Article

Developing the Theory of Perspective Transformation: Continuity, Intersubjectivity, and Emancipatory Praxis

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Abstract

Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation has proved to be a great asset to the scholarship of adult education and has provided a solid theoretical base for understanding complex learning phenomena. However, in the discussions surrounding Mezirow's work, a certain "stuckness" appears which we think is unproductive. Critiques of Mezirow are often repeated, secondhand or thirdhand, causing important issues and tensions to become simplified and dichotomized, which causes complex aspects of the theory to lose the nuance that a good theory provides. This article draws on recent contributions to the literature in order to elaborate on the theory of perspective transformation in light of these recurring critiques. In so doing, we introduce three key concepts to the lexicon of perspective transformation: continuity, intersubjectivity, and emancipatory praxis. For each, we address the underlying omission or weakness in Mezirow's theory and offer revised conceptualizations of the theory.

Keywords

perspective transformation, transformative learning, theory

Transformative learning is one of the most intensively researched theories in the field of adult education (Taylor, 2005, 2008; Taylor & Snyder, 2012). Over nearly four decades, it has evolved from Mezirow's foundational work on perspective

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transformation into a metatheory containing many individual *approaches* and theories (Hoggan, 2016). Not only was Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation the seminal contribution to the broader concept of transformative learning, it arguably remains the most robust theoretical elucidation of learning in the whole corpus of literature concerned with transformative learning. The theory of perspective transformation has proved to be a great asset to the research and scholarship in the field of adult education which has provided a solid theoretical base for understanding complex learning phenomena.

Mezirow's work has generated considerable dialogue and some heated debate. This is of course essential for the development of a theory so that ideas do not become reified but rather evolve into ever more refined, relevant, and useful explanations of learning. As scholars working with these ideas in very different places (the United States, Finland, and Ireland) and approaching transformative learning from different perspectives and with diverse but overlapping concerns, we think that Mezirow's theoretical work offers vital insights into processes of learning and change on both an individual and collective level.

But we discern in the discussions of the value of Mezirow's work a certain "stuckness" which we think is unproductive. Critiques of Mezirow are now repeated, secondhand or thirdhand, causing important issues and tensions to become simplified and dichotomized (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Mälkki, 2011). Complex aspects of perspective transformation, and the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for further theoretical development are therefore overlooked. In this article, we examine recurring criticisms of Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation, criticisms that we see as falling into three categories: the personal, relational, and social aspects of learning. We synthesize these critiques and discuss ways they have been addressed in the literature. This article is aimed at both experienced and new researchers interested in Mezirow's contribution to adult learning theory. It offers a summary of key points in Mezirow's work as well as major issues of contention in the reception and development of his ideas. The article sketches out how some of these major issues and recurrent misunderstandings might be fruitfully reframed.

In this article, *perspective transformation* refers to Mezirow's (1990) theory of perspective transformation, as well as to

> the process of becoming critically aware of how . . . we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (p. 14)

We use the term *transformative learning* to refer more broadly to the metatheory that has grown out of Mezirow's work, as well as to learning that is similarly related to Mezirow's work (transformational) but not necessarily limited to his precise definition. As Hoggan (2016) describes, *transformative learning* refers broadly to "processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world" (p. 71).

In thinking with and against Mezirow (Finnegan, 2011), we see perspective transformation as a generative, imperfect, but still relevant theory for adult education. This article is built around three key concepts: continuity, intersubjectivity, and emancipatory praxis. The three concepts highlight distinct but overlapping aspects of perspective transformation which are linked to the personal, relational, and social aspects of learning. For each, we present the conceptualization, address the underlying omission or weakness in Mezirow's theory, and offer revised conceptualizations of the theory which we hope will feed productive debate and perhaps unpick some theoretical knots.

Continuity

In talking about the importance of learning from experience, Dewey (1938) emphasized the principle of *continuity*, which states that there is a connection and interaction between one's past, present, and future experiences. Even a significant transformational experience does not completely sever or act independently of this connection and interaction. The notion of continuity, while not explicit, is manifested in Mezirow's (1991a, 2000) conceptualization of perspective transformation: Meaning perspectives that are formed by previous experiences in our social contexts, filter the way we make meaning of our present and future experiences, and in this process the continuity is realized as the past, present, and future interact in the continuous flow of experiencing and interpreting. However, when one is not able to make meaning of the present experience based on past experiences and the meaning perspectives derived from them, a disorienting dilemma occurs (Mezirow, 1990). Thus, the continuous flow between past, present, and future is momentarily broken down. This does not mean that the entirety of the meaning perspective collapses, but that a temporary break in the continuity regarding some aspect of one's life has occurred. And this break is significant enough that it cannot be ignored as just some irrelevant problem; it must be dealt with. The principle of continuity is consistent with Mezirow's (1981) definition of a meaning perspective as "the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions within which new experience is assimilated and transformed by one's past experience" (p. 6). The following sections address issues addressed by the principle of continuity.

The False Dichotomy of Transformation

According to Mezirow (1991b), perspective transformation is about significant change in one's meaning perspectives, or those interpretive frameworks used to making meaning of our experiences. Meaning perspectives are thus portrayed as the object of reflection, as there are taken-for-granted assumptions within our meaning perspectives that are untrue or inadequate and therefore in need of revision. What often goes unnoticed in the literature is that the meaning perspectives first and foremost function to take care of our need for coherence and continuity, which are necessary to understand our surroundings and maintain a coherent worldview in general (Mälkki, 2010, 2011; Mälkki & Green, 2014; Mezirow, 2000). Although some parts of a meaning perspective might undergo significant change, all of one's meaning perspectives would of course not

simultaneously transform. In fact, if this were even possible, it would be quite catastrophic for human functioning. One implication of this acknowledgment is that the scholars should explicitly address the role and interactions of existing meaning perspectives as they continue throughout and beyond the transformative learning process.

Despite the stabilizing effect of existing meaning structures, in our daily lives we are in constant interaction with our surroundings. We project our assumptions onto the world in order to make sense of our experiences. In so doing we modify and adjust those assumptions according to the encounters we have with reality. Therefore, we could say that there is a slight and tacit process of modification of meaning perspectives happening on a regular basis. Furthermore, the way our meaning perspectives are projected in each situation varies according to the situation. That is, different *sides* of a person are shown with different people based on the expectations and previous experiences. Some scholars have pointed to this state of constant adjustment and deduced that because of it there is nothing to distinguish transformative learning from any other type of learning (Newman, 2012). If a distinction exists, it is important to clarify what it is.

To help illustrate the distinction that we believe does exist between transformative learning and other forms of learning, we point to Piaget and his work on childhood development. Piaget (1954) noted two complimentary processes of human development: assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation refers to incremental learning, whereby experiences inform one's understanding of the world but do not change the underlying meaning-making structure. In contrast, through accommodation, the underlying structures change in order to adapt to one's experiences. Piaget noted further that accommodation can be a difficult and painful process. In drawing from Piaget's work to describe similar processes in transformation, the distinction between common instances of learning and transformation is the extent to which the learning affects the underlying meaning-making structures. One suggestion is that transformative learning differs from everyday learning in its depth, breadth, and relative stability (Hoggan, 2016). The concept of depth refers to the degree to which a learning experience affects a particular part of one's meaning perspective; minor changes with minimal affects to one's meaning perspective do not merit the descriptor of *transformation*. Breadth refers to the contexts in which change is manifest and implies that a transformation affects meaning-making in many if not all of the contexts in which a person interacts with the world, whereas everyday learning experiences usually affect only a limited number of contexts. Last, the criterion of relative stability insists that change cannot be temporary if it is to be considered transformational. These criteria resonate with Mezirow's (2000) description of transformative outcomes that result in meaning perspectives that are more critically reflective, integrative of experience, open, and so forth. Namely, they refer to changes in the general properties of meaning perspectives rather than a content-specific change. Scholars should not describe perspective transformation as either having happened or not, but rather talk in terms of the degree to which changes in meaning perspective demonstrate depth, breadth, and relative stability, and thus the extent to which they are transformative.

Also, although it is easier to talk about perspective transformation as if there are finite beginnings and endings of the learning, from a temporal perspective it is more

accurate to talk about overlapping trajectories of transformation. Small instances of disorientation may begin a slow, cumulative yet strong process of change. Furthermore, the end of one change process is often a stimulus for something new. The resolution of a dilemma creates new dilemmas, especially as the learner interacts in a variety of social surroundings (Malinen, 2000; Mälkki, 2012; Mezirow, 2000). From the perspective of continuity, whether a transformation has happened appears as a simplistic question, one that is undeniably tempting and engaging but that does not do justice to the phenomenon in reality. The outcomes of transformative learning are inseparable from the learner's previous experiences, existing meaning structures, and processes of learning. Although it is important from a scholarly perspective to have parameters that determine whether a learning experience should be considered an instance of transformative learning, it is more accurate and beneficial to focus on the extent of transformation and the exact ways in which it is manifest.

Transformation as a Goal of Education

Transformative learning has for decades been viewed as something more profound, more critical, and more empowering than other forms of learning. The promise is that it allows one to critically move beyond those seemingly self-evident assumptions governing one's thinking, feeling, and acting that have been unquestioningly internalized through socialization and education. Any educational effort designed to foster such profound change at the individual or societal level will be fraught with ethical dilemmas (Brockett, 1988), and many scholars have written about the ethical considerations surrounding transformative learning (Ettling, 2012). We suggest two facets of the theory that should be considered: underlying premises of normativity and the consequences of transformation.

Normativity. Normativity refers to the fact that the end-state of transformation as envisioned by the educator may not seem ideal from other perspectives. What is seen as positive learning by some may appear as indoctrination, radicalization, or some other negative outcome by others.

Underlying the perceived need for other people to change in fundamental ways are a host of normative values; in essence, we work to change people such that they match our values and views of the world. For instance, one of the intended outcomes of Mezirow's perspective transformation is that learners become more autonomous in their ways of knowing. Implicit in this goal is the value of individual autonomy. This value reflects Mezirow's cultural and intellectual background and is not necessarily universal across all cultures. And yet, what is education for if not to change people? Are we supposed to sit idly by without trying to make a difference in people's lives or to make the world a better place simply because there likely will never be a universal consensus about what "better" entails? "There is a strong ideological dimension to this question of challenging and transforming the consciousness of students" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 174, cited in Ettling, 2012). Addressing the issue of normativity begins with reflecting on the ideologies and values implicit in our educational goals.

Within the discussions on transformative learning, there seems to be a shared understanding that it yields positive outcomes. However, the goals of transformation in terms of specific outcomes are largely ignored and in need of critical review; various scholars have very different expectations for the outcomes of transformative learning (see Hoggan, 2016). Transformative learning is thus brought together with other sets of theoretical concepts or policy values without necessarily considering the consequences of this theoretical marriage. We are here challenged to consider whether by defining a transformative learning theory, we can predefine and restrict the topics or outcomes involved. Mezirow (2000) was careful in conceptualizing the nature of transformative outcomes in rather general terms (i.e., that meaning perspectives becoming more critically reflective, open, discerning, etc.), thereby positioning perspective transformation as a process leading to an open-ended, qualitative improvement in one's meaning making, without restricting the objects of reflections.

The question is, then, is transformation about acquiring certain viewpoints or about developing certain depth and criticality of thinking? Indeed, to promote perspective transformation without an ideological outcome would likely be impossible, as the processes of learning have embedded ideological values and by their very design lead to particular types of outcomes. In the end, any act of facilitating or influencing is not without values, but educators should be clear about the actual values orienting their thinking, feeling, and acting as pedagogues. This is especially crucial when there is assessment involved that in itself brings about an implicit or explicit priority of desired learning outcomes (see Cranton & Hoggan, 2012; Mälkki, 2011).

Consequences. The issue of consequences refers to the potential negative effects of perspective transformation, including the difficulties of the process and consequences of dramatic personal change (see Berger, 2004; Brookfield, 1994; Mälkki, 2010; Mälkki & Green, 2014). For instance, Brookfield (1994) writes of *cultural suicide*, which describes how learners can be cut off from important social groups as a result of dramatic change. Berger (2004) suggests that if we called our transformative educational programs *initiatives of catastrophic disorganization*, it would offer a more truthful image of the learning process and its associated risks. Thus, it is problematic to position perspective transformation as the ideal or best form of learning in every situation. Neither Mezirow nor most scholars explicitly claim that it is; nevertheless, the vast majority of the literature is silent about the appropriateness or possible inappropriateness of transformative learning in particular situations. We need to be more critically aware and explicit about the costs and consequences involved for the learners we aim to transform.

For perspective transformation to be effectively facilitated in educational programs, advocates of transformation should be thoughtful of and attentive to the consequences of what such a process means for the individual and in relation to the institution. By the former, we refer to what is the nature of the process that they are facilitating with all its joys and struggles for the individual undergoing the learning process both in the cognitive, social, and emotional spheres (see Mälkki & Green, 2014). By the latter, we

refer to how the struggles of transformation may be unnecessarily accentuated if the facilitator is blind to the power of the educational institution and the influence of such power on the extent to which learners are able to choose whether to engage in learning processes that may yield dramatic results in their personal lives. Participants often enroll in educational programs for instrumental rather than transformational purposes. Granted, there may be motivations or deeper yearnings that are transformative in nature and that are also prompting the choice to enroll. Nevertheless, it is one thing to recognize the potential of an educational program to promote transformative learning, but it is a much different thing to require and evaluate it. The latter is not necessarily unethical, but it is usually at least problematic.

In applying the principle of continuity to the theory of perspective transformation, several implications emerge. First, no transformative experience will affect the entirety of the learner's meaning perspectives. Therefore, it becomes necessary to clarify exactly how meaning perspectives have changed. A second implication is that no pedagogical design can determine the learning outcome independent of the learner's experience and existing meaning structures. There is a complex interaction between existing meaning structures, the specific experiences causing a disorienting dilemma, the epistemology used to negotiate new meaning structures, and the eventual transformational outcome (Hoggan, 2014). A third implication is that not all meaning perspectives are in need of change; the stabilizing affect of existing meaning perspectives is important (Mälkki, 2010, 2011; Mälkki & Green, 2014; Mezirow, 2000). Also, educators should be transparent about their intended learning outcomes, and care should be taken such that participants have legitimate options not-to-transform without hurting their progress in the educational program. Furthermore, special care and support should be offered when transformational outcomes are anticipated.

Intersubjectivity

The second problematic issue addressed in this article relates to the false dichotomizations between cognitive and emotional and the individual and social. Our conceptualization is premised on the notion that the human experience is first and foremost intersubjective. It is impossible to separate cognition from emotion, just as it is to completely separate the individual from the social.

Mezirow's focus on individual change has been the topic of several criticisms, which argue that he fails to take into account the issues of the individual in relation to context and issues of collective action (Collard & Law, 1989). Mezirow (1989) argues that collective action is only justifiable when it is learner-instigated based on critical assessment of the assumptions as its basis. While we acknowledge the relevance of their argument, discussions related to Collard and Law's (1989) critique on the individualism of the theory have actually promoted the conceptualization of perspective transformation as a solipsistically individual and rational process, to the extent that it is not congruent with what Mezirow actually wrote. In the following sections, we elaborate on the relation between cognition and emotions, as well as between the individual and the social.

Cognition and Emotion

One of the most frequent criticisms of Mezirow's theory has been the emphasis on cognition and rationality at the expense of emotions. Some of this criticism stems from the empirical studies that highlight emotions as an important aspect of transformative learning process (Taylor, 1997). However, Mezirow's theory does not ignore the influence of emotions as is often claimed. Some of the basic premises of the theory refer to emotions, and Mezirow mentions emotions in several instances in his writings (Mälkki, 2010). Nevertheless, criticisms of the cognitive emphasis of the theory are justifiable in the sense that the nature, role, and origins of emotions are not considered explicitly in the theory but remain rather in a subordinate role, whereas the elaboration on the cognitive aspects of learning are brought to the fore (Mälkki, 2010). Emotions are more than mere addenda to the learning process or barriers to rational thought; they can instigate the learning process and lead to more holistic ways of knowing and being (Dirkx, 2008; Lawrence, 2008; Mälkki, 2012).

Building on Mezirow's theory by utilizing Damasio's (1999) neurological theory of consciousness and emotions, Mälkki (2010) introduced the concepts of *edge-emotions* and *comfort zone* to explain the dynamics of cognition and emotion in the workings of meaning perspectives, as well as the challenges and possibilities to reflect and transform them. These concepts elaborate the experiential aspect of the unpleasant feelings that are common in perspective transformation and highlight the tendencies that these emotions bring about. Namely, just as emotions orient us to avoid danger and tacitly search for safety and comfort in our interactions with the environment (Damasio, 1999), emotions also function to maintain continuity and coherence of our meaning perspectives and sense of self (Mälkki, 2010). When our meaning perspectives are intact, we feel comfortable and secure in the world; we are in a comfort zone. When challenged, our efforts to reflect on our meaning perspectives are faced with an automatic resistance. We feel unpleasant emotions—edge-emotions—such as hurt, shame, frustration, depression, anger, or fear. The edge-emotions tacitly orient our thinking to return to the comfort zone, and we tend to avoid dealing with the questioned assumptions by explaining the situation in ways that allow us to avoid facing the need to reassess and revise them. As the problematized assumptions are guarded by these unpleasant edge-emotions, it is yet through these emotions that we can gain access to dealing with those assumptions. That is, instead of striving to avoid unpleasant edge-emotions and return to the comfort zone as soon as possible, it may be helpful or perhaps necessary to embrace or at least accept the unpleasant emotions for perspective transformation to occur (Mälkki, 2010, 2011).

Individual and Social

According to Mezirow, meaning perspectives develop out of the interaction, culture, and language of one's social contexts. Thus, meaning perspectives can be seen as unique compilations of shared social resources (Mälkki & Green, 2014). In this sense, individuals and identities are fundamentally relational and do not exist independent of

their social contexts. The shared nature of meaning perspectives creates social bonds between people and through this bond they can experience feeling accepted by others. When an individual reflects on their private meanings, they are at the same time challenging the social bonds that bind them with the like-minded (Mälkki, 2012). While meaning perspectives function to serve the coherence and continuity that we fundamentally need in order to survive and maintain a coherent mental life, they also serve to maintain our social connections and the fundamental feeling of belonging and being accepted by others. Some scholars have pointed out that people fundamentally are born premature and are in constant yearning of social connection and just cannot cope alone, without others, without the support of others (West, Fleming, & Finnegan, 2013). When we reflect on our meanings and challenge our assumptions, we are at the same time *playing* with this fundamental threat of being rejected or excluded (Mälkki, 2011).

As our meaning perspectives function to keep us in the familiar lines of thinking and interpreting as our social groups, we exist in a comfort zone where nothing challenges our meanings, values, social connections, and acceptance (Mälkki, 2010, 2011). In contrast, unpleasant edge-emotions emerge when these meanings, values, and social connections become challenged. Consequently, a *collective comfort zone* exists wherein people protect their collective meaning perspectives to stay in the comfort zone; they avoid voicing critical comments or viewpoints that might be challenging the harmonious atmosphere of the group or one's sense of being accepted (Mälkki, 2011).

Alternatively, the social context can be an aid for reflection by creating space for sketching alternative interpretations and challenging the givens, if there is a safe and accepting atmosphere that supports this critical questioning process (see Mezirow, 1991a). That is, if we already feel that we are accepted, even with our flaws, there is less of a defense against becoming aware of our assumptions (Mälkki, 2011). In this accepting atmosphere, we may even be more able to reflect than we would be able to on our own, where we would have to maintain the image of those accepting us, and we could not be sure whether they would actually accept us with all our new insights and questionings.

Emancipatory Praxis

Some of the most long-standing and sharpest debates about perspective transformation have been about its claim to be an emancipatory form of adult education (Clark & Wilson, 1991; Collard & Law, 1989; Hart, 1990; Inglis, 1997; Murray, 2013; Newman, 1994; and in response to some of these critics Mezirow, 1989, 1991b, 1994, 1997). In these discussions, Mezirow (1990) repeatedly asserted that challenging domination, fighting for social justice, and deepening democracy are integral to adult education and to his theory of perspective transformation. But critics discern major flaws in Mezirow's theory and have argued that it offers an inadequate account of power. In recent years, some radical critics (Murray, 2013; Newman, 2012) have even suggested that scholars need to abandon discussions of transformative learning altogether and seek a different conceptual framework and vocabulary for discussing significant learning. These recent interventions by Murray and Newman have added to

a long-standing, rich, and informative debate. But more commonly, the question of the value of perspective transformation as an emancipatory theory of adult education has become ritualistic and rhetorical and often degenerated into rather predictable defenses or denunciations of Mezirow's work. This part of the article will seek to move beyond the well-established and reified terms of this discussion and make the argument that Mezirow's work—despite significant gaps—remains an important resource for adult educators committed to emancipation (Finnegan, 2011, 2014b). To do this, we will briefly situate Mezirow in a broader intellectual landscape, outline how Mezirow understands emancipatory learning, assess the strengths and weaknesses of perspective transformation in this regard, and then finally suggest how Mezirow's ideas might usefully be reframed within a more explicitly differentiated theory of personal and collective emancipatory transformations.

It is important—even necessary—to begin by placing transformative learning within a longer history and a broader tradition in philosophy, politics, and adult education. Specifically, many of the major premises and the normative commitments that underpin Mezirow's way of thinking about knowledge, learning, and social action can be clearly traced back to other emancipatory theories of praxis. Praxis is a term with a complex genealogy with roots in Greek philosophy, but the version that feeds directly into Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation was articulated first, with great lapidary force, by Marx (1888). This has been elaborated and advanced in various ways by critical theorists, radical educators, and activists since then. In Mezirow's case, these ideas have been absorbed into his theory through the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970) and through the German critical theorist Jurgen Habermas (1984). The praxis orientation in perspective transformation has also been informed by Dewey's approach to experience, critical thinking, and democracy, as well as some aspects of psychoanalysis.

So what are the characteristics of an emancipatory theory of praxis? First, the defining aim of such a theory is to reflect *and* act on the world in a way that expands human freedom. It is of the utmost importance that theory and action are seen as being in dialectical relationship with each other. Furthermore, this orientation requires close attention to the logic of practice in a given sociohistorical context and seeks through critical thought to break with the *giveness* of practices and ideas. Praxis entails a specific type of epistemic break: a rupture which involves a double movement of critical negation and creative exploration. This critical distance allows individual and collective subjects to *deepen their rational understanding of the structural forces which give rise to the order of things*. Through this activity, we can then begin to identify possibilities for action that increase human well-being. This often—but not always—necessitates an explicit rejection and critique of dominant ideologies and social relations which unnecessarily harm or hinder human development. This is premised on the belief that it takes sustained critical effort "to prevent mankind [*sic*] from losing itself in those ideas and activities which the existing organization of society instills into its members" (Horkheimer, 2002, p. 265). To think against the grain is not sufficient: It is rational thought and action orientated to equality and freedom that defines an emancipatory theory of praxis. These concepts inform a great deal of adult education

literature and has helped crystallize a question which is central, even constitutive, of the field of adult education: "How can open-ended inquiry and reflexive learning linked to a commitment to equality be used by individuals, groups and movements to maintain and transform culture in a way that expands human freedom?"

We want to argue that this question is also at the heart of perspective transformation. From a historical perspective, we think the theory can be readily characterized as a specific version of praxis theory adapted to the culture and needs of the field of adult education at a particular period of time. What is significant is the precise way Mezirow understands emancipatory praxis. In fact, we believe it is by tracing the emphases, specific form, and theoretical gaps in Mezirow's work that we can begin to move beyond "either/or" thinking about it as a praxis theory.

Mezirow (1991b) describes praxis simply as the "creative implementation of purpose" (p. 12). He believes the most valuable form of praxis—perspective transformation—begins with the exploration and rational reconstruction of our frames of references. We can overcome epistemic, psychological, and sociolinguistic distortions in our frames of reference through reflection facilitated by collaborative discourse, and thus create the possibility to think and act differently. If we look carefully at the way Mezirow describes this process, it becomes clear that perspective transformation is a fascinating theoretical synthesis which brings together the radical, collectivist notion of praxis offered by Freire with more individualistic conceptions of critical awareness derived from studies of critical thinking and adult development. What bridges the concern with Freirean *conscientisation*, the process of developing deeper, more critical and highly agentic forms of social awareness, with a humanist concern with self-actualization is, we would argue, an ethical commitment to participatory democracy derived from Habermas and Dewey. Both forms of praxis—individual and collective—result in perspective transformation and contribute to a rational and democratic society. In fact, Mezirow (1990, 1991a, 2007) repeatedly links deep forms of critical reflection by individuals to the active construction of democratic spaces of learning. Such efforts are envisaged as having a cumulative power: enhanced individual autonomy, the creation of spaces of deliberation and reflection, and the practice of participatory democracy together provide the soundest basis for enhancing social freedom.

Significantly, Mezirow (1989, 1990) also stresses that perspective transformation is something that may or may not be linked to emancipatory social action. This makes his theory quite distinct from most other praxis theories such as Freire (1970) who argue that there is a *necessary* connection between transformative learning and social change which links deep forms of critical reflection to a collective capacity to "read the world" and then act on this understanding. In many respects, this partial decoupling of individual transformation from social transformation is useful. First of all, it offers conceptual tools for understanding important types of learning experiences that have liberatory effects, such as for example, finding new terms for understanding the experience of bereavement (Mälkki, 2012; Sands & Tennant, 2010). Such learning does not entail extended ideological critique or collective political praxis but can contribute to freedom and human flourishing. This might be usefully termed as one form of *emancipatory biographical praxis*. Treating such deep learning as either inconsequential or

just a subset of explicitly political praxis risks flattening out social life and ignoring many of the attachments and concerns that are central to our lives. Of course there are also forms of emancipatory biographical praxis where ideological critique and participation in collective activity are important. A powerful example of this sort of emancipatory praxis in recent history comes from the women's movement. The point here is that there is a wide range of forms of biographical praxis which might be usefully explored and enhanced through perspective transformation.

There is also reason to believe that such biographical praxis has assumed a new importance in late modernity. Arguably, the conditions under which we reflect and act in the world have radically altered over the past 40 years. Specifically, there is considerable evidence of a decisive shift in modern society toward detraditionalized, highly individualized, and fluid societies in which a specific form of reflexive action, the change and transformation of the self, is highly valued and perhaps even become an imperative (Alheit & Dausien, 2000; Beck, 1992). More than ever, we are asked to devise or discover satisfactory biographical solutions to the challenges that result from rapid and ceaseless social change. Of course there is no reason to believe that the demand to act in a biographically reflexive way is necessarily emancipatory (Alheit & Dausien, 2000). On the contrary, the dominant mode of biographical reflexivity, which is highly individualized, Richard Sennett (1998) believes, is both a symptom and cause of a "corrosion of character"; by which he means the demand to invent and reinvent oneself to be endlessly flexible leads to atomization, loneliness, and a felt lack of solidarity. Nevertheless, we need as educators to be able to respond to this demand in emancipatory fashion. In the current context, we need to be willing "to cut a passage through the thicket of new and yet unexplored life realities" (Bauman & Tester, 2001, p. 13), and we would argue that perspective transformation is particularly useful for grasping and exploring the dilemmas of modern biographical praxis in a satisfactory way (Illeris, 2014). It offers a theory which suggests how and under what circumstances such challenges can be used to create way of feeling, thinking, being, and acting that are more rational, open, discriminating, and integrative.

One of the enduring strengths of perspective transformation then is that it invites educators from the praxis tradition to think about emancipatory learning on a variety of scales and in relation to a variety of purposes. This remains an important development in praxis-orientated adult learning theory. However, the way Mezirow frames this and explains the sequence and value of what we have called biographical praxis to other forms of praxis is problematic in several respects. Namely, he treats it as the primary goal of adult education and as the prerequisite of all other forms of praxis, and this argument is given considerable force by the way perspective transformation in general is framed. Despite it being anchored to arguments about the centrality of intersubjective communication and consistently stating that informed action and higher levels of autonomy require collaboration and dialogue, the overwhelming focus is change on an individual level. It is worth noting that Mezirow's interpretation of Habermas downplays the role the latter gives to social forces. The result is that Mezirow systematically underestimates the socially structured, mediated, and contextual nature of both learning and social action (Clark & Wilson, 1991; Cunningham,

1998) and this leaves his theory insufficiently equipped to fully explain the dynamics and logic of social power (Inglis, 1997). Although the sociocultural and sociological aspects of learning *are* constantly alluded to in one form or other, social relations are rarely placed center stage and are given much less space than theories of adult and ego development in his work. We can see this, for instance, in his quite cursory treatment of the issues of employment, class, social movements, and to the patterns and sources of collective agency from below. This leads Mezirow to claim that democratic collective praxis can *only* follow individually achieved transformation. But social movement studies, biographies, and everyday experience suggest the processes are very complex and that there is no fixed linear sequence in how people become agentic and how historical change occurs (Horton, 2003; Tilly, 2004). It also offers no clear way of distinguishing between the value of education that leads to enhanced autonomy for individuals and forms of education that contribute to greater social freedom. These are quantitatively and qualitatively distinct—if linked—phenomena.

In summary, a sociological deficit, a tendency to methodological individualism, and a disregard of how social change occurs in complex mediated patterns leaves the question of how perspective transformation may or may not be linked to wider social change undertheorized. This has meant that some writers who are more attuned to the specificities and importance of collective praxis encounter perspective transformation as thin and unconvincing (Murray, 2013) and has led some commentators to, incorrectly in our view, conclude that it is a liberal rather than an emancipatory theory of learning.

If this analysis is correct and perspective transformation is a version of a praxis theory that has great explanatory power in certain respects but also has major weaknesses, the question to be addressed is whether there is a way around this theoretical impasse. We believe there is. This entails actively working between perspective transformation and other theories of praxis and clearly differentiating learning processes according to their scope, intensity, and the extent to which various modes of reflexive activity enhance intentional action and autonomy and allow us to reorganize social practices in an emancipatory fashion. Both collectivist and individualist views benefit from each other, as any view alone is always insufficient in understanding such complex human phenomena. By bringing perspective transformation into dialogue with a longer tradition of thinking about praxis, we wish to suggest that we can usefully distinguish between (a) reflexively adaptive learning, (b) emancipatory forms of praxis which occur on a biographical level, and (c) those types of praxis capable of effecting emancipatory institutional and social change. In this schema types, two and three are interrelated and interdependent but the links between them and the sequence they follow are contingent. This sketch requires greater elaboration but does offer a first step beyond the either/or approach taken to transformative learning as an emancipatory theory (Finnegan, 2014a).

Conclusion

Mezirow provided the field of adult education with a solid theoretical foundation in his theory of perspective transformation. The theory spawned a deluge of research

and dialogue, the likes of which have rarely been seen in our field. As the inevitable critiques of his work emerged, Mezirow continued to develop his theory (Kitchenham, 2008). Nevertheless, despite this ongoing development, there still exist many facets of perspective transformation that are undertheorized. This article provides elaboration on some of these facets that we feel are problematic by introducing or synthesizing from the literature a number of concepts. Continuity, normativity, and consequences provide theoretical explication for more nuanced and explicit discussions about the processes and outcomes of perspective transformation, as well as the ideological underpinnings and potential ramifications of transformative learning. The concepts of intersubjectivity, edge-emotions, and comfort zone provide for more holistic understandings of perspective transformation as a phenomenon that is not and indeed could not be a purely rational or individual process. Last, the concepts of emancipatory practice and biographical praxis help position it as an emancipatory theory of praxis that encompasses but is not restricted to emancipatory institutional and social change. These concepts contribute to the lexicon of perspective transformation theory and provide scholars with conceptual tools with which to further research and develop the theory.

We hope our article stimulates and encourages further theoretical analysis, refinement, and development on the theory of perspective transformation, in the spirit of broadening and deepening understanding by utilizing criticism as a source and stimulation for further development. To understand perspective transformation as a theory in progress, as Mezirow (2000) suggested, and to keep it under continuous critical continuous questioning and development (Mezirow, 1991a), we believe best facilitates the development of transformative and emancipatory praxis.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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