

## CHAPTER 21

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# THE SELF IN TRANSFORMATION

## What Gets Transformed in Transformative Learning?

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Mezirow's Theory of Transformative Learning has become a well-established paradigm in which adult learning is understood. Its development and critique has taken place in journals such as *Adult Education Quarterly*, *Journal of Transformative Education*, and in a number of other publications (Mezirow, Taylor, & Associates, 2009). However, it is surprising that there is little of significance published on how frames of reference are developed in the first instance. An elaboration of the genesis of frames of reference might be suggestive as to how they could be transformed. One possible reason for this absence may be that in attempting to trace the origin and development of frames of reference one is inevitably drawn to areas of psychology such as psychoanalysis, individual life history, and the social and cultural contexts in which our meaning schemes or habits of mind are developed or indeed, to research and theory about child development.

This chapter will illustrate how Bowlby's Attachment Theory is of profound and neglected importance for understanding transformative learning. It will outline Bowlby's main ideas and current research findings on adult attachment. It will conclude with suggestive connections that will add not only to the understanding of Transformation Theory but highlight the implications for facilitating transformative learning.

## JOHN BOWLBY AND ATTACHMENT THEORY

John Bowlby's (1907–1991) work as a child psychiatrist with children from poor backgrounds led him to explore the causes of delinquency (1944)—a term widely used then—the nature of the child's ties to mother (1958), the meaning of separation anxiety (1960a), and the significance of grief and mourning for young children (1960b). He outlined a theory in three volumes of *Attachment & Loss* (1969, 1973, 1980). Ainsworth made significant contributions to the theory and studied the stress resulting from separation of child and mother, called the strange situation (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

Bowlby (1969) saw both separation from the mother and social deprivation as detrimental to a child's psychological development, but the emphasis on the role of the mother should not be interpreted as in any way blaming mothers for the insecurity of children. Feminists object that Bowlby is using biology to justify what is essentially a cultural product of our own "patriarchal but father-absent" society (Holmes, 1993, p. 47). Bowlby took a dim view of anything that kept a mother from her infant, but was clear, even in early work, that "the role of a child's principal attachment-figure can be filled by others than the natural mother" (1969, pp. 303–304). The view that only the natural mother could provide care was dismissed by saying, "no such views have been expressed by me" (pp. 303–304). It could be the father who provides a secure base for the child. If the mother is blamed for the insecurity of the child, this allows society to abdicate responsibility for its role in shaping the child and also allows fathers to be absent. The primary carer, man or woman, parent or not, can perform the role of providing a secure base for the child.

Attachment is an enduring tie with a person who provides security. Bowlby observed that the child's attachment figure provides a secure base from which the infant can safely explore her environment and to which she can return if she experiences danger. Attachment is the process whereby infants and young children "develop deep confidence in their parents' protection" and this enduring tie provides security (Goldberg, 2000, p. 8). The child's experience of attachment strongly influences subsequent reactions to stress, relationships, self-esteem, sense of security, and identity. If a

ent is not available through neglect, illness, or inattention, this may result in insecure attachments. Bowlby (1969) observed that the child's attachment figure appeared to provide a secure base (a developmental platform) from which infants could safely explore their environment and to which they could return if stressed or in perceived danger or need (p. 304). In their fourth year, the child can begin to tolerate separation and keep alive a sense that the caregiver, though absent, is still available. For Bowlby (1979), parenting involves providing appropriate responses to the child's need for security, but as many as one in three children grow up without this experience (p. 136).

### **Secure and Insecure Attachments**

Children introject their experience of being cared for and as a result have a model of themselves as valued, a greater sense of "felt security," and more optimistic views of social relationships. Such children are securely attached (Bowlby, 1969, p. 339). This security is a result of the carer being sensitive (maternal sensitivity) and responsive to the needs of the child for security. Such a carer may be characterized as psychologically available to the child, emotionally expressive, and flexible in dealing with babies.

Insecure attachments have been categorized as anxious, avoidant, and disorganized. These attachments are defensive strategies that are the child's attempt to maintain contact with inconsistent or rejecting carers. The anxious attached child is preoccupied with the carer and reluctant to explore even in their presence. The carer of an anxious attached child (Bowlby, 1969, p. 338; 1973, p. 245) is more likely to be inconsistent in their responses, insensitive to signals from the child, inept at engaging in physical contact, and show little spontaneous affection (Gomez, 1997, p. 161).

The avoidant attached child is usually unconcerned with either the presence or absence of the carer and does not express attachment needs in order to avoid rejection. The primary carer in this case may exhibit low levels of response to the distress of the child, who is encouraged to get on with life and not make too many demands on the carer, who may be uncomfortable with close contact; even if the carer has positive feelings toward the child, these may be overshadowed by feelings of resentment or anger.

Finally, the disorganized attached child (Main & Solomon, 1986) is associated with consistently inadequate care, a parent who is seriously depressed, or who even subjects the child to maltreatment. In this case, the child may experience the carer as frightening and as a result, may be unable to maintain a consistent strategy for engaging in attachment behaviors.

## Strange Situation

According to Ainsworth et al. (1978), when the carer leaves a young child alone in a room or when a stranger approaches, the child may experience separation anxiety. Ainsworth used this *strange situation* as an analytical tool to assess attachment style. A secure child is likely to be upset when the carer leaves but will seek comfort from her when she returns. Insecure avoidant children, on the other hand, hardly notice the presence of their carer, show few overt signs of distress when the carer leaves, and mostly ignore the carer when they do return. The anxious child is often inconsolable when the carer leaves and is not easily pacified on their return.

## Internal Working Models

Attachment operates by each child developing an internal representation of their experience of relationships, an **internal working model (IWM)** of social relating. Like an architect's model, it represents the individual's perception of the world of relationships and guides social interactions (Bowlby, 1969, p. 80; 1973, p. 237). A securely attached child has internal working models that see the world as a safe place and themselves as responsive, caring, and reliable. An insecurely attached child is more likely to be cautious toward others and see themselves as less worthy of attention and love (Holmes, 1993, p. 79). Although IWMs can be revised in the light of experience, they are not always, or indeed easily, accessible to conscious examination and change because they are laid down unconsciously in early life (Bowlby, 1973, p. 367). Parents' relationships with their children are influenced by their own IWMs, and in this way, IWMs are transmitted across generations (Bowlby, 1969, p. 348).

## Mind-Mindedness

Recent research has developed the important concept of "mind-mindedness" to describe the ability of a parent to understand and respond not only to the infant's feelings but also to their thinking (Meins et al., 2002). Carers' "proclivity to comment appropriately on their infants' mental states and processes" is related in research to secure attachments (Meins et al., 2001, p. 637). Mind-mindedness is an indicator of a relationship that is more likely to produce secure attachments. Mind-mindedness reframes Bowlby's concept of maternal sensitivity and involves the carer being "willing to change her focus of attention in response to cues from the infant" (Meins et al., 2001, p. 638). An examination of these selected ideas from

Attachment Theory will be linked to Transformation Theory later in the chapter. First, one more body of research findings on adult attachment will assist in making the proposed connection with the Theory of Transformative Learning more secure.

## ADULT ATTACHMENT

Attachment style and behaviors persist through life (Bowlby, 1988, p. 126) and undergo developmental transformation. Bowlby saw that

Whatever representational models of attachment figures and of self an individual builds up during childhood and adolescence, tend to persist relatively unchanged into and throughout life. As a result he tends to assimilate any new person with whom he may form a bond, such as a spouse or child, or employer or therapist, to an existing model . . . and may continue to do so despite repeated evidence that the model is inappropriate. (Bowlby 1979, p. 142)

Goleman's popular work on *Social Intelligence* acknowledges the importance of a secure base for human relationships; and in researching the connection between attachment and adult relationships, he found that the secure adult is confident of a partner's love and regularly turns to the partner for support, especially when upset (2006, pp. 162–172, 194). Secure adults have internalized “rules” and strategies that allow them to be aware of when they are distressed and when to actively seek comfort from others. They are also able to engage with emotions, neither fearing them nor avoiding them and, moreover, not preoccupied with them (Goleman, 2006, p. 194). Adults with secure attachments will be better able to cope with and embrace new experiences, new ideas, and will even (of importance for adult learners) accept the supports offered. A secure attachment style is a positive indicator of success at reaching one's goals (including learning goals). Insecure adults who are anxious tend to be preoccupied with the anxiety brought on by new experiences. They are more likely to be overwhelmed with feelings of loss and are more likely to be disoriented and unable to avail themselves of support from colleagues or teachers. Anxious attached adults (including students) are likely to worry and tend to be unable to turn off the worry (Goleman, 2006, p. 196). The role of the teacher of adults then is one of building secure and safe spaces in which the anxiety is addressed and a secure base created.

Avoidant adults distance themselves cognitively and in their behavior from the source of stress (Belsky, 2002, p. 167). Those with an avoidant style overly rely on cognitive factors; may ignore or deny emotional reactions, such as anxiety or fear; and may not be able to turn on the worrying brain signals (Feeney & Noller, 1996, p. 105). Avoidant adults are less likely to

seek support, are less satisfied with the support available, and mistrust those who offer support. This is in contrast to those with anxious attachments who focus on the emotional dimensions of experience rather than the cognitive aspect. Whether students are secure or insecure, this will impact on their feelings, attitudes, and behavior and how they react in a learning situation.

A secure attachment facilitates optimal motivation for achieving one's goals because it enables individuals to view achievement in positive terms and to fully focus on effective ways of reaching their goals (Eliot & Reis, 2003, p. 328). In contrast, anxious attachments undermine motivation and achievement because they lead to viewing tasks less positively. Research in this area by Eliot and Reis (2003) supports the general view that secure attachments in adulthood assist in achieving one's goals, and insecure attachments interfere with exploration and in achieving one's goals by evoking avoidance or anxiety. This adds a new dimension to our understanding of adult motivation to learn.

The internal working models (or meaning schemes) of adults affect cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to others in family, work, and in all communications. They affect how data is evaluated and experienced, accepted, rejected, or ignored; how communications are interpreted and responded to; and how others are evaluated. Cognitive responses may lead to giving selective attention to others and biases in memory, and they may impact inferences and explanations. Emotional response patterns and behavior are also influenced by our IWMs. In any activity that involves thinking, the question arises as to how one's IWMs influence that thinking? The thoughts we have, what we remember, what we consider important, how we interpret and make sense of events, is influenced by these models. Those with anxious attachments will focus on the emotional rather than the cognitive aspects, and those with avoidant style will overly rely on the cognitive factors and ignore or deny emotional reactions such as anxiety or fear (Feehey & Noller, 1996, p. 105). Attachment theory and the concept of IWMs help us elaborate what Mezirow (2007, p. 11) calls meaning schemes.

The strange situation is not only a reality that brings to the fore one's attachment style, it is also a precondition for learning. A teacher of adults has traditionally been described as one who initiates wonder (Aristotle) creates perplexity or, in the words of Maxine Greene makes the familiar strange. Adult education provides strange situations for learners when an adult joins a course or program for the first time or when they explore new ideas. Such experiences bring to the fore one's attachment style. This is understandable as much of the discourse in adult education centers around the anxiety of "going back to school" and the low self-confidence a learner often feels on joining a new group for the first time. In addition, these ideas of Bowlby also prompt us to see that new ideas, new points of view, and new learning can have a similar impact,

even if the student has successfully navigated their way into the classroom. The ability of a learner to cope with new knowledge is hugely influenced by their strategies for coping with the strange situations brought about by new learning that triggers attachment behaviors. Students make meaning of the strange situations in ways that are consistent with their internal working models. Whether they are secure or insecure will impact on their feelings and attitudes and how they make meaning and act in these situations. The logic of the strange situation is possibly what Greene means when she talks about the teacher as stranger (Greene, 1995, p. 92).

This understanding is consistent with Bowlby's own views. For instance, Bowlby envisages the role of the therapist as providing the conditions in which a patient can explore their representational models of themselves and their attachment figures with a view to reappraising and restructuring them in the light of the new understandings acquired and the new experiences one has in the therapeutic relationship (Bowlby 1988, p. 138). He goes on to describe the role of the therapist as providing the patient with a secure base from which the past may be explored. Therapy involves assisting the patient to explore the ways he/she now engages in relations with significant others and what unconscious biases there may be in one's close or intimate relationships. The therapist encourages the patient to explore how the current situation is an expression of how one's own experiences in childhood may continue to impact on current relationships and helps in recognizing that the models the patient has of oneself and one's relationships may or may not be appropriate to the present or future, or indeed may not have been justified at all (Bowlby, 1988, p. 138). In this way, "one may cease to be a slave to old and unconscious stereotypes and to feel, think and to act in new ways" (Bowlby, 1988, p. 139). This is the site in which an understanding of how transformative learning can be understood, re-framed, and facilitated.

Paying attention to the student as having a mind and feelings is not new to adult education. It is in fact a precondition for all interactions. It is a precondition for the Communicative Action of Habermas, which is so influential in the articulation of the Theory of Transformative Learning. However, insights from attachment theory give a solid and additional grounding for attending to the student in this way, as one with a mind and feelings. Mind-mindedness is developmental. As Greene says, while emphasizing the role of the teacher in supporting learning, I see teachers "becoming a friend of someone else's mind" (1995, p. 38). Mind-mindedness is a useful way of supporting adults in the process of learning and supporting the move toward secure at

## MEZIROW'S THEORY OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

According to Mezirow's theory, the most significant adult learning involves becoming aware of the ways in which unquestioned assumptions that act as taken-for-granted beliefs, attitudes, and values, constrain and distort how one makes sense of the world. Frequently, these assumptions originate in childhood experiences. These unquestioned assumptions as frames of reference have two dimensions. One involves habits of expectation (meaning perspectives) that serve as filters or codes that shape, constrain, or distort our meaning making. The other involves points of view (meaning scheme) or individual beliefs, judgments, attitudes, and such (Mezirow, 2007, p. 11). Attachment styles and internal working models are good examples of psychological filters or codes that continue to influence ways of feeling and acting in adulthood. These internal working models are frames of reference as described by Mezirow (2007, p. 11).

In transformative learning theory, a key role is given to meaning as the organization of experience. Individuals order experiences, relate them to previous experiences, and use them to make decisions about how to act in the future. This organization of experience allows the individual to order and classify events and recognize feelings associated with events. By perceiving experience as having a pattern that is recognizable, one can learn (Marris, 1991, p. 78). The process of growing up is at least partly the process of developing these organizations of meaning. The activity of adult learning involves the process of changing these organizations of meaning. Transformative learning theory adds a critical dimension by emphasizing how these organizations of meaning are transformed by critical reflection on taken-for-granted assumptions.

One's attachment style and internal working models are psychological dimensions of meaning schemes. In transformation theory, it is these meaning schemes or frames of reference that get transformed (Mezirow, 2007). The internal working models are exactly what Mezirow means by psychological filters or codes "that shape and delimit and often distort our experience" (Mezirow, 2007, p. 11). One can associate the process of transformation with the development of new internal working models. It is also consistent with attachment theory and transformative learning theory to see the creation of perplexity as a prompt for transformative learning. In addition, a changed IWM may be an improvement on a previous one, and it is better if it meets Mezirow's criteria. A transformed frame of reference is "more inclusive, differentiating, more open to alternative perspectives and more integrative of experience" (Mezirow, 2007, p. 11). This may also be a good set of criteria for judging a "better" internal working model. It is at least a real possibility that development and growth are best supported by more secure attachment styles.

What gets transformed in transformation theory? Attachment styles and internal working models get transformed, and the understanding of transformation theory can thus be expanded and enhanced in a number of ways. According to Mezirow, the process of transforming a frame of reference commences with a disorienting dilemma and concludes with a reintegration into community with a new set of assumptions. This is suggestive of a process of altering or transforming one's attachment style and internal working models. Mezirow's disorienting dilemma is reminiscent of the strange situation. Each has in common an experience that what was taken for granted or assumed does not hold anymore. In the case of the child, it is the departing attachment figure or the arrival of a perceived danger, possibly another person. In the case of the adult engaged in transformative learning, it might be the apprehension felt by the arrival at new learning situations or exploration of new ideas. The strange situation has the added importance for transformation theory in that it allows us to identify the experience of disorientation as a sense that things do not fit anymore; previously taken-for-granted meanings do not hold. The profound sense of loss implied in that experience may precipitate or bring to the fore our own attachment style. If learners are secure, they are more likely to react with less anxiety and a decreased possibility of avoiding issues and situations.

As one's attachment style informs one's way of relating to others, it is suggested here that a significant kind of adult learning involves the developmental task of moving toward more secure attachments. One dimension of transformative learning involves the process of developing new internal working models. It is also consistent with attachment theory to see the creation of perplexity as a way of prompting transformative learning. Human development is being redefined here as the transformation of attachment styles and internal working models. Bowlby (1973, p. 368; 1988, p. 126) did envisage attachment as a lifelong learning project. Finally, it is the usefulness of mind-mindedness, though not carrying the full weight of critical reflection so important for transformation, that leads to seeing the importance of paying attention to one's mind that underpins the importance of a process of facilitating adult transformation.

This study of Bowlby's attachment theory allows a more thorough understanding of how society and culture construct child-rearing practices and have a profound impact not only on the child but on the entire learning life of that individual. Attachment theory provides a lifelong learning project that brings together deep psychological patterns as well as the reproduction of society. These ideas take on board, in a way reminiscent of Erich Fromm's work, how the individual and society are inextricably connected. Marris (1991, pp. 79–80) posits,

The experience of attachment is the first crucial link between sociological and psychological understanding: the experience of attachment, which so profoundly influences the growth of personality, is itself the product of a culture, and a determinant of how that culture will be reproduced in the next generation—not only the culture of attachment itself but all our ideas of order, authority, and control.

At the core of a critical adult learning theory is the necessity to imagine and theorize about how the cultures and societies in which we live and interact with influence the ways in which people relate to each other. This is helpful in understanding more thoroughly how adult learning may be enhanced or distorted by secure or insecure attachment styles and internal working models. Finally, the move toward more secure ways of relating and exploring the world is a lifelong learning project of the most significant personal and political importance.

Mind-mindedness for adults is what is being proposed. When adults develop secure attachments, as a consequence, the next generation of children learns secure attachment as well. This begins a positive cycle of attachment and facilitates continuous growth. Meaning schemes, as articulated by Mezirow (2007), can now be understood as having a genesis in childhood experiences and in society. The process involved in the development and transformation is a lifelong learning project.

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