitat and tax avoidance (if you can afford it) (Monbiot, 2016).

As the prevalence rates of mental ill health are on the increase and according to some, could be considered to have reached epidemic proportions (Carlat, 2010, Kirsch, 2010, Whitaker, 2010). Investigating the high percentage rate of consumption in prescriptive anti-depressant drugs, I would argue that it is perhaps the pressures from living in a world, as described above, that people are opting out of life and choosing death by suicide.

Examining, recent structural changes in our Irish adult and community education sector, I reflect upon the absence of critical and reflexive skills and argue that perhaps this is also having an impact on our mental health. Not being given an opportunity to identify the source of our oppression, how can we act against the forces that cause it? (Freire, 1970).

Given that the political left and centre parties have not produced an alternative to neoliberal ideology, those of us who are disillusioned, disturbed and desire to see social justice being restored are seeking other routes to overcome this subordination of our society.

My research explores such an attempt, by highlighting the experiential reflections of the lives of ten women, from different religious and cultural backgrounds as well as a wide spectrum in age variance. The participants seek to learn tools for self-transcendence and reflexivity. Although the findings suggest that the participants are active in the engagement of a journey towards a higher consciousness and they support each other. Nevertheless, it appears that they do not engage in collective action for social change. A hypothesis that they are in the process of 'healing' themselves first is mooted. As the groups didn't see the socio-political dimension of community education or spirituality, this study concludes, given the value of inner peace, love and solidarity being overarching themes in the theory of self-transcendence, I argue, that this is perhaps the necessary first step in creating a new world order.

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Chapter One

Introduction

A personal note

In my second year of college, I answered the ringing bell of my student accommodations and found my brother standing there, his eyes swollen red and he looked like he was in severe pain. I remember he just barely managed to get the words out before reaching for a hug. “Anthony is dead” he said, “he has killed himself”.

Anthony was my brother's best friend from secondary school. We were all in the same year and as a group of friends, we journeyed together through school and made it fun. We socialised at the weekends and enjoyed camping trips in whatever field took our fancy during our summer holidays. Although, Anthony would have been considered the quieter one of our group, nothing prepared or signalled to us that he was having any difficulties. Academically, he was far exceeding the rest of us, having been awarded top of his class in UCD for his end of year results. We were proud of him and had a suspicion that out of all of us, he perhaps would go on to be the most ‘successful’ as he was the full package; smart, good looking, gentle and kind.

As a group, for a long time afterwards, we were all devastated. Feelings of shock, guilt, confusion and powerlessness seemed to fill up the void and there was no answer or solution in how this tragedy could be resolved. The interpretation we were left with was that as ‘a friend’ we weren’t good enough and the fact that we didn’t save him, haunted us for years. Following Anthony’s death, I began to think about life. Philosophical questions stirred in me a quest to find answers to help overcome the pain and loss I was feeling. Around this time, I found a book in my parents’ house by Anthony de Mello (1990) called ‘*Awareness*’. This was my first introduction to material that made me query how I thought and felt and I devoured it. The message was clear and for the first time I had a sense of purpose of what life was and how to live it. It was like a road map. This was to be the beginning of my own journey to self- discovery and later seeking ‘self-transcendence’ as described by Abraham H. Maslow (1969a). Self-transcendence refers to the ability to change self-centred consciousness, or ego and have the perspective of awareness regarding human nature and human problems and enjoy a considerable measure of freedom from biological and social conditioning (Habermans, 1970; Le, and Levenson, 2004; Aldwin, Levenson & Cupertino, 2001)

The problem

Since 2008, we have seen a prolonged socio-economic crisis, supported by the obstinacy of the state, implementing austerity policies and measures, despite mass dissatisfaction and resultant strikes and demonstrations at local and national level. Yet the state continued to ignore the majorities interests and imposed savage reductions in living standards whilst blaming social programmes for the crisis, signposting a neo-liberal epoch of “decay and slow descent in barbarism- the capitalism of the twenty first century” (Petras and Veltmeyer, 2013 p.115). For a greater discussion on neo-liberalism and its impact on society, mental health and education, see Chapter Two.

A recent headline in the Guardian newspaper paper claims “Neo-liberalism is creating loneliness and that is what is wrenching society apart” (Monbiot. 2016). According to Mental Health Ireland (2016) “one in four of us will experience a mental health issue in our life-time and one in twelve will suffer from depression”. The World Health Organisation (WHO) suggest that by 2030, these figures will increase to “33% of the world’s population experiencing a mental health issue during their lifespan” (Wan, 2012 p.1).

Recognition of Ireland’s growing mental health problems is evident in conflicts between the country’s dominant political parties. Using the Freedom of Information Act, the Irish Times accessed a letter sent by the leader of, Fianna Fáil, Michael Martin to then Taoiseach [Irish Prime Minister] and leader of, Fine Gael, Enda Kenny, dated the 2nd of December 2016. Martin criticised Kenny for failing to adhere to an agreement by the two parties to set aside €35 million for the mental health budget in 2017. Martin’s angst was that he discovered there was a shortfall of €20 million in spending for the funding and development of mental health services (Bardon, 2017).

If we examine funding for mental health services, the government does not seem as committed to improving these vital services, despite the Department of Health (DOH) publishing a national strategy to reduce suicide in 2015: ‘*Connecting for Life 2015-2020*’ The DOH developed this strategy in conjunction with the National Suicide Prevention Office, HSE and County Councils, setting a minimum target of a 10% reduction in the rates of suicide and self-harm in Ireland by 2020. Each county has its own action plan which was developed through a multi-agency approach.

The action plan published by Health Service Executive (HSE): Health Promotion and Improvement, Donegal. ‘*Connecting for Life’ Donegal, 2015-2020* claims that the Central Statistical Office (CSO) recorded the number of deaths by suicide in Donegal as being “relatively small and that the official suicide rates for Donegal are lower than the Irish average” (HSE, 2015, p.5), although, according to this report, there are many factors which can result in the under-recording of death by suicide.

The reports points that up until 1993 it was a criminal offence to take your own life in Ireland. It suggests that this legacy, coupled with strong catholic teachings ‘that suicide is a sin’ (HSE, 2015, p. 6), has had an effect in terms of accurate recording. Given that all suspected deaths by suicide must be reported to the coroner’s office, the report also suggests that the coroner may in the past have been “influenced by family sensitivities because of the perceived stigma of a suicide verdict or the risk that an insurance policy may not pay out if the death is by suicide” ((HSE, 2015 p.6).

Last summer alone, I know five families personally who experienced the loss of an immediate family member through death by suicide, four of these people were from Donegal. For these families, their loved ones are not just a ‘relatively small number’.

The purpose

I am deeply concerned that the prevalence rates of mental ill health are so high and are continuing to rise. I propose that there must be a better way. In my opinion, there seems to be ‘something’ that we are missing in terms of how best we can prevent and support illness. Ultimately, it was this quest which drove my motivation to conduct this research study. According to Bombardelli (2015, p.89) “with too much inequality, people are experiencing “a loss of respect... towards themselves, resulting in a warped view of the self, disorientation, and despair”.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine power structures and policy which create inequality and the resultant personal pressures. I wish to explore whether an education in tools for self-transcendence is the missing link in the protection of mental health. I also aim to determine if this theory has the capacity for the development of critical consciousness for social transformation, so that we can all enjoy good mental health.

Good mental health is characterised by a person's ability to fulfil a number of key functions and activities, including: the ability to learn, the ability to feel, express and manage a range of positive and negative emotions, the ability to form and maintain good relationships with others and the ability to cope with and manage change and uncertainty.

(Mental Health Foundation, 2017)

Background

For the past three years, I have been attending an informal community education group and we seek to achieve Maslow's sixth hierarchy of human need; 'self-transcendence' (Maslow, 1969a) by raising our level of consciousness. For further information on Maslow, see chapter 2. This group studies *A Course of Miracles* (ACIM) and on occasions other material pertaining to this subject area. This book is said to have been channelled by a higher force that Maslow (1969a) speaks of and has been scribed.

A Course in Miracles proposes itself to be a "teaching device" (ACIM, 1976) based upon a spiritual philosophy which teaches the art of self-awareness and reflexivity. Although this book credits no author, the preface surmises that it began with the decision of two people to join in a common goal. These were Helen Schuman and William Thetford, both Professors of Medical Psychology at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York, "who were anything but spiritual" (ACIM, 1976). Schuman claims that following a series of symbolic dreams and symbols, she was encouraged by Thetford to write down what was happening. She claims to have been very surprised to have written "This is a course in miracles..." (ACIM, Preface, 1976). She asserts that although this was her first introduction to the 'Voice', it made no sound, but describes the experience as: "it seemed to be giving a kind of rapid, inner dictation" (ACIM, Preface, 1976). She scribed this into a short-hand notebook, and thus began a series of 'dialogue' which resulted in a three-volume combined book and the 'Voice' whom she identified, and they both affirm the 'Voice for love' (ACIM, 1976)

After de'Mello's (1990) '*Awareness*' introduction I was on a quest to find more universal truths and wisdom. I have over the past twenty years read many books and attended seminars. Eric Fromm (1993) points to commercialisation of the personal development industry or in his own words "*the sham in the field of man's salvation*, of his well-being, inner growth, and happiness" (1993, p.13). In acknowledging that we can be confused

and uncertain, Fromm (1993) claims that we search for answers that will bring peace, joy, self-discovery. But he also warns that we demand that the scheme be easy to learn, requires little to no effort and that results have immediate effect (Fromm, 1993). Fromm is also critical of the fact that individual personal development has become big business.

In my own experience, in the search for self-discovery, I got caught up in the ‘continuing stream’ of self-help consumerism (Myers, 2014) or ‘capital spiritualism (Carrette and King, 2005). I enjoyed reading this genre, it became my escape, it became a secret pleasure. But the material never motivated me enough to do the prescribed work that promised in a relatively short period that my life would somehow reflect my interpretation of what optimum happiness and success is. Besides upon reflection, this usually changed depending on the given day.

It wasn’t until *A Course of Miracles*, a little blue book showed up into my life, that for the first time since de’Mello, I thought, ok this is it, this is the one. I now find that I don’t need any other book/ programme or guru. As per the teachings of this *ACIM*, I don’t even need *A Course in Miracles*. The theory maintains that once we tune into the ‘Voice for love’ we no longer need to seek external sources for happiness, love, esteem, as it can only be found within (ACIM, 1976).

However, I admit that initially I couldn’t read this book, in the sense that I could understand it. I needed help. No one in my social circle had ever heard of it and after a time, I somehow found a group that met on a weekly basis near to my home place to study *A Course in Miracles*. This study highlights through the discussion of two focus groups in Donegal, their lived experience of coming together to study this manual and another similar work ‘*The Way of Mastery*’ as a teaching system to reach a higher level of consciousness.

This book is not as Fromm (1993) would critique as a quick fix, for it requires effort and practice. Personally, the authenticity of the *ACIM* has been verified because I am aware of the positive and dramatic change in my life and the lives of those in my group as well as others who I have met and interviewed as a part of this study. The participants of both groups stressed (see chapter four) that it is ‘A’ course and there are many other paths to self-transcendence.

Importance of the Study for Practice

Community Education and Mental Health

Nelson Mandela claimed; “education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world” (Mandela, 2003). I believe it will be through mental health and well-being education that we can teach people tools that will allow them, if they so choose, to think, feel and perceive themselves, others and the world differently and I am certain that education praxis is the only vehicle to deliver this remedy.

My personal hope for this study would be that self-transcendence and teaching tools for inner awareness and peace would be given further consideration in curriculum development across all sectors of education provision aiming to enhance our mental health and well-being. My aspiration is that perhaps one day a curriculum for self-transcendence may be recorded in history as being like that of ‘cultural studies’. David Scholle (1991) highlighted that “cultural studies began as a specific (adult) education project-as a way of helping people to understand the pressures upon them” and it all began in Britain (cited in Mayo, 1999 p. 145). Perhaps the study of self-transcendence will be recorded as enabling people to overcome these pressures.

This study demonstrates that self-transcendence will foster conscientisation (Freire, 1970) as the first step in the process because it leads to personal transformation. However, a second step which includes Freire’s ‘praxis’ for critical reflection and action for social change needs to be incorporated into the curriculum. Marx maintained that personal and social transformation needs to be a concurrent dual process . This study highlights that we need to heal our own ‘egoic’ thinking first and then take the necessary steps to create an equal and fair society, through demonstration of peace and love for all humanity. For now, I can only surmise how society would look, without ego driven impulses and demands. Perhaps John Lennon capsulated the meaning of self-transcendence for social change best with the lyrics:

Imagine there is no countries, it isn’t hard to do.
Imagine nothing to kill or die for, and no religion too.
Imagine all the people living life in peace.

(Lennon, 1971)

Outline of Chapters

Chapter One: Introduction

This introduction puts forward the research question and the inspiration to conduct this study. In this chapter, I give an overview of the problem that this study seeks to address and introduce the book *A Course of Miracles* (1976) as the research participants of this study utilise this manual for Maslow's sixth need for self-transcendence in an informal education setting. I outline the implications for this study for practice and myself personally and I also introduce the structure of the chapters to follow.

Chapter 2: A Theoretical Discussion

The second chapter is broken up into two parts.

Part One

I discuss neo-liberalism and briefly outline its influence and impact in areas such as mental health provision and spirituality. I then examine how this ideology is having a coercive and destructive impact on society in Ireland, especially in our adult and community education sector, considering recent structural changes since the economic crisis of 2008.

Part Two

Aims to highlight ‘a different way’ to overcome neo-liberal dogma. This chapter introduces Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and outlines the theory behind self-transcendence. I introduce Paulo Freire and his theory of critical consciousness and discuss how this was meant to be used for social change. The theme of mindfulness is discussed linking to the teachings of a Course in Miracles. I discuss awareness and reflexivity and their link to self-transcendence and critical consciousness.

Chapter 3: Research Design

The third chapter highlights the journey to choosing the paradigm and highlights aspects of feminist, social constructivist and reflexive approaches. I give a description of the

participants, how the interviews came about and how data was collected, coded and analysed.

Chapter 4: Experiential Reflections

Explores the findings of the two focus groups who seek to learn tools for self-transcendence.

Chapter 5: The Discussion

Explores the analysis of the five overarching findings and employs the literature, as already reviewed, to substantiate my argument, whilst drawing a conclusion and providing further recommendations

Chapter Two

A Theoretical Discussion

“How many seas must a white dove sail, before she sleeps in the sand? The answer my friend is blowing in the wind”
(Dylan, 1963)

Drawing on literature from education, psychology and other related disciplines, this chapter is broken into two parts and sets the context for a questioning of whether in an era of neoliberalism and inequality, can self-transcendence foster conscientisation (Freire, 1970) for social change?

Part One

This chapter section will examine what neo-liberalism is, its ‘cultural hegemonic’ (Gramsci, 1971) overtones and impact on society, the individual, on adult and community education as a discipline and on mental health from a medical model perspective. I will also describe informal community education, as this is the settings of the groups I am researching.

Neoliberalism

Monbiot (2016 p.1) highlights that:

the ideology that dominates our lives has, for most of us, no name. Its anonymity is both a symptom and cause of its power...But the philosophy arose as a conscious attempt to reshape human life and shift the focus of power.

According to McChesney (1999, p. 8) neoliberalism is the major political economic paradigm of our time. It represents the “policies and processes whereby a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible social life in order to maximise their personal profit” Neoliberalism as defined by David Harvey (2005, p.2) is “a theory of political economics that proposes human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. This construct is said to have been “formulated by small band of European philosophers and popularised by economists in the United States” (Coulter, 2015 p. 4).

Forty years ago, these neoliberal policy-makers pursued to apply Chicago School monetarist prescriptions that abandoned Keynesian interest-rate modification in favour of money supply steamrolling (Peck, 2010). Although, it is Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Regan are famed as having embraced this concept as part of their leadership reigns and successfully along with some others, successfully set the world on this course, under the assumption that ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’ (Harvey, 2005). Even though the initial consequence was huge redundancies in industrialized countries, a sharp rise in global interest rates, and significant financial market instability, it was a project that was revered by government officials (Peck, 2010, Coulter, 2015). As Harvey (2005, p. 2) points out without the “role of the state in the deliverance and per servant of this model” wouldn’t exist.

As a result, since the late seventies, neoliberalism or “free-market fundamentalism... drives the practices and principles of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and World Trade Organization, trans-national institutions which largely determine the economic policies of developing countries and the rules of international trade” (Giroux, 2014, p.1).

As, per Giroux, this economic prescription is:

capable of challenging market-driven values and social relations, promoting the virtues of an unbridled individualism almost pathological in its disdain for community, social responsibility, public values, and the public good

(2014, p. 2).

The impact of neoliberalism on a global scale according to Treanor: 46% of the world wealth is owned by just 1% of the world’s population. Which begs the question, what has happened to 99% of all other boats?

Neoliberalism and Inequality

Human life in the last forty years has witnessed considerable developments in technology, science, medicine, access to information and knowledge. Yet, on the negative side we see war, poverty, hunger, political and religious corruption, terrorism, erosion of our environment and a great sadness even among the most affluent (McCoy, 1999).

As mentioned previously, ‘privatisation’ is a defining principle which allows for the justification of corporate takeover of state assets, services and utilities.

Such as Irish gas and oil, as Slevin (2016, pp. 198-199) highlights:

essentially giving away those resources in exchange for a promise of some financial return or spin-offs... Yet due to Ireland's licensing regime, oil companies are under no obligation to base their activities in Ireland or use Irish goods, services or workers"

Another feature of this corruption, is that it breeds precariousness for many new to the labour market in terms of employment contracts and conditions (Pembroke et. al, 2017).

Our food is sprayed with chemicals in the interest of short term profit, despite serious environmental damage such as the injury to bees on which we depend to pollinate plants. In the 'age of the selfie' (Giroux, 2015), social media networks may determine one's self-esteem on how many 'likes' received. And technology which can record activities, including our consumer choices, and at the same time, monitor our online social activity to the point that a computer programme can now 'determine a relationship break up before we do' (Hamburger, 2014).

According to Verhaeghe (2014) excessive inequality in nations is associated with an extensive list of health and mental disorders. He points that neoliberal philosophy has devastating consequences on the identity of the individual, and on mental well-being such as burnout, depression and performance anxiety, addictions, eating disorders, fear of failure (Verhaeghe, 2014).

According to an International Business Report (Thornton, 2016, p. 3) "the gender diversity issue has been on the business agenda for many years now, yet a third of businesses still have no women at a senior management level". The European Commission Statistical Database show statistics that the average percentage for female political voice for EU-28 countries has slowly risen from 21 per cent to 27 per cent over the last decade; while in Ireland, the figure has increased just over 13 per cent in 2011 to 27 per cent in 2014. Evidence to suggest that we are still living a very patriarchal society.

Becker (1999) claims that human beings do not flourish when hyper-masculinity is glorified and traditionally softer feminine qualities are denigrated or when all males are pressured to adopt hyper-masculine attributes and repress feminine ones, and all females are forced to adopt traditionally feminine attributes and re-press masculine ones.

Mental health

My introduction chapter highlighted Monbiot's claim (2016) that neoliberalism is making us lonely. According to WHO (World Health Organization) mental health is "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to his or her community". WHO stresses that mental health "is not just the absence of mental disorder" (2000a).

Neoliberalism, Depression and Suicide

According to a recent report, rates of depression have increased by eighteen percent between 2005 and 2015 and it now estimates that this condition afflicts over 300 million people worldwide (WHO, 2017). The report claims that approximately 800,000 people commit suicide each year. It also acknowledges a similar claim made by the HSE (2015) in chapter 1, that under-reporting does occur.

According to Peebles (2015) 'mental health issues' are often cited as being the umbrella term for the cause of suicide and self-harm behaviour. He cites a BBC Panorama documentary where researchers from Glasgow University stated that 90% of suicide cases suffer from some form of mental illness. Peebles (2015) points that is an ambiguous phrase that doesn't provide any answers. It is worth considering that according to WHO, poverty and unemployment are leading causes. Also, research by Corcoran et al (2015, pp 6-7) show that

Five years of economic recession and austerity in Ireland has had a significant negative impact on national rates of suicide and hospital-treated self-harm. The male and female suicide rates were 57% and 7% higher and the male and female self-harm rates were 31% and 22% higher, respectively, by the end of 2012 than if pre-recession trends had continued.

WHO (2014) states that suicide in the lower- to middle income developed countries have a higher death by suicide rating. The report acknowledges that each country shares statistics being influenced by factors including stigma and not feeling comfortable with seeking help as well as pressures of life (WHO, 2014). Peebles (2014) calls us to examine these 'pressures of life' and question: what they are and where they come from. There must be something terribly gone wrong in our world when "one person every forty seconds manages to take their own life and where suicide is the second highest cause of

death amongst under twenty year olds" (WHO, 2014 p. 18). We look next to the medical model to see if it can 'save' us.

The Neoliberal Medical Model

According to Pop (2010) as a society we have come to revere medical science. In Ireland, the first person to contact when experiencing a mental health difficulty is a family doctor. (Citizens Information, 2016). Mercier et al. (2014) revealed that general practitioners (GPs) were responsible for about 80% of the anti-depressant (AD) prescriptions.

Information obtained through the Freedom of Information Act and published in the Sunday Business Post (SPS) highlights the influence of corporate sponsorship in Irish surgeries and hospitals nationwide by 'Big Pharma' (Mitchell, 2016). The article claims that drug companies are funding dozens of medical and nursing posts in some of Irelands biggest hospitals. Revealing that almost one third of the HSE's most senior doctors receive money from pharmaceutical companies. The SPS article also highlights that many of these senior doctors decide which drugs will be used by the profession to treat countless conditions.(Mitchell, 2016).

The chemical imbalance theory

Much of the medical model discourse regarding mental ill health is that it is caused by chemical imbalances in the brain (Moncrieff, 2006). According to Krammer (2008) 'chemical imbalance' is a popular translation of the 'monoamine' or 'biogenic amine' theory of depression. Krammer (2008) hypothesised that this mood disorder is due to a relative lack of certain transmitters, notably norepinephrine and serotonin.

Moncrieff (2006) claims that the chemical imbalance theory helps further the aims of neoliberal social and economic policies because it breeds feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. Moncrieff (2006) maintains that it is these feelings that drive increasing consumption, encourages people to accept more pressured working conditions and that it inhibits social and political responses. She also argues that the biological theory offers neoliberalism a subtle means of social control and supports its values of the competitiveness and consumerism (Moncrieff, 2006). She reflects that if people are preoccupied with their mental state and encouraged to be dissatisfied with themselves,

compounded with the need to ‘rectify’ their brain chemistry, they are less likely to challenge social conditions and to fight for alternative values.

According to the Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (2017) research into adults with moderate or severe depression who took a placebo; 20 to 40 out of 100 people noticed an improvement in their symptoms within six to eight weeks. Those taking antidepressants:40 to 60 out of 100 people who took an antidepressant reported an improvement in their symptoms within six to eight weeks. The Institute surmises that these findings suggest that antidepressants improved symptoms in about 20 more people out of 100.

Lupton (1997) highlighted that critics of the medical model such as Irving Zola (1972) and Eliot Freidson argued that the role of social regulation which was traditionally performed by religion and the law was now being undertaken by medicine. Lupton also points to Ivan Illich (1975) who signposted that rather than improving people’s health, “contemporary scientific medicine undermined it, both through the side-effects of medical treatment and by diminishing lay people’s capacity for autonomy in dealing with their own health care” (p. 189-190).

Let’s hypnotise, that that we are ‘well’ enough to take charge of our own self-care, and are looking to find ‘meaning’ in our life, other than prescribed indoctrination that ‘happiness can be bought’, brings me to my next argument:

Neoliberalism and Spirituality

Spirituality, is a seemingly vague term for the pursuit of personal meaning. It has become a catchword to embody the psychological needs that previous generations had addressed under the banner of traditional religion.

(Galanter, 2014.p. 11)

Kee (2005 p.227) claims that the term spirituality became popular about thirty years ago in “western culture amongst those who wished to enquire into transcendence and seek an alternative to western materialism”. He argues that nowadays with the advent of global capitalism the term spirituality is being taken over by corporate interests and used to subvert individuals and seduce them into consumerism. Mind, body and spirit is now a multi-billion industry (Gaille, 2017). Carrette and King (2005) point that this industry sustains the social, economic and political values of the day and does little to challenge to the status quo or an existence of self-interest and pervasive consumption. Carrette and

King (2005 p.20) call this ‘capitalist spirituality’ and maintains that it promotes and features the following;

The individualisation of responsibility with no consideration of society. An ethic of self-interest that sees profit as the primary motivation for human action. It places corporate (not community) success above the welfare and job security of employees. Allows for the treatment of others as means rather than ends (e.g. seeing humans as consumers to be persuaded, other businesses as competitors to be overcome, or employees as resources to be used). That consumerism is the key to happiness. The promotion of quietism for tacit or overt acceptance of the inevitability of social injustice rather than a wish to overcome it. A political myopia i.e. a claim to political neutrality or the refusal to see the political dimensions of ‘spirituality’. Thought-control using psycho-physical techniques, described in terms of ‘personal development’, that seek to pacify feelings of anxiety and disquiet at the individual level rather than seeking to challenge the social, political and economic inequalities that cause such distress.

(Carrette and King, 2005 pp.21-22)

Carrette and King reflect that perhaps Marx’s statement that “religion is the opiate of the masses”, could now be applied to the” ideological institutions and practices of corporate capitalism itself” (2005, p. 23). Or to perhaps consider Nietzsche claim “God is dead”, but “has been resurrected as ‘Capital’. Given that shopping centres have “become the new altars for worshipping the God of money, and consumerism is the new esoteric knowledge, disguised as ‘New Age’ spirituality” (2005, p.23). Present day ‘mindfulness’ is marketed as a tool for enhancing individual wellbeing, happiness, and inner peace in everyday life, work and relationship contexts. But as Stanley (2102) argues “there is a risk that mindfulness has become individualised and psychologised as a technique for improving individuals’ functioning within a capitalist society”. I will present a counter-defence argument in part two of this chapter. Nevertheless, I will next highlight an ‘accepted’ mindfulness treatment-based intervention for depression by the medical model.

Mindfulness- Cogitative Behavioural Therapy (MBCT)

MBCT is a group based program eight week programme that integrates mindfulness exercises including yoga, body awareness and daily journaling to record activities such as eating or doing chores, with full attention to what one is doing, moment by moment (Lu, 2015). It was developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn who added elements of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT to his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) curriculum.to target people with prior histories of depression (Lu, 2015). The research

suggests that this can be a successful intervention in recurrence of depression episodes only and after the third relapse (MacKenzie and Kocovski, 2016). First introduced as a cost-saving measure as it includes cognitive behavioural therapy in a group setting as opposed to a one-on-one patient-therapist relationship (Kuyden et. al 2008) The positive findings of these studies are encouraging however the researchers suggest that more independent analysis needs to be completed, as they claim that founders of this method are those who are purporting the benefits (MacKenzie and Kocovski, 2016).

I turn now, to examine the impact of neoliberalism in Ireland and in particular our adult and community education provision, to ascertain, if this can enhance our well-being. Given that the *White Paper for Learning for Life 2000*, promises to provide a policy in adult education which aspires to raise our level of consciousness.

Consciousness raising refers to the capacity of Adult Education to enable people to realise their full human potential in a way that draws on the links between their individual personal experiences and wider structural factors. It embraces a view of Adult Education as an empowering process of self-discovery towards personal and collective development

(2000, pp. 28-29)

Neoliberalism in Ireland

In Ireland, during the much celebrated ‘Celtic Tiger’ era, we were pinned as the global poster child for neoliberalism (Coulter, 2015). Thanks to the ‘economic miracle’ or the ‘invisible hand’ as referred to by Adam Smith in the 1920’s. Yet, our then ‘new-found success’ was not because of our highly skilled workforce or our proximity to mainland Europe in attracting American foreign investment but on subprime mortgage lending and betting by the world’s largest banks and an over inflated domestic construction industry that was unsustainable (Fitzsimons, 2017). Suddenly, the trick of this ‘hand’ turned against us because of the crash and we were perforated to the bottom of the global economic heap and our fate; the humiliating poster child for austerity (Roche et al. 2017)

At the very beginning of this prolonged economic crisis, the leitmotif of Ireland’s leading politicians heralded through national and independent media was that: we were all to blame; it was the fault of an inefficient public service; and welfare fraud being the culprit of our misfortunes (O’ Flynn et al. 2014). This was a deliberate attempt by government to thwart critical attention that might otherwise challenge profound operational relations, configurations and logics that brand Irish capitalism (Allen, 2009, McCabe, 2011, Flynn et.

al 2014). What followed was unrecognisable shift and restructuring in policy, funding and services.

I now turn attention to how this restructuring impacted Irish community and adult education initiatives. But first I lean on Skaull to describe the purpose of education by way of introduction.

Function of education:

There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring conformity to it, or it becomes the ‘practice of freedom’ the means by which (we) deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of the world.

(Skaull, 1970 cited in Freire, p. 16, 1970)

Neoliberalism, Adult and Community Education

According to Fitzsimons (2017) it has been well researched that those pursuing adult education opportunities have been initially ‘failed’ by formal or compulsory education structures. Due to limited space, for a much greater discussion on the history of adult education see; Fitzsimons, 2017, Connolly, 2007.

Yet, following formal recognition of this sector by the Irish Government in the publication of recommendations in its Green Paper (1998) and subsequent White Paper (2000), this sector has up until recently had a wide variety of opportunities for ‘second chance education’. These included state funded programmes through initiatives provided by Vocational Education Committees (VEC’s), FAS and various Community Development Programmes (CDP’s). These programmes included literacy training, apprenticeships and personal and community development to name but a few. According to Grummell these state policies (White Paper, 2000) offered extensive support for the;

ideals of community education – empowerment, participative democracy and societal transformation – but then returned to the narrower practice of enabling access for specified groups in Irish society (women’s groups, ethnic minorities and older people).

(Grummell, 2007, p.6)

However, post- financial crash, even this narrow ‘offered support’ was withdrawn and an unrecognisable shift in these various structures and funding for community education was

legitimised (Fitzsimons, 2017). For example, Harvey's Report (2012, p.29) highlighted that funding for this sector began its sharp focus on:

‘job-ready initiatives’ in a way that is dismissive of the hard work done in community education and lifelong learning. It is now very difficult to get funding for non-accredited courses.

Given that the ethos of adult and community education is to provide spaces of learning where opportunities to think creatively, critically and reflectively are encouraged (Connolly, 2010, Freire, 1970). Lynch et al (2012) claim that post-financial crash, this transformative element of education has been eradicated in favour of as outlined above performance-based and employment-oriented based training which now features heavily in this sector. The authors highlight the devastating consequences for this in our education policies and proposes:

Education has just become another consumption good (not a human right) paralleling other goods and the individual is held responsible for her or his own ‘choices’ within it.... Neo-liberalism embeds not only a unique concept of the learner in education, it also maps a new set of goals to education... The focus is on the product not the person, both in terms of what is attained and what is counted and countable. A culture of carelessness is created (in education).

(Lynch, 2012, pp.14,22).

Following the amalgamation of FAS (Irish National Training Agency) and 33 VEC bodies into SOLAS and 16 Education Training Boards (ETB's) in 2012 and the publication of a national strategy for Further Education and Training (FET) 2014-2019, published by SOLAS, the extent of state intention for a newly structured adult and community education sector was realised (Fitzsimons, 2017). For example, the new arrangement according to the strategy is to provide “all FET learners with a service which meets the needs both of individual learners and of Government economic policy” (Mooney, 2014).

Singling, that these changes to both statutory and community based education initiatives allows for state agencies to influence and decide what educational and training programmes are to be funded. Or as described by Finnegan (2016, p.52) this legacy has played a central role in reshaping the relationship between the economy, everyday life, and education, and “the collective consequence has been an extraordinary consolidation in elite power...and the ability to effect decision making has created a ‘democratic deficit’”.

A two-tier education system

Another, outcome of this FET strategy as argued by Lynch et al. (2012) is that a two-tier system for further and higher education is to be maintained. According to Donnelly (2013) “research reveals that pupils attending schools in disadvantaged areas are most likely to drop out and if they do the Leaving Cert are least likely to go straight to a third-level institution”. The gap between rich and poor widens because as Nolan and Voitchovsky (2016) suggest that people with a third-Level (University) degree were 126 times more likely to obtain employment compared with people with a lower of standard of education qualifications. Perhaps, further indication of what Harvey (2003) describes as being: ‘social inequality’ and class power by the ruling elites. Signalling that changes in this sector embed neoliberal dogma or as Grummell (2007, p, 9) suggests, that as a result;

Education becomes a controlling force that integrates people into the existing social and economic order. The critical discourse in adult education becomes marginalised and incorporated, negating its civic and political possibilities. Adult education becomes a part of the world of work and training, incorporating people’s actions to the functions and requirements of the marketplace.

Compulsory Education

Another recent development is the compulsory conditions imposed upon those receiving long-term (more than 12 months) unemployment benefit to uptake training programmes or else face the threat of being struck off the live register. Per Fleming and Finnegan (2014. p. 156) “being forced to complete schemes affects one’s relationship to self” (2014, p.154), highlighting that Bourdieu would refer these actions as being “symbolic violence of being demeaned or undervalued”. Yet, the economic crisis has given legitimacy to these measures or as Chomsky (1989) calls ‘manufactured consent’

Lack of choice and opportunities

Still, what this agenda doesn’t consider is individual interests, occupational goals or the availability of considered career choices in one’s own region in terms of training or employment opportunities. As these adult education initiatives are run more and more like a business model (Lynch et. al. 2012), it only provides courses in certain areas which are deemed to be sustainable and provide participants with direct routes into employment.

Yet having a direct route into employment, doesn't necessarily mean that employment opportunities are available or that perhaps the market has already been saturated with 'qualified' trainees who are now competing for limited job opportunities. As mentioned earlier, it allows for precarious working conditions such as short-term contracts and in some cases zero-hour contracts as there is a surplus of trained personnel anxious to get employments and hence are willing to take up service minus protection contracts and benefits including social security, pension and holidays (Fitzsimons, 2017, Lynch et al). Rodgers (2002 p. 5) reminds us that; "underlying all forms of education and perhaps especially adult education lies the question of power... and we need to ask in all the teaching of adults, who's interests are being served?"

Power and control

The current system of FET provision encourages 'technicist orientation' (Aronowitz & Giroux 1986, p.197), learning experience and outcomes that remain "abstract and critique sterile" (Aronowitz.& Giroux 1986, p.7). Neglecting the importance of developing creative, critical, reflective skills is perhaps a deliberate elimination of space within the curriculum to develop these skills and an example that; "ruling groups are able to exercise control over what is taught and how it is taught, maintaining hegemonic control" (Jackson, 2011, p.5).

The ability to question and reflect on our world fosters both personal and social empowerment as well as active citizenship (Freire, 1970, hooks, 1994, Fitzsimons, 2017). Where in the classroom, problem solving is not just a mathematical equation for robots to formulate, it is about collectively sharing our worldview and determining a better outcome for all. As Freire claimed:

Men are defeated and dominated, though they do not know it... Their creative power is impaired. They are objects, not Subjects. For men to overcome their state of massification, they must be enabled to reflect about that very condition.

(Freire, 1974, p.16)

According to Heywood (1994 p.100), the theory of a 'third face of power' or 'invisible power' can be attributed to Marxist thinking about the "pervasive power of ideology, values and beliefs in reproducing class relations and concealing contradictions". It is worth noting, here that Freire was greatly influenced by Marx. Heywood maintains that

Marx not only highlighted economic profiteering as the only driver behind capitalism but that the system was reinforced by a dominance of ruling class ideas and values. Heywood purports that it was this theory that lead to Engels's famous concern that 'false consciousness' would keep the working class from recognising and rejecting their oppression (Heywood, 1994, p. 85). Freire mirrors this concept in his own theories and uses class analysis to show that only a minority benefit from the status quo. He points that this culture of silence was the political reality of Brazil (Freire, 1970). He highlighted that the ruling class or elite benefit from the masses being silent, without a voice of opposition. Reflecting on Monbiot (2016) claim that neoliberalism's power lies in the fact that it is nameless, loudly resonates of a similar 'culture' in contemporary society.

Yet as Carrette and King (2005, p. 12) point out:

We are never obliged to accept the dominant version of reality (however conceived throughout history) without question. As human beings, we are able to challenge regimes of thought-control, but only if we become aware of them, and of the possibility of alternatives... Political, legal, educational, financial, religious and media institutions attempt to define 'truth' and inform the values through which people understand the world. (brackets in the original).

Finding an alternative education route

Although Margaret Thatcher would have had us believe that in response to neoliberal dogma; 'there is no alternative' (Berlinski, 2008), history shows us, that groups do gather and organise themselves to challenge dominant systems (Carrette and King, 2005, Finnegan, 2016). For example, according to Quilty et al. (2016 p.29) the backdrop of our formal Irish education sector has been up until present day been influenced by the ruling force of the Catholic Church and they exercised their power by means of exclusion, coercion and control. The authors suggest that it was mostly groups of women who challenged this in the 1970s and 1980's.

Nowadays, with the advent of technologies such as the internet and social media outlets, movements who wish to challenge ruling forces have a greater platform for "grassroots organisation and communicative exchange across local, national, transnational, continental and global fora is now much enhanced" (Castelles, 2009 cited by Finnegan, 2016 p. 50). Finnegan highlights that movements are grouping together through this platform against neoliberalism and this has also led to experiments in methods of democratic education (2016. p.51).

Signalling that community and informal education practice, despite coercion and control from the ruling elite will always find a platform, because by its nature, it brings a group of people from a community together “who perceive common needs and problems, have a sense of identity and a common sense of objectives” (Tett, 2006, cited by Fitzsimons, 2017).

Conclusion:

Neoliberalism is an economic dogma that serves individual self-interest through policies such as privatisation, deregulation, tax cuts for the wealthy and globalisation (Giroux, 2014, Fitzsimons, 2017). Given the changes in society in the last forty years, granted that development and technological advances in areas such as science and communications are to be welcomed. It could be argued that our mental health is being affected by neoliberal ideology and not just a ‘chemical imbalance of the brain’.

Also, worth considering are the recent structural changes in adult and community education, as evidence would suggest that the value of being ‘job-ready’ takes priority over personal development and well-being not to mention the realisation of our “full human potential” (DOES, 2000 p. 29).

As Lynch et.al (2012) point to a two-tier society being created while the divide between the rich and poor gets wider as result of neoliberal policies. To summarise in the words of Mofid (2016 p.1):

unless we address and tackle the causes of injustice, inhumanity, poverty (spiritual and material), inequality, loneliness, anger, frustration, hopelessness..., resultant from neo-liberal economic policies, then, the world falls deeper and deeper into the abyss.

It is these issues and feelings that my next section of this chapter turns to.

Part Two

In this section I introduce Maslow's theory of self-transcendence and introduce Paulo Freire who advocated for a social transformation through his theory of conscientisation for social change. Here, I put forward a theatrical argument for self-transcendence and the development of reflexivity, comparing the similarities to Freire's critical consciousness theory. I highlight some of the teachings of A Course in Miracles, which encourages us to reach our highest human potential and overcome subversions as outlined in part one, through praxis¹.

Self-transcendence

As mentioned in the introduction chapter, Maslow identified a sixth human development need which he called 'Self-transcendence' and it is from this theoretical framework, I pin this section's discussion

Self-transcendence is a deep and universal human need to reach beyond oneself and serve something greater (Frankl, 1959) According to Reed (1991b) self-transcendence was originally hypothesised as a basic developmental process for well-being for those facing significant life-events and end-of-life issues. Reed (1991b) claimed that self-transcendence has been identified as a developmental theory relevant to mental health, including depressive illness and emotional well-being.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Abraham H. Maslow (1908-1970) is recognised as being one of the most important modern psychologists (Kolto-Riveria, 2006)

During the first half of the 20th century, the central theories in psychology had been delivered in two movements. The first wave, introduced *psychoanalysis* by Sigmund Freud and the second wave: *behaviourism* by J. B. Watson and B. F. Skinner. According to Needs (2017) both regarded humans as faulty machines. Also in their different ways, psychoanalysis and behaviourism had:

dehumanized our understanding of ourselves and what it means to be human. In the middle of this century, we saw Nazism, Communism, mechanized warfare, systematic genocide and psychology was unintentionally providing a scientific "justification" for such horrors (Needs, 2017 p.1)

¹ See page 27

Maslow was disheartened by these attempts to reduce human psychology to mindless machines and was resolute to find what created positive mental health and happiness, not just mental illness and misery (Needs, 2017). Maslow is credited as being responsible for generating a third wave of psychology called ‘humanistic psychology’ (Needs, 2017) Maslow’s theory of motivation was based on a framework of man having five needs: physiological, safety, belonging, esteem and self-actualisation (see figure 1. below).

Maslow posited that human needs are arranged in a hierarchy and said:

It is quite true that man lives by bread alone—when there is no bread. But what happens to man’s desires when there is plenty of bread and when his belly is chronically filled?

At once other (and “higher”) needs emerge and these, rather than physiological hungers, dominate the organism. And when these in turn are satisfied, again new (and still “higher”) needs emerge and so on. This is what we mean by saying that the basic human needs are organized into a hierarchy of relative propensity.

(Maslow, 1943, p. 375)



Figure 1.

The above diagram depicts the five initial motivational needs as described by Maslow and each in the ascending order in the hierarchy. Kolto-Riveria (2006) purports that this image although the conventional description Maslow’s (1943, 1954) hierarchy of needs and is in fact inaccurate. He goes on to highlight that Maslow amended his theory and incorporated self-transcendence above self-actualisation.

Kolto-Riveria explains that the reason why Maslow’s ‘sixth need’ isn’t well known is because by the time Maslow developed this construct, he had only managed to publish it as the first article in the new Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, which he founded,

before he took ill and died some months after. It is also speculated that for many years following his death, self-transcendence wasn't seen to be an acceptable theory for organised psychology of the day and or indeed by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) (Koltko-Riveria, 2006).

Nevertheless, in Maslow's original framework, the highest form of motivational development is; self-actualisation meaning the accomplishment of needs which allow for meaning in life (Olson, 2013). Maslow claimed that this varied from person to person and in his own words he summarises it as being;

In one individual, it may take the form of the desire to be an ideal mother, in another it may be expressed athletically, and in still another it may be expressed in painting pictures or in inventions.

(Maslow, 1943, pp. 382–383).

Maslow recognised that this was a stage of human development that was driven by the individual self or ego and that there was something missing. (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). His theory that the highest form of human development is at the transpersonal level where the self/ ego is surpassed. It is at this level when a person chooses to lay down their sword (ego) with the intention to be in service of others and some higher force, that man realises his absolute full potential (ACIM, 1976, Wong, 2014).

At around this time a Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1921- 1997) was working toward his theory of 'conscientisation' (Freire, 1970). Freire maintained that societal development is a critical process which depends upon uncovering real problems and actual needs. He believed that through reflection and action, critical awareness of one's social reality, could be achieved. He named this exercise 'praxis' (Freire, 1970).

Although Maslow pertains his theory of transformation to the individual (micro level), Freire seeks to emancipate a wider societal audience (macro). Maslow's self-transcendence theory has similarities to Freire's teachings, in that they both seek for the highest level of human development (Shirur, 2009)

Freire

Paulo Freire is considered the founding father of critical pedagogy (Bhattacharya, 2011). He established liberating educational praxis in the milieu of his work with communities experiencing extreme poverty and social inequalities as well as highly oppressive

governments in Latin America in the 1950s and 1960's (Campbell, 2010). Freire was one of the first education theorists to maintain that formal schooling was a means to dominate (Campbell, 2010). He highlighted this in what he called the 'banking system' of education (Freire, 1970). This system is where 'teacher' (including institutions and all those responsible for learning initiatives and policy) has full control (and/ or power) over the curriculum. By highlighting the inadequacies of this model of education, Freire not only designed but advocated for an alternative pedagogy which sought through praxis to transform and liberate via dialog² and to awaken consciousness through his theory of critical consciousness (hooks, 1994)

Conscientisation/ critical consciousness

As a philosopher of education, Freire sought to enhance the human experience for those considered to be marginalised by society (hooks, 1995, Giroux, 2014). Key elements of his conscientisation theory are consciousness and critical questioning which he describes as;

A requirement for our human condition. It is one of the roads we have to follow if we are to deepen our awareness of our world, of facts, of events, of the demands of human consciousness to develop our capacity for epistemological curiosity.
(Freire, 2001, p.55)

He used the description of 'subject' and 'object' to define man's position in his world. The title of 'subject' was given when referring to the dominant group and the term 'object' indicates a lower status position (Freire, 1970). Freire ascertained that it is the dominant class (A), whom whilst a minority hold power over the popular classes (B). He claims to be certain that "man's relation to reality, expressed as a Subject to an object, results in knowledge, which man could express through language" (Freire, 1974, p. 41).

Freire recognises that this 'knowledge' is always open to the interpretation of an individual whilst they apprehend the root cause of a problem or situation or what he refers to as 'causal links' (Freire, 1970). Freire maintains that the more "accurately men are able to grasp true causality, the more critical their understanding of reality will be" (Freire, 1974 p. 41). He believed that once man perceives a problem or challenge, his reaction or action is based on his understanding of the situation and this is informed by the level of consciousness in which he makes his decisions. (Freire, 1974).

² See page 30

He highlighted different layers of consciousness and defined these as being: naïve, critical and magical. “Naïve consciousness is seeing causality as a static, established fact and is thus deceived in its perception. Critical consciousness always submits that causality to analysis: what is true today may not be true tomorrow... Magic consciousness .. is characterised by fatalism, which leads men to fold their arms, resigned to the impossibility of resisting the power of facts” (Freire, 1974, p. 41).

Freire juxtaposes these three conditions and states that “critical consciousness is integrated with reality: naïve consciousness superimposes itself on reality: and fanatical consciousness, whose pathological naivete leads to the irrational, adapts to reality” Freire, 1974, p.42). Thus, Freire felt that those who experience this form of consciousness were aware of the oppression they experienced, yet felt resigned to accept it.

It is worth considering that new ‘capitalist spiritualism’ (Carrett and King, 2005) which is presently popular could be considered as purporting levels of ‘naïve and magic consciousness’. For reasons as discussed in part one or as King (2004 p. 27) that this type of “privatised spirituality” is like a “cultural prozac' (the opium of the people)” which leads to pacification and insensitivity to social responsibility (Kee, 2004, Carrett and King, 2005)

Freire’s theory of Conscientisation “implies the critical insertion of the person into the demythologized reality. It is first of all an effort to enlighten people about the obstacles preventing them from a clear perception of reality” (Freire, 1970i, p.30). To achieve the overriding of the naïve and/ or magic state(s) so that critical consciousness can surface he proposed the following:

an active, dialogical, critical and criticism-stimulating method, changing the programme content of education, the use of techniques like thematic “breakdown” and “codification”.

(Freire, 1974. p.42)

Freire then based these methods on dialogue signifying communication and intercommunication between (as already mentioned) A and B as a horizontal discourse (Freire, 1974).

Dialog

Dialog for Freire is the basis of open communication and true education (Freire, 1977). He established that dialogue be utilised as a teaching tool to “interpret” and “discover” in a critical fashion the world and oneself, to reveal the historical processes that shape the person.

For Freire, in education setting the praxis of ‘dialog’ is to afford the teacher and the student opportunity to share equal status and have a chance to learn from each other. This was one of the central themes throughout Freire’s work. He considered the importance of humanity i.e. the ‘I’ that is ‘me’ acknowledges and respects the ‘other’ that is ‘you’.

Fundamental to the success of Freire’s theory is the opportunity for love and understanding which aims to provide space for a humanizing relationship to develop: Humanising change can only happen through “a process involving love and solidarity” (Morrow & Torres, 2002, p.135) Freire claimed, “when I do not love the world -when I do not love life -when I do not love people -I cannot start a dialog” (Freire, 1977, p.104).

Freire encourages us to consider that education be a process which is maintained by the loving connection between a teacher and the student, through which they both obtain self-knowledge and recognition. (Cho. 2005). This self-knowledge to which he refers, is reflexivity. Nevertheless, I believe that to love and accept another, we must first love and accept ourselves. Not in a narcissistic, selfish, individualistic sense. But in reaching an understanding of who the ‘I’ that calls itself ‘I’. Or to take inspiration from the inscription over an ancient Greek temple in Delphi: ‘*Gnothi Seauton*’, in other words ‘Know Thyself’.

Self-transcendence is about waking-up to who we really are. Although, Freire talks about ‘awakening consciousness on the part of the masses’, nowhere does he elaborate how this can be achieved on an individual level (Taylor, P.V. 1993, p: 62). Nevertheless, I highlight that it has been purported by many spiritual activists that to see a change in the world, that change must first happen within (Buddha, Rumi, Gandhi, Frankl, 1959, Tolle, 1999).

In an effort for this change to occur, one must become reflective whereby we challenge our own inner dialogs for attitudes and prejudices. (Ledwith, 2007a, McCormack and Ryan, 2011).

Reflexivity... is the capacity to be aware of ourselves in the practice of listening to another person, the capacity to use what we are aware of in that listening in the service of the client while at the same time being critically aware of our own frames of reference and the extent to which they are interfering with or facilitating the work we are doing with a client. This requires the practitioner not only to listen to the client and to themselves as they listen, but also to the wider organisational, community and social contexts in which they find themselves.

(McCormack and Ryan, 2011, p. 7)

I believe that to achieve this level awareness we must first train our minds. As Fromm (1993, p.50) recommends, one should find a form of meditation that aims to “achieve a higher degree of non-attachment, of non-greed, and of non-illusion”. For this he recommends a “Buddhist mediation” (p. 50). Nevertheless, as highlighted, in chapter one, there are many paths leading to self-transcendence and these all point to practice of the quieting the mind, to the dimension of no thought (Tolle, 1999).

Meditation

Meditation is a sole exercise and the method requires ‘practice’. Nevertheless, like McCormack and Ryan (2011), Fromm (1993) claims that ‘right’ mindfulness needs to be applied on a moment by moment basis. By becoming attentive to all thoughts and feelings even if we find ourselves in a chaotic environment, we allow ourselves the opportunity for awareness to inform our decisions, judgements and reactions.

Our thinking and/ or behaviour now becomes a choice as opposed to an automatic response, based on beliefs accessible in memory which guide our corresponding behaviour and/ or emotion (Ajzen and Fishbien, 2000). As Victor Frankl, neurologist, psychiatrist as well as a Holocaust survivor. claimed "everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances" (1946, p.86).

In the words of Sri Ramana Maharshi, possibly the most famous sage of the twentieth century both in India and the rest of the world, “the mind is nothing but thoughts” (Maharshi, 1985, p. 57). We don’t have the power to stop whatever thoughts slip into our coconsciousness. But we do have the power to choose, how they make us think, feel and act (ACIM, 1976). Through the practice of examination, we can become aware of their

source. For example, for someone who is oppressed by others, their thoughts may be: “I’m not worthy”, “I deserve to be treated this way”, “I have no power therefore I must be content with my lot”. On closer and critical investigation of these thoughts, one can only conclude, as Freire maintained these are ‘myths’ (Freire, 1971), Engels; ‘false consciousness and ACIM, (1976) the voice for ‘ego’.

As per the teaching of ACIM, it maintains that through reflexive practice, when you strip every thought back to its original source, it either stems from fear (‘ego’) or Love (higher source) (ACIM, 1976). As a guide, ACIM claims that if the thought is not loving, peaceful or joyful, then it is fear based (ACIM, 1976). Sounds simple, but it is hard to do on a continuing basis (Fromm, 1993).

ACIM warns that we are in fact too tolerant of mind wandering and this allows the voice for ego to govern our lives, and hence create our reality. An example of this would be when our thinking leads us living in the past, regurgitating old stories. Or thinking about the future and simulating ‘what if’ scenarios and imaginings of how we will respond or worries of what other may people think (ACIM, 1976). ACIM reminds us that this has nothing to do with the present moment and this thinking is what Buddhists refer to as ‘monkey mind’.

As per the teaching, of ACIM, we are One with the ‘I am’, ‘Pure Consciousness’ or the “true Self” (Maharshi, 1985, p. 201) and each other. The daily practice of meditation allows us to experience this for ourselves and develop a habit of reflexive awareness in our private practice but also in our all activities (ACIM, 1976, Fromm, 1993, Wong, 2014). The journey to self-transcendence is purported as not being an easy one. Benedict de Spinoza approximately, three hundred and fifty years ago, cited in Fromm (1993) said:

If the way which, as I have shown... seems difficult, it can nevertheless be found. It must indeed be difficult since it is so seldom discovered, for if salvation lay ready to hand and could be discovered without great labour, how could it be possible that it could be neglected by almost everybody?

(cited in Fromm, 1993, p. 82)

Self-transcendence and social change

Fromm points that contemporary psychology highlighted within this study as being ‘capitalist spiritualism’ (Carrette and King, 2005) is useful economically because it manufactures:

illusion-producing ideology. It is harmful to human beings because it tends to increase their alienation. It is fraudulent when it pretends to be based on the ideas of self-knowledge as the humanistic tradition.

(Fromm, 1993, p 86)

On the other hand, Fromm claims that the opposite to this is: ‘adjustment psychology’, which is radical because it knows that conscious thought is mostly a fabric of illusions and falsehood” (Fromm, 1993, p. 86). He argues that this true knowledge of self and others “liberates man and it is conducive to his well-being” (1993, p.86).

As outlined above, practicing tools for self-transcendence leads to this ‘knowledge and an accomplishment of becoming ‘fully human’ (Frankl, 1946). According to Wong (2014) almost all literature on personal development focuses on the self, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-actualization. However, in contrast, those who purport self-transcendence, as a path towards fulfilment of one’s potential is not through constant self-referral, but rather serving others as a reference point (Frankl, 1946, Wong, 2014).

I leave this argument, leaning on the words of a sixth century spiritual social activist, who sought to change the caste system, that divided his fellow people based on their birth.

A man struggling for existence will naturally look for something of value. There are two ways of looking... if he looks in the right direction, he recognizes the true nature of sickness, old age, and death, and then he searches for meaning in that which transcends all human suffering. In my life of pleasures, I seem to be looking in the wrong way.

(Buddha, 1966, p. 8)

Conclusion:

Maslow developed a theory that human development had a hierarchy of needs which took ascending order. He claimed that our final need was ‘self-transcendence’ which means to go beyond one’s egoic drives and impulses and serve a higher purpose e.g. others and/ or a higher Source. Freire, claimed that through critical consciousness we could identify the source of our problems and through a ‘dialogic’ approach ‘reflect’ and take ‘action’ to overcome oppression and coercions. Freire argues that the current system of education continues to dominate the popular classes and proposes that the teacher and student share equal status and learn from each other. I argue that this won’t happen until the ‘teacher’ understands and knows him/ herself first. Through the practice of tools for self-transcendence this can be achieved. This takes training and effort (a continuous practice of reflexivity) and according to Spinoza, isn’t always an easy task.

Chapter 3

Research Design

Fear is in your head... The writings on the wall.. Love will clean the mind and makes it Free.

Bowie, 1971

Journey to the Paradigm

This chapter highlights the design, structure and actions that I undertook to uncover my research question:

In an era of neoliberalism and inequality, can self-transcendence foster conscientisation for social transformation?

In the introduction chapter, I mention that I belong to an informal community education group that seeks to achieve Maslow's sixth need of human development: self-transcendence (Maslow, 1969a). I believe that the long-term experience this group affords me the privileged position to conduct such a study. According to Lofland (1971) and McLeod (1996) being familiar with the area one is researching is highly effective in collating relevant information.

Initially, as a new student to the field of research, I had to explore various praxis of methodologies to ascertain which one would best suit my topic. I discovered early on that given the subject matter, my research would require the employment of a qualitative study. There are many features to this methodology such as "a lack of strict structure, loosely planned designs geared to capture the reality in action,... close contact with the respondent, and context sensitivity (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 50) to name but a few. Nevertheless, my rational for choosing this paradigm was two-fold.

Primarily, evidence from the literature concerning qualitative research suggests that this model is much more concerned with the personal experiences of the individuals being studied. Secondly, by observing what people do and say, this archetype of study integrates an opportunity to collect, analyse and interpret this form of data (Habib et al., 2014). It appeared to me to be a more holistic form of exploration and configured to the approach of education for transformation which I believe my research participants and I would be more familiar with.

Naming my research world

Given that the two groups that participated in this study are all women. It struck me that in my many years of experience of attending groups, seminars and conferences pertaining to this subject area, it is more women who seek to come together to learn, share, explore and support each other through this inner transformative process. It seemed that feminism would be a core influence as researcher methodology is guided by the essential theoretical paradigm and nature of the research topic (Sarantakos, 2005).

A feminist researcher

Although, feminist research perceives the social construction of gender to be at the centre of one's inquiry (Lather, 1988), I admit that initially I had difficulty relating this aspect to the goal of my project. However, to be true to my thesis, I instinctively knew that it was my own limited thinking about feminism that needed to be addressed. Space forbids a detailed account of my education in this area but I am very grateful to those who transformed my thinking of this subject, mainly; Lather 1988; Letherby, 2005; and Oakley, 1990. As a result, I now conclude that our perceived reality is very much affected by this social construct and each of us needs to consider that we are still living in a society which is still very much dominated by patriarchy, see chapter two, part one. Or as Ortner (2014) considers and which I will allow to appraise my new-found knowledge:

Patriarchy... persists quite vigorously and often brutally in contemporary society, not only as a thing in itself, but also as a form of power that intersects with, and organizes, major institutions of twentieth- and twenty-first-century capitalism: the industrial production site, the military, and the corporation.

(Ortner, 2014 p. 530)

Once, I began looking through this lens, I could see that even the literature I was depending upon to inform my theoretical framework was in fact biased towards men also. For example, Freire never mentions women once in 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1970) and later admits that he was gender blind in his writing. While *A Course of Miracles* (1976) claims we are all sons of God as opposed to a more inclusive description we are all; 'children'. Therefore, it seemed a natural fit that feminist research methodology would be utilised in this piece, given that it also supports "dialogue and reflexivity and through this; design, data, and theory emerge, with data being recognized as generated from people in a relationship" (Lather, 1988, p.572) i.e. the group.

Another important aspect in utilising this method which I considered was as Lather also suggests:

in a praxis-oriented investigation, mutually educative progression is more important than product and that empowering methods contribute to consciousness-raising and transformative social action (1988 p. 572).

I identified that the feminism approach that I relate to also incorporates aspects of social constructivism.

Social constructivism

I anticipated that other aspects of this paradigm (social constructivism) would also feature in my research methodology. This approach is characterised by several conventions which I could identify with and wished to employ in my methodology which include and as per Crotty (1998): (1) Trust in participant's perspective(s) of the subject being studied and ensure that open-ended questions are employed to allow for this. (2) Identify that the researcher shapes the interpretation of the research based on his/ her own background, culture and history. (3) Accept that people seek to understand the social world in which they find themselves.

Crotty's steps for social constructivism, embodied a praxis of reflexivity that I could relate to. Not only, could I visualise how these would empower my interviewees but I felt that these would also afford me the opportunity to hone my own skills.

Also, I felt that these three attributes would provide a more honest representation of data collected for my participants as well as myself. I believe that everyone has their own truth to tell and that this depends on various background factors or as Creswell (2014) more eloquently puts it:

Humans engage with their world and make sense of it based on their historical and social perspective – we are born into a world of meaning bestowed upon us by our culture. Thus, qualitative researchers seek to understand the context or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information generally (Creswell, 2014 p. 9)

The feminist influenced, social constructivist paradigm, as I have mentioned above has the integration of reflexivity within its fabric. However, I wish to specifically give an addition discussion because this methodology (reflexivity) underpins this whole thesis.

As discussed in chapter 2, I believe that critical consciousness and tools advocated for self-transcendence have reflection at the core of their epistemology and hence this practice was be crucial to all phases of my research process.

Reflexivity as a paradigm

Reflexivity has been increasingly documented as a critical strategy in the process of creating knowledge by means of qualitative research (Ahmed Dunya et al., 2011; Blaxter et al., 2006; Berger, 2013; D'Cruz et al., 2007).

Given my familiarity with the topic, this theory stresses the importance of self-monitoring throughout the process for the identification of personal biases and opinions (McCormack and Ryan, 2011). It also warns against the deficit of balance between the personal (micro) and universal (macro) in terms of the creation of knowledge, which is the intended endeavour. This is perhaps the most distinguishing feature of this method (Berger, 2013).

Research approach

Deciding how best to carry out my qualitative study turned out to be the easiest decision of the whole process. Given that Freire, recognises the importance of dialogue in a horizontal and loving pedagogy, for me this pointed to a focus group setting. Dewey (1925) claimed human beings are best understood in relation to their environment and therefore I felt it was necessary to interview the group in settings that they are used to, mainly, in private household living rooms.

I also discovered that focus groups are recommended to novice qualitative researchers (Davis and Hughes, 2014) to avoid trying to cover too much ground. These authors consider that this is achieved by first completing a literature review of available works concerning the subject to be addressed, followed by incorporating elements of “exploratory discussions, observation and creative thought” (Davis and Hughes, p.194). They go on to maintain that this work leads to the identification of possible sub-topics that the target group may have opinions and feelings about (Davis and Hughes, 2014). I was satisfied that this ‘formula’ would best serve my purpose and as Krueger claims

“focus group interview works because it taps into human tendencies” (Krueger, 1998, p. 23) which compliments my motivation for completing this study.

However, one of the disadvantages that I did consider of using a focus group is the assumption that people are aware of how they feel. According to Krueger, it is presumed that people form their own opinions in seclusion. He also highlights that some people may need to listen to others before drawing their own conclusion. He claims that evidence from focus group interviews suggest that people are influenced by each other’s comments and to be aware of this shift (Krueger, 1988).

The Participants

At first, I had just planned to interview the experiences of my own group known as ‘insider’ research. However, through a series of reflections I felt that to give my research more authority, I needed to produce a larger yield in terms of numbers of participant experience as well as spanning a wider geographical area. I acknowledge that this was a lack of confidence on my part in terms of my own belief in the validity of my subject area for an MEd. academic study.

My initial plan was to conduct three focus groups. Two in Donegal (one in Letterkenny and the other in South Donegal) and one in Dublin so that data could be collected from groups who shared similar learning interests but from different geographical areas. The focus groups in each area were already established. I deliberately identified and recruited these groups as they met the criteria for inclusion.

Participants were asked if they would like to participate in the research by either myself or their group leader or to use a research technical term for their position; ‘a gate keeper’ (Saunders, 2006, p. 49). The group in Letterkenny is currently made up of six regular members including myself. The group in South Donegal has eight regular members and five members were available to take part.

I was aware that one of the disadvantages of recruiting from established groups was that there could be subtle dynamics at play, regarding formal and informal communications that could influence responses because as Krueger warns “superior-subordinate relationships among participants can inhibit discussion” (Krueger, 1998a, p. 97).

Invitation to the Participants

First, I rang each participating member in the Letterkenny group and spoke to them about my intention to research the ‘learning’ experiences of our group. Upon receiving their positive feedback and support, my fears of power struggles were alleviated.

Regarding the other groups, I was aware of their existence, having met some of them on occasions at different events. I got in touch with the leader of the group in South Donegal and asked if they would like to participate in this research. A Thursday night was agreed to do an interview over my Easter break.

I had also invited a group in Dublin to participate. A focus group interview was arranged with them for the 6th of April. However, on the evening prior to this, I contacted their group leader to finalise details. Due to unforeseen circumstances, it had to be postponed and although it was rescheduled for the following week, unfortunately, it had to be cancelled. Subsequent events which will be discussed in this chapter prevented me from organising another date.

Ethics

Since this research process enters the world of my participants and deals with highly personal matter, ethical considerations were foremost taken in terms of decisions regarding the group.

These include the following:

‘Informed Consent’ was obtained from all participants at the start of each evening’s reflective conversation. I had initially consulted with members of the group in Letterkenny to see if they wished to devise their own consent form as part of the overall interview process but this invitation was declined.

A form outlining full disclosure regarding the nature and purpose of the research/investigation was given to each interviewee. This included: methodology, research approach, time and place and length of interview. Participants were informed and clearly reminded of the right to withhold information or involvement.

I was aware of my role as researcher could cause issues that would prevent open communications between members. I didn’t want them to feel under pressure to participate because of their relationship to me or other members.

Design of the interview guide

In the initial planning phase of this thesis, I created for myself a list of possible questions and arranged them into groups as per different areas I felt could be used in the interviews. As Davis and Hughes (2014) advise this was more of an open checklist to serve as guide and I was conscious of keeping it flexible enough to allow for other (unanticipated) material to arise within the groups conversation.

Notwithstanding this advice, I felt it was important to have this guide thoughtfully prepared even if wasn't to be used. I learned that regarding the development of good research questions, Agee (2009) claims the process involves understanding that inquiries into other people's lives is always an exercise in ethics. This inspired me to think about how I would like to be asked these questions and what my own response would be. I had to consider honestly, how much of myself I was prepared to share. Agee (2009) also advocates for a more rigorous and reflexive inquiry by developing emerging and refining questions which she claims can help a research generate discovery-oriented questions. I brainstormed in my journal what I considered to be all possible scenarios which helped in the development of my guide. I was mindful during this process that good qualitative questions ought to offer a passage of exploration and discovery, as Creswell (2007) suggests. However, Maxwell warned that starting with questions that are too focused can lead to 'tunnel vision' and can impede a researcher's understanding and analysis (Maxwell, 2005, p.67).

My 'guide' questions went through a metamorphosis and after a third re-write, I sought advice, from my supervisor to ascertain how appropriate the questions were about information they may elicit and their clarity, if I were to use them. She confirmed for me that my guide was open enough for purpose and in line with all the rational as highlighted in the literature. My guide included the questions: What motivated you to join this group? Can you describe what happens on a typical night? What do think works/ what doesn't work? What do you think is the 'learning' here? As a result, of your study do you feel that your perception of the world has changed and if so how? Would you say your practice of mindfulness has deepened as a result of being part of a group? Do you practice mindfulness on a regular basis? Has your study and the practice of mindfulness changed your life and if so how? How does this study and mindfulness help with any negative emotions in your personal and professional life? And how do you measure this?

Nevertheless, my supervisor pointed out, which I found to be extremely helpful, was her advice to ask the group at the end of the interview, is there anything else that hasn't been mentioned that they feel would be important to include. This turned out to be a light bulb moment and a question that I felt needed to be asked. Not only was this suggestion in keeping with the ethos of adult education philosophy and theory but with feminist, social constructivist and reflective research. Despite my efforts in generating potential questions, I missed a fundamental one. This affirmed for me the importance of collaboration and dialogue with others.

Due to time constraints, I considered myself to be diving straight into the interview process with no opportunity to practice my interviewing skills, which Mason (1996) considers essential to handle the social, intellectual and practical elements of interviews. Nevertheless, I was aware that I could rely on skills developed over the years as an adult educator and facilitator.

I felt it was very important to create a relaxed atmosphere as part of the interview process and one which would "promote self-disclosure" (Kitzinger, 1994, 1995; Krueger & Casey, 2000). I know from experience that for some this maybe an easy task but for others they may find the procedure more difficult or uncomfortable. To achieve a relaxed atmosphere, before I turned on the recording devices, I facilitated deep breathing exercises, a guided body scan and meditation to help relax the body and focus the mind into the present moment, please see Appendix 1.

Data Collection Procedures

I recorded my focus group interviews on a digital recorder as well as my mobile phone. The reason I recorded on two devices was to ensure that I had a contingency plan for that 'just in case' scenario. On my phone, I turned off all settings including wifi, cellular and network settings so that participants would not be disturbed or data effected by an unexpected call or text message. Once home, I downloaded the content on my phone onto the computer and saved it onto a fob and deleted the interviews of my mobile phone. I put the fob and the Dictaphone into my filing cabinet and made sure it was securely locked.

Analysis Breakdown

I transcribed the recordings first by hand and then typed up this data. My rational for this is because I wished to code my findings in coloured pens and cut and paste them to onto big sheets of paper in a graph format so that I could hand them on a wall and visually see a structured map of findings.

I found that the data had five emerging themes and I gave these each a category heading:

‘Motivation to join the group’ ‘Community Education in an Informal Setting’ Mental Health’ ‘Self-transcendence’ and Other. As this over arched into others I found I could code the data into additional sub-headings and double or triple lined them with colour pens corresponding to the five main themes, where appropriate.

I cut and pasted these all onto a roll of blank art wallpaper that my daughter lent me and hung the finished piece on the wall of the room I was using to study, which I kept locked when I wasn’t there. The process was very enjoyable. I then sat to work and began writing the findings. Light bulb moments struck me when I came across a piece of dialog similar to a theme that I found in the literature review. I found myself starting a provisional analysis chapter also. I then returned to the literature and coded using markers again, theoretical findings which paralleled with data using the same colours for easy dissemination.

Study limitations:

This study pertains to the lived experiences of ten women living in Donegal. Following, the cancelation of the Dublin group. I decided it would be better to focus on the groups in Donegal and dig deeper as it were by bringing the first interview findings back to them. During the Easter break, my son became critically ill and my first focus group interview with the group in South Donegal had to be cancelled. I wasn’t available to organise another interview. until several weeks after. Unfortunately, due to these rescheduling issues my research timetable and plan was disappointingly affected, as I didn’t have time to meet with the groups for further feedback.

During our stay in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) in Temple Street Hospital, Dublin, whilst my son, Rory was heavily sedated and we waited for a formal diagnosis, I was able employ the techniques that I had learned from being in this group and was able to bypass all fearful thoughts that this situation, would have brought up for me prior to my training.

Such as the big ‘What if....?’ followed by a panic of illusionary imagining of worst case scenarios.

Instead, I willed myself into a state of presence or as the Buddha refers to as ‘the middle way’ with no past and no future and just focused on allowing each moment to be. At some point, I can’t describe the feeling, but I remember experiencing an intense feeling of lightness and calm. I knew then he was to be ok. I accept, that we all try to think positively in these situations. And it may sound callous to some, but I wasn’t thinking that way. Not that that I didn’t pray. I did. But I wasn’t praying to God to make him better. I was praying for forgiveness. That whatever karma, (mine, Rory’s, our collective families or whoever) which had led to this critical situation coming into awareness for us would be healed.

I mentally held my boy in light, saw him as healed and repeated silently, non-stop, for hours on end, the ancient Hawaiian prayer of Ho’oponpono, which promotes taking responsibility and letting go of challenging life experiences. It is made up of four phrases;

I’m so sorry, I love you, please forgive me, I thank you

My son has made a remarkable recovery for which we as a family are so grateful. Upon reflection, the gift of this experience, reminded me not to take time spent with loved ones for granted because life as we know it, can change in a second and the old adage; our health is our wealth, rings true.

Other limitations considered is that there are many ‘paths’ to self-transcendence. This study mentions only two guides; *A Course in Miracles* and *A Way of Mastery*.

The scope of this study didn’t allow for a discussion of the differences between religion or spirituality.

Chapter Four

Experiential Reflections

‘Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery. None but ourselves can free our minds’.

Marley, (1980)

This chapter will outline the data collected during two focus group discussions in a rural and urban setting in Donegal. As discussed in chapter three, these two groups are already established and usually meet on a weekly basis for a few hours. Ten participants in total took part. The ages ranged from twenty to seventy years old. Participants are from a diverse range of religious, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds including; Catholic, Protestant, English, Irish and South African and hold various marital statuses. They are: Aine, Angel, Ann, Ellie, Florence, Janet, Patricia, Rose, Tara. And myself.

There are five main over-arching themes pertaining to categories as highlighted by both groups. These include; motivation to join the group, community education in an informal setting, mental health, self-transcendence and other. Sub-headings, for several categories will follow under the main themes.

I will introduce the theme and then I will demonstrate a participant’s response, using their pseudo name, followed by some verbatim extracts, identifying the person by their pseudo name. So that the reader will have a sense of how participants described their experience and insight in relation to the themes as they emerged.

Theme 1: Motivation to join this group

As mentioned in Chapter 3, one of my guide questions was to find out what motivated the members to join the group in the first place. Each participant was given an opportunity to describe their own narrative which lead them to this path of self-transcendence and to the group.

A common thread for most the participants was having read loads of books considered to be bibliotherapy or self-help, some they had participated in other similar type community education programmes, attended conferences/ seminars/ retreats before finding *A Course*

in Miracles (ACIM). I remember my own personal experience of requesting into the void to be shown a better way to be. Other interviewees claimed to have made similar requests and shortly after we were all shown *ACIM* through other people; chance meetings of distant acquaintances, new members joining other groups etc.

Another common thread for participants was their difficulty in reading and comprehending the material at first and this was one of the main motivators for many joining the group. The language and the way *ACIM* is presented has biblical connotations.

Ellie sums up the experience for the many members of the groups when she claims:

I had read every book under the sun until I found A Course in Miracles.

Theme 2: Community Education in an Informal Setting

In these neoliberal times, where the focus for funding education initiatives seems to be more about upskilling people for employment (see chapter 2). Yet as Connolly advocates;

Adult and community education is much more than just a continuous development of skills; it embraces self-knowledge, covering both thoughts and feelings about who we are” (Connolly, 2007).

The two groups involved in this research study set up because of an interest by its members in finding ‘a road map’ to this “self-knowledge” that Connolly (2007) suggests.

Every traveler/ explorer needs a guide, a map, a compass. The focus group interviewees study two spiritual works as previously mentioned *ACIM* and *Way of Mastery (WOM)*. Although these works purport to be a self-study programmes, this section aims to highlight the meaning and value of coming together under the aegis of an informal education setting to study these manuals.

2.1 The setting

According to Fitzsimons;

Community education refers to any localised, structured adult learning that happens outside of traditional institutions such as schools and colleges. This can be within.. independent community sector organisations,... training centres, health centres... people' s homes and whatever other premises are available.

(2017, pp. 4-5)

These groups gather in their group leaders houses and it is through word of mouth that their existence is made known. They have no funding and all the work involved is of a voluntary nature. Nevertheless, the door is open to anyone wishing to join. The informal nature of the group means that there is no pressure to stay for the short or long-term nor is there a requirement to turn up to every single session.

Ann said:

I like the fact that (the study of) the Way Of Mastery is officially every other Thursday and I do try to commit to that. The in-between Thursdays, I don't always get to them and there is no tie.. it is relaxed.

2.2 A Typical night

The format of the evening has no formal agenda except to come together, learn, discuss and support each other on the path to self-transcendence. The only scheduled routine they have is at the start of the evening, were they meditate as a group for approx. 10- 15 minutes either by listening to a guided mediation or music. Other activities as to what an evening may entail are collectively decided upon. Rodgers (2005) refers to this as 'liberation education' given that "there is no set sequence of learning; students engage with the material in their way and in their own sequence" (2005, p. 57)) This can include the reading a chapter from ACIM, WOM, watch an online video of other international teachers' present teachings of the work, play a game relating to the subject area and engage in a critical reflective discussion at the end.

2.3 Importance of coming together as a group

As specified previously, informal community education is about coming together as a group of people who share common problems and goals, identities and have a similar objectives. This next sub-section highlights the importance of this platform for the groups.

Ann:

So many subjects within what we talk about we couldn't talk about with anybody else. You wouldn't want to for a start because they wouldn't understand you and because basically when you don't even understand it yourself, you can come here and say it and maybe someone else will (pause) have had an experience of that. And also sometimes you can say a thing, just to say it, not to be helped, you don't

need somebody to say anything but you know in this space you can just say it and it is just the saying of it that helps and suddenly you think, oh I'm heard, that is all I needed."

For Florence::

getting support from other people in different ways... someone else might find something that someone else might not see and I suppose it is the more eyes on something, whatever it is, the more chance of seeing it clearly.

Patricia said:

We are coming here because we are seeking self-discovery really and that is it. It is a very wide subject. There is no end you know. And that is what we all have in common, we are all exploring ourselves together.

Janet reflected on the power of the group coming together and using the space to find answers or solutions to issues that a person(s) in the group would be having difficulty with.

It is unbelievable, cos there is stuff that happens in a group that you just couldn't make up. I mean there are nights that something might come up and Maureen might say "I'll just pick up the book now" and she'll read like a paragraph and (pause) and it will be like how the fuck did that happen (laughter from participants) do you know and things like, we will be talking about something or we might be playing a game and everybody there has got exactly what they needed and it is not just an odd occasion, it is like that every week. Yeah so much more powerful than you can really explain, just powerful, powerful.

Theme 3 Mental Health

According to WHO (World Health Organization), mental health is "a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community"(WHO 2001a, p.1) WHO stresses that mental health is not just the absence of mental disorder. (WHO, 2001a).

Mental health was an overarching theme that was discussed in both focus group interviews. It initially came up in the first instance during discussions about motivation to join the group. Experience of mental health issues paralleled with others and these

included suicide, depression and addiction among others such as lack of peace and fear based thinking and memories having an emotional charge of guilt and shame.

3.1 Suicide

Several participants spoke about losing a family member or a close friend to suicide, one participant considered this option at one point prior to joining the group.

Rose, recalls having to come home due to a family tragedy as her brother took his own life. She talked about how after her brother's death, she went back to the missionary in Africa for two years, but things were never the same again and claims that

“this was one of the things that made me really think about life”.

Angel spoke of what had drawn her to the group in the first place which was seeing the positive transformation in friend of hers, Aidan, through his own self study of ACIM. I was there standing beside him watching his transformation and I was like:

“oh this looks interesting”.

They decided to set up a weekly ACIM study group in Letterkenny, amongst five other interested friends. Shortly after one of the group members committed suicide and Angel describes how this event “just snowballed everything”.

She recalls, how for years, she attended every alternative therapy training group going. But after this tragedy happened, she dropped out of all other activities and consistently studied *A Course in Miracles*, with the help of other group members to get through the grieving process.

Angel describes this period as being:

“in shock, you know the guilt, guilt feelings...your friend commits suicide and then you kinda go God, what did I not see? what had I not done? you know, how did she find (pause).. so what happened then was I decided that this (ACIM) was going to be part of my life, not just something I stepped into for an hour a week, it would have to be 7 days a week. My children were young at the time and they would say “that bloody blue book” (laughter from group) but it was either that or I was going to have to go and get psychiatric help or something like that.. it was that severe, you know the guilt I was going through. But Aidan was very good to

me and he would help me read it paragraph by paragraph as I couldn't read it and I couldn't understand it either. But you know it just took time and having the Course was fantastic, it looks at the issue of guilt. So, to come to realise I had done nothing wrong, I wasn't guilty and I had nothing to fear (pause) you know the basic steps of the Course, to really take that on board made a big difference to me”

3.2 Depression

Depression was another issue for several participants; some had a direct experience, others had borne witness to a close family member experiencing this condition.

All the interviewees spoke about the importance of the group in helping them on this learning journey.

Aine sums up the experience as being:

“What I love about the group is that if you are weak someone else is stronger than you that day, in that moment and you can go you know “pull me through this” and it is about that Oneness, that we are stronger together than we are alone.

Participants mentioned that the mind-training of ACIM and WOM, allows them to identify their thoughts and feelings. They mentioned that even though they can't stop these from coming up into awareness, through a process of examination and allowance, they get to choose their effect.

3.3 Addiction

Addiction was another issue that was raised and three participants are members of Alcohol Anonymous. They all reflected that this journey has helped them with their addiction issues.

Rose tells of how before she came to the group, she was going to AA and “I didn't want to stop drinking and em because that was my only solace. I found it settled my nerves” She goes on to speak about the impact that had for her:

Here was three policemen and three nuns in the family and I was the one here now the alcoholic, the black sheep coming out of the woodwork and em I just felt you know, I was just dust walking me.

Those going to AA mentioned the overlap between ACIM and WOM teachings and the AA Twelve Step Programme. Tara identifies these as being “not having resentment, not blaming people, taking responsibility for your life” but she went on to claim that the ACIM teachings goes “much much deeper”.

Theme 4 Self-transcendence

This section is broken down into different sub-headings as pertaining to this subject: an overview, reflexivity, meditation, awareness and reflecting on transformation progress to date.

Overview

This path promises freedom from ‘ego’ thinking, ‘false consciousness’ or illusions by learning tools to become present, aware and reflexive of all thoughts and feelings going on in the mind. I opened this chapter with a lyric from Bob Marley (1980), advising us to free our minds, that no one else can do it for us. Self-transcendence is a journey to ‘wake-up’ to who we truly are; at one with great ‘I Am’ and each other (ACIM, 1976). As Marley points, it is a personal journey, however, we can support each other on the path towards inner transformation.

Patricia highlighted her experience by saying:

The more I get to know myself (pause) I begin to love myself more and relate well to myself, the more I begin to love and relate well to others.. I find also the more I dip into myself, the more grounded I am becoming and em (pause)...I become stronger, things bother me less and less, I become calmer, unafraid of life (pause) in commune with others more, emm, I have a stronger tie with other people (pause) less isolated, more at one with the world, with life, with everyone you know...

Both groups also pointed out that the rewards, as Patricia has highlighted above, of doing this work are that you feel calmer, more connected to self and others, less fearful etc. Yet, the findings suggest that it is not always easy to attain this level of consciousness and both groups mention it requires a lot of effort.

Ann’s example about when she first began learning these tools is an example of what others mentioned it to be like in the beginning. She also captures the frustration of the responsibility of being ‘mindful’ of thoughts on a continuum in an effort to reach self-transcendence.

Ann:

When you start on this spiritual journey and you start to know all this and I know you're supposed to go with the flow and hand things to God or whatever but sometimes it can be hard work and you know there is no going back. Maybe looking for that space before you knew any of this to just live, to be the Ann I used to know. And why do I have to have the responsibility for all of this.. I know youse already know that, without me having to say and I know you have probably felt similar things.. in the search”.

4.1 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a skill when you are able to actively listen to another person, whilst also being mindful of your own thoughts regarding your attitudes and prejudices that are possibly being triggered and your awareness of the wider social context of these triggers. The teachings of both these courses ask us to be vigilant to all thoughts and feelings, so that we can be discerning as to what is happening in our inner world, so that we can make informed decisions and choose how we wish to act and react.

This has lead the participants to become as Ellie highlighted;

You become very, very aware of your thinking. You develop an awareness that you can now watch yourself and others from that higher mind and just say ‘ok, what is this showing me?’ and it is just, I know I don’t have to react. Now I do get caught but I am fully aware of what I am doing which is good because you can’t go in at 100% when you are fully aware. What I mean is, you know, I would have really played the victim in the past if I had felt that someone had of (pause) done something that I felt wasn’t appropriate or (pause). And I may have gone to bed or have been throwing dishes. I would have doing whatever, temper, anger, you know, whereas now I may be annoyed but I won’t let it take over, I can move in and out of it. So, I don’t stay there which I think is huge, just a change in perception and that really is what a miracle is.

Tara affirms that reflexivity is to know that:

it doesn’t matter what anyone has done to you, it is your reaction, your interpretation of what the experience is bringing up that causes you to think and feel a certain way.

Tara also alludes that through the practice of meditation, this way of thinking becomes a habit, a shift from old patterns to new ways of thinking and claims

once you let that one nugget in, that nugget will be become a massive rock..

4.2 Awareness

Radical education permits for the discovery of one's truth, the truth that as human beings we are all equal. Realising this truth is a goal of A Course in Miracles.

The participants all spoke about this level of 'awareness'. The awareness they spoke about was a transformation in their thinking about the world and their place in it. The following extracts are examples of their shifts in their own ontological perspective.

Patricia describes this awareness as being aware of the teachings of this path which aims to get us to see that we are all one with each other.

The whole concept is huge, it is massive you know and an awful lot of people aren't aware, I mean I wasn't aware of it until recently. To look at what is going on in the world outside yourself or within another person, (to know) it is really all about yourself, you see because there really is only One. You really need to be aware of this because everything you see then is different, it changes everything you see, you know, everything, So, your kind of kept in the dark if you don't see that way."

Ellie continued to reflect that the awareness is to;

recognise that in each journey, we awaken a certain amount to the love we really are, the peace we really are, to look at everybody as one with you and to see the face of, I won't say Christ / God or whatever but to see the face of love, joy and peace within everyone of us. You know, no matter who or what we are and if we could only get to that and it ripples out, I mean there would be no war, there would be no starvation.

4.3 Meditation

Each participant in the group claimed to have a daily meditation practice without compromise. They spoke about having a regular time every day to practice and to turn up to that commitment. Aine spoke of the difficulties she had in the beginning and of counting down the seconds of just a five-minute practice when she first started. She now claims to be able to switch off and get into that 'space' wherever she is.

Nevertheless, it is not an experience you can put into words although the group did pertain to an unexplainable deep sense of peace, love and joy during and post practices.

Below is an extract of the Letterkenny groups discussion.

Ellie claims "once you know it, you know the benefit, you can't not do it".

Tara describes that after her daily practice

I feel wonderful, like walking on clouds for a while (pause).. and then something like the fucking kettle won't boil" (laughter from group) because you can slip. And you know when you have slipped because you are in pain"

Following Tara's comments, that it isn't easy stay in the 'zone', a lively discussion took place these comments, that demonstrates reflexivity.

- Aine But sometimes, you can't see it, you are so stuck in it
- Tara Or your hanging on to it because you want to be right
- Aine Or you want to feed the dragon, the drama
- Elllie Or you want to be the victim
- Angel But you have got the awareness if you want to do it or not
- Aine: Yeah, but the drama, we are addicted to it
- Ellie We are so addicted to it
- Tara We are like that bloody or...
- Ellie How dare you
- Tara Even in the car 'dickhead' is my favourite word
- Ellie Yeah I'm abit like that (pause) but you know you're hurting and causing pain for yourself. And maybe not this incident but because it is your own anger you've brought up and you're playing the victim. And you know you are always playing the victim when you feel pain.

Rose, a former nun claims that

I am being nourished spiritually. I think I came in famished. But now this awareness of spirit life and I am developing it. And you know not making marked progress in the sense of big lights or anything but it is just a little gradual. And then through finding that others seem to be advanced or gosh she is very deep and then I begin to worry about maybe I should be working harder. But then I go home and I think about it and I just say really this is the work of the Spirit, not me.

4.4 Reflecting on their transformation to date

All of the participants acknowledged that they had changed on some level and that this was having a positive impact on their own lives as well as their families and wider community. They also referred to what Ann mentioned earlier and Janet says succinctly:

“you can’t ever go back once you start to wake up”.

Aine invokes a sense of achievement by highlighting:

“I know personally I have been transformed, how my thinking has been transformed. It is still (pause) a work in progress but I look around this room and it is to see all of you and that is what keeps me going and that is the ripple effect. I see the change in every single person and I think wow”.

Rose talked about the moment of her transformation. It started when Janet invited her to a retreat and this was her first introduction to this type of spirituality.

One of the vivid moments I remember was Nouck (the facilitator) began to go into this thing, telling us how beautiful and how good we were and I couldn’t take it.. I went into convulsions of crying because I was never told I was good in my life. I was good after I did something ‘ah you’re a very good girl’ because you brought in the turf or something like that. And certainly, in the Order you were never praised because it would be pride and because of that you were never appreciated for nothing. And when I left the Order they said “we owe you nothing” (pause).. But that first retreat burst the dam for me and I felt very different, now I didn’t see myself as different, I just felt it was the same old two and six coming back. But I just felt it was about me, my life, not about other peoples. I spent my life pleasing people, I didn’t know who I was. But after that retreat things began to change for me and then Janet began this this thing and I began to see things from a different way. It didn’t happen straight away. A drip, drip process. But you know what I find is I am not looking outside myself anymore for what would you say cures for my spiritual life or my mental life. I find what I have to do em its inner work and that is where I would be at the moment.

Janet talked about the fact that before she was on this path she says:

I was a shit mother, I really was horrendous.

She tells of overhearing a conversation recently between her daughter and her boyfriend who was giving out about his own family and she heard her daughter say:

“Oh, mum used to be like that”.

And her boyfriend replied: “no, she is alright”.

And her daughter told him back “No, she has calmed down”.

Janet laughs and goes on to say:

and you don’t know why but you do just change and we teach it to others in how we are.

Many of the participants shared this view. Initially, when they had started they would have had the experience of wanting other family members to join them on this path because they could see the benefit or as Ellie said:

because it helps you so much you really want to help others

But they have all come to realise that the best way to bring the teaching to others is as Janet pointed out by example.

They also felt because of the learning, it is important, as Aine said:

to allow people their own journey.

Ellie reflects about her transformation experience;

So if I am angry, chances are I may react or say I am fearful. I don’t want to feel that fear, so what will I do? I will go and do anything to get away from it. But that fear is still there. So, if I just sit with it and allow it to rise, look at it, you realise that there is nothing there, it is just a thought and we can have control over those thoughts.

Theme 5 Other

There were other findings that came up that also pertained to each other but the scope of this study doesn’t allow for further discussion. These were: the language of A Course in Miracles / Religion / God.

ACIM does have biblical connotations in the way that it was written. However, a majority of both groups are dismissive of organised religion and in particular the Roman Catholic Church, which many of the interviewees grew up under its influence.

Patrica claims as a young girl growing up in Ireland in the 1950's she felt that:

the whole system didn't feel right you know, it was very confining, very suffocating, very narrow. Education and religion, there was something very insular especially in the country in Ireland. What I am doing right now in the WOM for example em (pause) I find that very exciting and very comforting em I wouldn't have been open to that kind of material as a young person you know and I find it right now really really helpful

Prior to her decision to leave the missionary in Africa, Rose describes her circumstances as:

I just couldn't hack it. I just thought there was no religious life because the motto there was work was prayer and I found if I went to pray I was so exhausted I couldn't pray and with seminary work I couldn't see the prayer in it. I am always amazed now that Janet never told me about all this spirituality that was going on because I was googling prayer groups but I didn't want a prayer group of saying prayers because I had practiced religion, I had practiced religiosity for years and it wasn't religion (pause) as I didn't agree with half the stuff the Catholic Church was teaching in the Sudro or in Ireland.

Ellie reflected on the fact that given these two works have religious overtones, it is difficult to discuss the subject outside of the groups.

There is huge resistance. You mention the word God and it is like it is a religion and it is only because we have been conditioned to think a certain way. I mean we were taught miracles are only something Jesus can perform. But the Christ is within all of us and we all have that power, we just don't know we have it.

Aine responded to Joanne's comment with

And so you know what is interesting, when you say that, that is the kind of conversation I would have been resisting when I first came to ACIM (pause) I can listen to that now and get it because I feel that transformation, that peace. But at the start I would have been running out the door. I suppose because growing up I had seen some terrible things happen to people around me and you know the community stood back and did nothing and they were all Christ lovers and it was all holier than thou and I know that is a judgement but (pause).

Janet summed up the teachings when she said:

It is not about being nicey, nicey, it is about being real. And you know sometimes it is shit and you feel terrible. But it is about not blaming or being blamed. It is about what is happening; what is it that I need so I can heal this? Or what do I need to look at? And you don't have to do it on your own. You know sometimes to get perspective on it is good because sometimes it can become too big a thing

Ellie reflects that the teachings could perhaps attract a wider audience if the language were to be change:

The teachings could be opened up to a greater amount of people if it didn't have the word God, Christ (pause) because it is not a religion, it states categorically it is not a religion and it is not to be used as a religion.

The words 'God' and 'Christ' were an issue for most participants. Most interviewees claimed that it wasn't until they experienced peace, joy and love that the resistance to these religious names were dropped.

Summary

Both groups were very open in sharing their experiences. I am humbled that they allowed and trusted me to share in dark episodes of their past.

There is one over-arching theme that spans into nearly all the findings: reflectivity. The participants demonstrated how they are using this skill to take responsibility and control of their thinking, feeling and actions. Given that it features in most of the themes, it demonstrates that these women are using it as on a continual basis, as much as possible.

The findings reveal that they have a practice of critical consciousness, on a personal level. They report to have witnessed the positive change in others in their group as well as themselves. However, they claim it is not an overnight remedy and some have been in the group for several years. As Rose pointed out, they all seem to be experiencing different levels of transcendence and Florence highlights that this provides an additional supportive environment, where they can help each other.

They all revealed how meditation plays a key role in their lives and discussed the benefits as well the up and downs. They reveal that it is hard work and you're not always going to feel good about yourself. But as Ellie maintains, the secret is to allow whatever it is to come up in your mind and discover it has authenticity.

Although, they claim that part of the process is to seek to see the 'good' in everyone they also demonstrated that they didn't need a hierarchy of patriarchal dominance to feed their 'spiritual' wellbeing. These are women who have over-come issues such depression, alcohol misuse and one participant claims to have had a drug addiction. This suggests that this training has considerable benefits, if practiced.

However, neither of the groups, discussed how they could take these tools and apply them for praxis for social change. Although, they felt that it was important to teach others through example.

Chapter Five

The Discussion

Get off the race track. And take a pace back, face facts. It's your decision.

You don't need eyes to see. You need vision

(Faithless, 1996)

Based on the six themes as discussed by the two groups. I returned to the literature to draw analysis on the findings. I will continue with the same structured format as utilised in chapter four and continue to provide a heading for each theme, thus unifying the theoretical and experimental perspectives.

Theme 1 Motivation to join in group

In the planning stages, I anticipated that this question would have led to a discussion around ‘neoliberalism’. I never expected the participants to ‘name’ this ‘invisible and nameless’ ideology (Monbiot, 2016). I had only heard its name in one of the first lectures of this Med Programme, delivered by Michael Murray. My eyes were as a consequence opened. Nevertheless, I suspected that it was the principles of neoliberal dogma, (chapter 2) which had participants seeking Maslow’s sixth theory of human need ‘self-transcendence’ in the first place.

As mentioned in chapter one, Marx states that “the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and human activity or self-change” requires that this action for change be a dual process of a social struggle for justice and an inner struggle for liberating one’s human nature (Lebowitz, 2006, p. 70). The findings suggest that the participants had a clear objective, in that they were coming together to learn tools for self-transcendence.

Nevertheless, the findings highlight that neither of these groups perhaps are aware of the political ends of community education nor did they consider the neoliberal agenda as enforced by our governments. Or, that of the current state of our adult and community education system is more focused on preparation for employment rather than skills for personal and social development. Lack of funding opportunity and availability of space. Means they have to use private sitting rooms to realise their “full human” potential (DOES, 2000).

I critique that this is not a lack of concern. It is evident that these women have experienced their own subordinations in life, through death by suicide in families and friends, depression and addiction issues to name a few. Yet, they have taken control of their own well-being, and organised themselves to seek a different way; of showing up in the world by seeking to free their minds through reflexivity, awareness and love.

They have also rejected the neoliberal corporate-takeover of ‘religiosity’ and traditional Eastern spiritual practices, marketed through the popular version of mind, body soul bibliotherapy or ‘capitalist spiritualism’ (Caddette and King, 2005). Fromm (1993) refers, to this practice as the great ‘sham’, group members critiqued this industry as not being sufficient in terms of achieving a higher level of consciousness. Carrette and King (2005) point that this is because neoliberal ‘new age’ thought is a means to an end of thought-control and keeps people passive. Freire (1970) reminds us that we are dominated and defeated, but do not know it.

Theme 2 Community Education in an informal setting:

Brid Connolly asks so what is community education?

In discussions about the nature of community education, there is one aspect that most people are agreed on. Community education is complex. It is not simply a series of techniques, nor is about the location; and it is not just about the subject matter.

(2003, p.15)

The subject area which both these group study is currently not available in the conventional sense of community education provision. However, short-term courses in ‘Mindfulness’ and eastern practices of Yoga, Tai Chi etc. are available. Nevertheless, because of lack of provision, these groups came together at grass roots and echo the founding principles of community education praxis. As Parker Palmer claims:

“Education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, and transcendence: renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world” (quoted in hooks, 2003, p. 179).

Revolting against a ‘culture of carelessness’ as quoted by Lynch, these women are taking responsibility for their own learning needs whilst healing themselves. Not having a choice

- they had to devise their own programmes. This signals, as Finnegan (2016) highlights, movements are grouping together and experimenting in methods of democratic education.

Nevertheless, the findings highlight that there is a missing ‘social and political dimension’ to their transformative education process. Although these women claimed to have transformed on a personal level and noted positive impacts on their relationships with others, they hadn’t considered how this could be developed into praxis for a social transformation.

It was suggested by a few participants that their aim was to bring the teaching to others by example rather than preaching. This is akin to Freire’s dialog theory. He recognised the importance of an equal status student-teacher relationship. Fundamental to the success of his theory was love. Love of self, life and others. One of the practices that the women mention as part of their training is to see this ‘love’ in all others also.

The findings show that the purpose of this informal education group, is to provide a platform for women who seek a common goal and that is; to learn to ‘wake-up’. They are developing critical consciousness skills for internal (micro) reflexivity. It is a slow process that requires effort and vigilance. But it may be worth noting that this path to self-transcendence hasn’t been well researched since even Spinoza’s day either.

Theme 3 Mental Health

As discussed in chapter 2, mental health affects how we think, feel, and act. Although the medical model pertains that one of the reasons for depression is a chemical imbalance in the brain and that there is a one size fits all continuum of happiness that each of us should attain to. Yet, the World Health Organisation suggest that poverty and unemployment are leading causes of suicide. Statistics from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) confirm that figures for the rate of suicide and self-harm increased dramatically following the great financial crash in 2008 and subsequent years thereafter. Research indicates that suicide may be the cause of death most likely to increase in times of economic crisis. The incidence rate of suicide in Ireland was profoundly affected by five years of economic recession and subsequent austerity from 2007-2012 (Conoran et. al, 2015)

Several of the participants have experienced depression and one participant had contemplated suicide. She claims that at the time to have had just wanted out of life. The

findings suggest that these women through pathways to self-transcendence, have found inner peace and have control over their thinking through reflexive practice.

Considering the ‘medical model’ currently recommends Mindful Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (MBCT), an eight week programme which is being advocated by this sector for the alleviation of symptoms of depression, the findings suggest that rather than a short-term fix, mindful meditation including breathwork and movement should be practiced daily for long-term benefit. It takes practice but as Ellie suggests “once you know it, you can’t not do it” Or Tara, “just have to let that one nougat in and it will become a rock”.

Theme 4 Self-transcendence

One of the principles of self-transcendence is to create critical awareness of our existence. It involves changing of our frames of reference through reflexivity by examining our assumptions, attitudes and prejudices (McCormack and Ryan, 2011). The role of the educator is to promote critical learning through dialogue and reflection (Freire, 1970). The findings demonstrate that this skill needs be developed on a personal level first and used continually, in all interactions.

The findings suggest that a daily meditation practice develops this skill and creates an opening of space that allows for critical reflection whilst listening to others (Archer, 2010). When we are aware of our own prejudices and attitudes being triggered, we can then make informed decisions on how we wish to act or react (McCormack and Ryan, 2011).

The findings suggest that initially participants would have wanted family members to join them on this path. According to Vidarou (2010) it is natural to think that when we are on a spiritual path that other people should be on that path as well. But Freire warns that this will lead us to the oppressor inside of us (Vidovic, 2010). Freire writes of peasants who want to be free, but in their world view, the only alternative to being the oppressed is to become the oppressor.

Freire maintains that this internalization of consciousness affects relationships. To Freire, liberation encompasses the breaking of this oppressor-oppressed cycle and instead becoming a ‘human’ who does not enforce his will onto others. While this claim takes

Freire away from his Marxist leanings and more towards growth and ‘spirit’. Vidovic (2010) produces a similar warning:

It is possible to use our own idea of spiritual growth to oppress. It is possible to make of our own individual journey a grand narrative to apply to others and even to the whole world. But it is also and must be possible to work always for humbleness -- to believe in our own spirit and yet to approach every interaction, whether between individuals or between nations with respect for each individual’s and each group’s own path in this universe.

(Vidovic, 2010 p. 21)

The interviewees demonstrate in the findings that they are aware of this causal implication and have since learned that it is better to teach by example than to preach.

Theme 5 Other

In recent years, ‘capital spiritualism’ according to Carrette and King could be another form of thought-control, replacing old religiosity teachings as a measure to keep practitioner’s passive. However, the groups, consider that their spiritual work requires them to be continuously vigilant and critically reflective of all thoughts and feelings so that they can take responsibility for their own actions and reactions. It is not a quick fix and requires effort. Fromm (1993).

The findings highlight that having conversations regarding self-transcendence, outside the group, is received with suspicion and resistance. It would indeed seem that as Nietzsche claimed ‘God is dead’. Nevertheless, the group in Letterkenny, discussed how the teachings of this work could reach a wider audience. They claimed that if the biblical terminology were to be changed perhaps more people would be attracted to the subject.

Conclusion:

We are living in an era of inequality which is driven by neoliberal economic dogma. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank that sought to extend Thatcherite and Regan economics on a global scale (Carrette and King, 2005). They conclude:

The so-called ‘Washington Consensus’ that has emerged, consolidated by the establishment of unelected organisations such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO, founded in 1995), remains intent upon promoting a global deregulation of markets (euphemistically called ‘free trade’), an ideology of unfettered global consumption (‘continued economic growth’) and the privatisation of public assets and services (‘ending state-owned monopolies’; ‘introducing market competitiveness and business efficiency to health, education, transport, media, etc.

(Carrette and King, 2005, p. 7)

Is considered by many, (Chomsky, 1989, Giroux, 2014, Grummell, 2007, Finnegan, 2016, Fitzsimmons, 2017) to be the plight of personal and social freedom. I argue that the coercion of this ideology is being manufactured through systems of mental health and adult and community education provision. Given new structural and funding changes within the adult education sector, those in charge of policy and funding get to decide which programmes are to be supported. Training and preparation for work initiatives are the order of the day. Lack of opportunity to use educational space to develop personal, reflective and critical skills, judging by current provision standards, it would seem that these are no longer valuable in society today. Which recalls Rodgers (2005 p. 5) question “in the teaching of adults, who’s interests are been served?”

Given the increase of prevalence rates of mental ill health, I argue that perhaps the ‘medical models’ claim that it mainly due to a chemical imbalance in the brain, isn’t the only factor. The World Health Organisation (2017) suggest that it is mainly poverty and unemployment. Evidence from figures pertaining to the increase of incidence rate of death by suicide during the economic crisis in Ireland would confirm this suggestion.

In an age where secular thought is promoted. It would appear that ‘spirituality’ has also been taken over by “corporate interests and used to subvert individuals and seduce them into consumerism” (King, 2004 p. 277), as well as a mechanism for thought-control to maintain an uncritical and passive society.

The ability to question and reflect on our world fosters both personal and social empowerment as well as active citizenship. Maslow identified that human development

has a hierarchy of needs and that self-transcendence is the sixth and final need. Reflexivity is a defining practice for achieving this level of attainment.

Self-transcendence considers the ability to move beyond self-centred consciousness and developing an awareness of human nature and human problems, and with an extensive measure of freedom from personal and social conditioning (Habermans, 1970; Levenson, Aldwin, & Cupertino, 2001; Levenson & Crumpler, 1996). The participants of this research study utilise two works to help attain this level of consciousness (*A Course in Miracles* and *A Way of Mastery*). The findings suggest that levels of attainment are unique to the individual, it takes time to develop and isn't always easy.

Nevertheless, the findings suggest that participants are taking responsibility of their own personal development and using the reflexivity model (McCormack and Ryan, 2011) so that we can make informed critical decisions about how they choose think, feel, act and react in the world. As Frankl (1959) states, this is the last of freedoms which can be taken away.

Although these women did not discuss becoming political and social activists. I would argue that they are taking responsibility for raising their level of critical consciousness.

Although Marx argued for a dual process of social justice and self-realisation, I view the process as being like the advice a parent is given in case of an emergency on an airplane: attend to your own oxygen mask first or in the words “Physican, heal thy self”. Freire, pertains to this message also when he claims that when he does not love himself or the world, he cannot start a dialog. Possibly, if Maslow had lived longer, he may have added a seventh step on his hierarchy of needs; social transcendence, which would follow on from his theory of ‘self-transcendence’.

Recommendation / Further Study

A model for social transcendence needs to be developed. This framework would include tools for self-transcendence and incorporating them into an education of social and political activism. The praxis of this suggestion would require further study to ascertain its effectiveness.

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