



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING: CRITICIZING THE MEZIROW'S THEORY.

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#### Abstract

This paper presents a discussion on Mezirow's transformational learning theory. A set of hypothetical situations is presented as discussion material proving Mezirow's views transformational learning theory is not solid and need for further researches. The following discussion is based on key examples that show hidden features that happen when Mezirow's transformational learning theory is applied in hypothetical everyday situations. This paper provides possible overviews on adult learning process under transformational learning framework.

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#### Introduction:-

Mezirow's Theory (Mezirow & Assoc., 2000) proposes transformation learning as a process through which people can change their perceived framework of reference about reality that is constructed by a set of beliefs, assumptions, values and experiences (Boverie & Kroth, 2001; Gergen, 1991). This change could rebuild or re-scale all of the previously mentioned features in a single moment, and either, in a short or a long period of time (Wallace & Gruber, 1989). Mezirow identifies transformational learning as a positive process. He also states that there is no possible way that people are able to come back to any previous frameworks that they have already been through (Daloz, 1999; Wallace & Gruber, 1989). Finally, the author mentions that this process could happen in a single person as well as in an organization anywhere in the world.

#### Our Approach to the Theory:-

First of all, we agree with Mezirow's theory (Mezirow & Assoc., 2000) on many points but we also disagree on others.

#### Points that we agree with are:-

Transformational learning is a process that occurs many times in every person's lifetime.

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Transformational learning is linked to people's assumptions, beliefs, values, personal experiences, and to the individual personal's created reality.

This event can also be placed in any organization but not just only one or few selected kinds of them.

Points of disagreement are:-

- Transformational learning is always a positive process. Positive is very subjective when applied to more than one individual' transformation event. Positive transformation can be applied to a single person but not for many people or vice-versa. For example, what if a woman who was living a happily married life becomes a widow? Her transformation will be positive if she can overcome this event and she comes to an independent and self-confident woman (Daloz, 1999). However, many parts of her life maybe are also broken such the losing of her positive feelings about a relationship with her mate and no longer being part of that couple.
- Transformational learning is a way that people deal with their lives' events by using their own personal framework. People are not always ready for a transformation (Wallace & Gruber, 1989; Arnheim, 1969). Sometimes, people refuse to change (Daloz, 1999; Vygotsky, 1986). People's customs are very strong and they do not want to change their way of life. Following the previous example of the widowed woman, she might try to keep living in the same way that she was living before and she might do anything in order to keep her status quo (Daloz, 1999).
- The framework, already mentioned by Mezirow (Mezirow & Assoc., 2000), is adapted in order to fit into every moment of a person's life and it shall need to be reframed constantly (Boverie & Kroth, 2001). Life leads us to many unexpected ways and people like to be in the same framework.

For the case of the widowed woman, she may try to keep her previous lifestyle and maybe she will try to get married again, or at least, to live as a married woman and might will be failed on fulfilling her objectives by a variety of reasons such as family's interests, financial, job's issues, health, and so on.

In order to adapt to a given reality, people need to learn about this episodic reality that is taking place, but it does not mean that this episodic reality will be adapted to the next moment (Daloz, 1999). If this condition occurs, learning might stop when people no longer need to adapt to a new reality. In fact, learning is a life-long process and people learn every single moment of their life (Daloz, 1999).

Our first statement is "transformation is a multi-dimensional and multi-factorial event that occurs many times in human life" (Mezirow, & Assoc., 2000). Transformation and learning are strongly linked and we cannot approach either of them without regard to the other one. Transformation and learning are constructed by a personal framework composed by set of beliefs, values, assumptions and experiences in every single person. These features have different parameters that are not static but are very dynamic; they can change easily depending on the episodic event people are going through (Mezirow and Assoc., 2000). When a person is learning a foreign language different from their mother's tongue, this person not only learns a language but also about the culture of the native speakers of this language and vice-versa, the learning of the native speakers' culture is leading him to learn this language (Daloz, 1999).

Furthermore, personal experiences can influence a person's decision-making that might cause the next experience to occur. This process makes a closed circle that can influence and shape the set

of the person's beliefs, values, and assumptions (Daloz, 1999; John-Steiner, 2000). An example, when we learn by our mistakes, we may react differently when a similar situation occurs. Thus, each everyday experience reframes people's frameworks and frameworks can also shape people's experience (Mezirow& Assoc., 2000). Sometimes, under special circumstances, some events, isolated or enchainned, promote the need of large change in people's framework, e.g. traumatic experience like the death of someone close, losing a job or being hired for a new kind of a job, an accident, and so on. If we use the same already mentioned character (widowed woman) when she overcomes the death and becomes an independent and self-confident being. Life has pushed her to another status (Mezirow& Assoc., 2000). This new status has many new requirements, if she can achieve them and adjust herself in this new framework, we can say that she has been transformed. This reframing becomes a tipping point in a person's life. Also, this tipping point can be a new reference about the perceived reality (Mezirow& Assoc., 2000). But when conditions change, a person's framework is no longer adjusted toward this new perceived reality, in our example, the widow it might be got married again. This constant changing of framework and reality is the engine for learning and transformation (Boverie&Kroth, 2001); the widowed woman learns to be a married woman, then, a widow, and finally, a married widowed remarried woman.

Transformational learning is a process hard to perceive and people are not always aware of their own transformational learning process (Mezirow& Assoc., 2000; Brookfield, 1987). For some people, transformational learning is a manageable process. For these people, the process is easy to see and to handle; they also can take a very active role in their own process of transformational learning (Daloz, 1999). For some others, it is also easy to promote this process in others but unfortunately; there are not too many people of this kind. Most of us are not able to take an active role in our own transformational process; we become casualties of our own process; that is the most common event (Gergen, 1991).

In order to understand this statement let's consider the following example: suppose that we have a hundred-dollar bill in my pocket, and let's think about some possibilities on using the \$100 US Dollars bill:

- What if we fully ignore we are carrying on a 100-dollar bill in my pocket?
- What if we know we are carrying this 100-dollars bill but in our personal perceived reality about this bill, it is not for a 100-dollar bill but smaller? - We do not realize the real value of the bill.
- What if we know about the 100-dollar bill but we only know how to spend a 50-dollar bill? So, we do not know how to use a 100-dollar bill.

Now, if we suppose that we are trying to use this bill. In any of the above cases, we will not be successful, mostly because my framework does not match my reality. Thus, we will become a casualty of my own framework. The 100-dollar bill is still in my pocket but we cannot use it in a successful way. A "perfect" framework is useless if it does not fit my mediated reality.

Another component that influences our framework is the way we construct our set of assumptions, beliefs, and values. These features can also shape each moment of a person's life (Mezirow& Assoc., 2000).

Some culture loads can significantly bias the way on how we define our framework's boundaries. This culture loads can be different among groups of people. The biggest culture load is the

decision-making when people construct their own framework. Choosing a religion in a closed society is usually an easy task. Because of the surrounding environment, we often choose the widespread religion. But sometimes we follow our own framework and we choose a different one. This difference makes a tipping point for this particular society that does not match perfectly to our expectations (Mezirow & Assoc., 2000). If new approach transcends beyond a single person, we can assume that it is a matter of time that this society will hold to a different religion.

Another subject matter is decision-making and risk-taking. These processes are shaped and reshaped, most of the time, by a person's "positive" experiences (Boverie & Kroth, 2001) that influence self-confidence and self-esteem. "Bad" experiences can lower self-esteem and self-confidence, and sometimes, in some cases and under some circumstances, other people create a framework for that particular person (Mezirow & Assoc., 2000). He or she is no longer the one who hold or/and use his/her own framework (John-Steiner, 2000) other's frameworks. Worst of all, they create psychological dependency, their framework becomes weaker and they do not have clear choices of decision taking about their own framework. An example for this statement is the case of a person that becomes dependent, maybe brain-washed or after sect experience as well as Job's dependent person. He or she loses the ability to make decisions concerning his/her life, expecting another person to take a full responsibility for it. But people always have a choice, the only thing they need is to realize that. It is an important remark that the adoption of somebody else's framework is not always a wrong decision because we learn from others and the learning process, as well as transformation event, becomes a social event. The model example of this situation is a parent-child relationship. Children do not have enough life experience for decisions making, they rely on their parents. Another example is a teacher-student relationship, but there is a thin line between learning better and being dependent, something like in the beginning teacher should be a person that is always right, but as students, through the time they learn and know more, now they are in the position to challenge the teacher's knowledge. In the case of the widowed woman, she has the option to keep her current framework (maybe it is her husband's framework) or to adopt a new framework (Gergen, 1991).

The situation, already mentioned in the last paragraph, can happen in a single person's life as well as in organizations (Mezirow & Assoc., 2000). When we decide to teach somebody, we should be very careful not to promote psychological dependency. People do not always need a transformational learning event or it needs to happen in the right time and place otherwise is a recipe for failure.

### **Internal Transformation versus External Transformation:-**

Another issue for discussion about transformational learning is related to a statement where people hold two sets of assumptions, values, beliefs, and experiences. The first one is related to internal processes that are happening inside of every single person. The second is related to people's relations with their immediate environment (Vygotsky, 1986). There is a strong dependency between the duo internal-external since there is a communication channel between internal and external speech. The internal set is constructed as a group of features that support people's perceptions; it is related to people's spiritual and emotional world of feelings (Gergen, 1991). Examples of this set are: love, believing in a higher being, goodness, satisfaction, and so on. Construction of the external set is based on everyday person's experience about their immediate environment, it is based on possession of belongings; it is related to the physical

world(Vygotsky, 1986). Examples for this external set are: having a house, money, traveling, education, and so on. These two are different in nature and no always matching for a person's framework. Both sets might work independently or work dependently to each other.

An example of a conflict between these two sets are e.g. love against money, respect about your thoughts on being not educated versus be educated, etc.

When does transformation take a place in a person? The "right" answer should be: "it depends on..." "The transformational process has many features that are working together, so it is hard to define when a transformation will take a place. But we can be sure that when transformational components and its relationship no longer fit the person's reality, it is a fertile ground for a transformational event" (Brookfield, 1987). As many previous transformational experiences a person has in its past as easier will be to transform into a new framework (Brookfield, 1987). In our example, once she has learned about married life, it will easier for her get marry again, all depends if her previous experience was "good" or "bad" with the influence of many others factors.

This statement is leading us to another question. Is the person ready for a transformation? The answer to this question will be: it depends on the moment and people's personal evolution. "Opportunity will always favor the most prepared mind"(Roberts, 1989). But we could be sure that while more transformational events happen in a person, it will be easier to transform again (Mezirow& Assoc., 2000). It is the case of the married woman that became the widow, now she needs to face another set of unexpected framework that offers her a new set of opportunities.

Personal evolution is another issue for transformation. Personal expectancies and goals of two different people are quite different (Gergen, 1991). The scale of parameters is also quite different because it is constructed based on different approaches (Brookfield, 1987).

The eternal difference between eastern and western cultures is a reality even nowadays. Both cultures lead their societies in different ways. Both societies focus in a different way about what is the best way to perceive a given reality.

It is possible to think that we are in a transformational process that goes in reverse mode and to believe that this process looks like an involution (against) rather than evolution (pro) of our set of features that comprise our transformation.

### **Summary:-**

Transformational learning is a non-stop process (Dalo, 1999; Vygotsky, 1986) but sometimes non-transformation learning is a right process. For people that already reached a stage of well self-development transformational learning is no longer necessary, they just need an elapse of time in order to perform their tasks. In the case of the widow woman, after she married again and her married last for many years, she does not need a reframe of her framework but she needs time to enjoy her married status as long her mate live. Based on all already mentioned situations, we can propose that transformation is not always a positive experience but rather a double-edged knife that can lead us to a new stage but the relationship between the transformational event, right time and "right" personal set of features in a single person are non-linear.

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