

Transformative Learning With Women: A Critical Review Proposing Linkages for the Personal and Political Spheres*

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Abstract: Theoretical developments in the field of transformative learning have progressed significantly over the past two decades, yet little attention has been paid to women's experiences of transformative learning and to the issues of race, class and gender in this learning. We explore the apparent hesitation at both the personal and political ends of the transformative learning spectrum, and help to create alliances and strengthen the theory.

Beyond the fact that Mezirow's (1978) empirical work started with women returning to college after a hiatus, neither his deliberation on that study nor his more recent work have focused specifically on women. The same might be said of theorists such as Clark and Dirkx (2008), Taylor (2008), or Cranton (2006). Not naming women (and gender) directly in the discussion of transformative learning is problematic for a number of reasons. A comprehensive review of gender and learning showed that the category of gender had faded from the adult education literature, though women's issues floated beneath the surface, and women continue to make up the majority of the student body and professoriate in adult education (English & Irving, 2007). We speculate that in the attempt to unite with other causes in the struggle for equality and to tone down feminist rhetoric, adult education scholars have foregone attention to women. The broader discourse of "women's empowerment" has been similarly depoliticized from its collective and radical transformative roots; in its place are neo-liberal priorities of access and individual choice, which raise questions about the concept of transformation itself (Cornwall, Harrison & Whitehead, 2007). This depoliticization means that women's needs are increasingly hidden, as are the links of transformative learning to social justice. This chapter addresses these gaps.

Much of the adult education literature on women and learning presupposes transformation. This is not surprising since the literature deals with personal and institutional challenges that affect women's entry and active participation in educational programs (Belenky et al., 1986; Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Women's challenging location in the workplace, the community, higher education, and the development sphere, has lent itself to extended, though varied, discussions of transformation. Arguably, women's historically disadvantaged position has necessitated a unique body of work that has not engaged the discourse of transformative learning. A second possibility is that while much of the literature on feminism, in particular, is from a community, civil society, and collective experience, there may be an erroneous perception that transformative learning is always individualistic. The time is perhaps now right for theorists focusing on women, and those focusing on social justice, to learn from the transformative learning literature.

Observations on the Literature

This paper draws on our review of the literature on transformative learning theory and women. Our search revealed that direct linkages between the theory and women's learning were few and far between, which was surprising given the overall commitment of adult educators to women and learning and to feminism more specifically (e.g., Belenky et al., 1986; Hayes & Flannery, 2000). In fact, the primary publication for articles on transformative learning, the *Journal of Transformative Education*, has published few related articles (Clover, 2006; Cooley, 2007; Elvy, 2004; Kluge, 2007; Mayuzumi, 2006; Nash, 2007; Williams, 2006). The proceedings of the International Transformative Learning Conference, contain an equally low number of papers directly focused on women's transformation (e.g., Armacost, 2005; Buck, 2009; Forest, 2009; Hamp, 2007; Hansman & Wright, 2005; Jeanetta, 2005; Jeris & Gajanayake, 2005; Mejiuni, 2009; Muhammad & Dixson, 2005). Significantly, only one of these publications uses the word feminist in the title (Brookfield, 2003).

Searches of other adult education journals yield similar results when the specific terms transformative learning and women/gender/feminism are used (e.g., Cooley, 2007; Elvy, 2004). Yet, there is a considerable literature in cognate areas. The term "transformative learning," like the term "women and learning," has several synonyms such as conscientization, radical social change, and transition (e.g., Arnot, 2006; Stromquist, 2006). We include both the explicitly named concept and its cognates with the intent of encouraging mutual exchange and broadening the scope of the field. From our review of the literature, we highlight three aspects of the theory.

Engagement of Women's Learning With the Theory

We concentrate here on Belenky et al. (1986) because it would seem that most of the work on women's transformation pays homage to it, directly or indirectly (e.g., Cranton & Wright, 2008; Forest, 2009). Belenky and Stanton (2000) bring the theory of transformative learning to the understandings of the original *Women's Ways of Knowing* (WWK) (Belenky et al.), which include concepts such as voice, subjectivity and silence. In traversing the WWK theory of women as connected knowers they point also to the preferred styles of knowing of women. They are also gently critical of Mezirow's linear and rational version of transformative learning, noting that "Critical discourse, the doubting game, can only be played well on a level playing field" (Belenky & Stanton, p. 89), suggesting that the field is rarely level for women.

Belenky and Stanton (2000) do not refute Mezirow's separate knowing but rather suggest that it not occupy the central place that Mezirow would give it, especially for collective action. They note that critical thinking skills are important, in particular for oppressed groups whose voices have not been heard. For Belenky and Stanton and researchers such as Hamp (2007), Jeanetta (2005), Meyer (2009) and Nash (2007) it is important first to build these capacities so women's transformation is possible.

Connection to Race, Class, and Oppression

Much of the writing on transformative learning and women is derived from studies of women in oppressive conditions, which has helped to contextualize an originally middle class and white experience. Meyer (2009) studies lower class women in East Harlem, Nash (2007) examines the impact of intimate partner violence on African American women, and Jeris and Gajanayake (2005) work with Mezirow's theory to examine perspective transformation among women in Sri Lanka. Implicit in these articles is the tragedy, violence or other social factors as an instigator of

a disorienting dilemma yet the links to transformative learning theory are not specifically named or advanced.

Hamp (2007) writes about the transformative dimensions of the lives of oppressed women who make the transition from welfare to work. She emphasizes how their experience of poverty and domestic violence affects their ability to manage emotions and to experience transformative learning. Kilgore and Bloom (2002) similarly point out the challenges of facilitating transformative learning with women in crisis. There is a challenge to the rational and linear expectations of Mezirow's theory. Harris (2007) uses Mezirow's theories to analyze a gender training program in Tajikistan. She observes that students are not all at the same level of preparation for transformation, so programs need to be more rigorously adapted for these differences than Mezirow suggests.

Silence on Transformative Learning Theory

One of the most troubling findings in our review is the lack of direct attention to the theoretical frameworks that support transformative learning. Many of the articles used the language of transformative learning in a superficial way and did not attempt to contribute to the development of theory that is necessary for its ongoing conceptualization. For instance, Brookfield (2003) describes bell hooks and Angela Davis as exemplars of the social action and transformative struggle, yet he does not directly engage the transformative learning theory to any great degree in the context of their work. Others who seem to evade direct discussion of the theory include Mayuzumi (2006), Williams (2006), Kluge (2007), Grant (2008) and Elvy (2004).

Facilitating Women's Transformation

These gaps reveal opportunities for particular areas that can be developed to make the transformative learning theory on women more robust and the practice in the field stronger.

Importance of Relationships

Clear in the studies that we have explored is the importance of relationships in women's transformative experiences (see Brookfield, 2003; Buck, 2009; Grant, 2008; Hamp, 2007; Wittman et al., 2008). This connects to Brooks' (2000) notion the opportunity for women to share their life narratives is at the heart of their transformative experience. Cooley (2007) explores the significance of an enclave or gathering for women, which can facilitate friendship, trust, and transformative learning. Mejiuni (2009) speaks to the value of collaboration and support for transformative learning among women in academe in Nigeria. Meyer (2009) stresses journaling and coaching, as does Forest (2009) who explores the role of the "coach" in assisting women who live in poverty. These studies suggest that relationships and collectivity are especially important for women in crisis. This recalls Ryan's (2001) contention that for any meaningful social change to occur learning starts with individual self-reflection that must at some juncture connect with the collective realm. Although this is important for all women, it is a particular concern for women who have been socialized in collectivist societies. Harris (2007) notes that participants within various cultural learning contexts do not relate well to western individualized models; they see their learning as inherently linked to the community, both in terms of process and product.

Importance of the Body

A decidedly female version of transformative learning is developed by Armacost (2005) who writes on menopause and its transformative dimensions, Buck (2009) who looks at the use of photography to understand women's midlife spirituality and Mayuzumi (2006) who examines the physical ritual of the tea ceremony for healing and transformation of women. The body is the impetus and the site of learning, creating change and enacting new possibilities. Likewise, in the Kluge (2007) article, women are challenged to undertake physical activity as a means of challenging stereotypes of aging. Through the body they learn potential and are transformed in self-perception, moving from stereotypes and negative self image to "increased connection with and confidence in their bodies" (p.187). Barnacle (2009) and Michelson (1998) have showcased the role of the body in women's learning and emphasized non-cognitive modes of knowing. These theorists' insights about the body can move transformative learning theory beyond the metaphors of midwifing that have stalled its development.

Importance of Emotion

Much of the transformative learning literature on women focuses on oppressive conditions, which affect women's learning. These conditions directly and indirectly affect women's transformation either by stymieing it or by serving as a catalyst. It would seem that women who became stirred up by their circumstances, who work together with other women, have the ability to be transformed. Hamp (2007) identifies the "drama and extreme emotional distress" (p.176) that is part of women's learning. Muhammad and Dixson (2005) name resistance and anger, latent pain, and discomfort among white and black women as they discussed race. Mayuzumi (2006) examines transformation via the tranquility achieved through ritual and Mejuini (2009) considers the role of emotion in female academics' transformative learning. This suggests that emotion plays a particular role in transformation for women, yet in most of the other studies it remains beneath the surface and is not named directly. We know from bell hooks (2001) and Freire (1970) that emotion is a catalyst in transforming one's life circumstances.

Importance of Race and Class

Social, cultural and economic factors affect transformative learning and women. Race, class, gender, and ability are dealt with a little in the literature, yet collectively we see that they are major factors to be considered in understanding the intersection of women and transformative learning. Johnson-Bailey's (2006) work for instance, highlights the role of race and suggests that struggle is part of the transformative learning process, yet few other writers take on these issues directly. Her race-centric perspective is reminiscent of Hill Collins' (1998) work, which suggests definite links for those interested in pursuing the transformative dimensions of women's learning. Although there may be an uneasy alliance between some aspects of feminism and some of the theory of transformative learning, given occasional competing claims between transformative learning and social change adherents, the benefits of a critical lens would be useful. From our Canadian perspective we realize that attention to the First Nations communities is especially needed. Harris (2007) observes the need for more theorizing in other cultural contexts.

The links among women, class, and learning have been developed by researchers such as Sue Jackson (2003) and Jane Thompson (2007). This literature focuses on the interlocking nature of the multiple systems of oppression—race, class, gender and sexual orientation—and with how these have affected or facilitated learning. It would be a logical leap to conjoin these insights

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with transformative learning and to make deliberate attempts in practice to be aware of how race, class and gender and power affect learning for women.

Importance of Creativity and the Arts

A theme in the literature is the role of creativity and the arts in supporting transformation for women. Armacost (2005), Elvy (2004), Clover (2006), and Wittman et al. (2008), all employ photographic research methods to examine women's transformative learning. Others such as Brooks (2000) have examined the role of the narrative arts of storytelling as important to women's learning. In a similar vein, Wiessner (2009) examines women's use of music-based activities, Wittman et al. (2008) the use of collective writing, and Hansman and Wright (2005) the role of popular education techniques as a means of facilitating women's transformation. Pettit (2010) provides a helpful example of how to use creativity to analyze power and emotion.

Directions for Future Research and Practice

In addition to the areas named above for teaching and learning practice, there are other areas where researchers need to help the literature become more robust. Few of the researchers made an attempt to situate their work in a particular body of transformative learning theory, and yet there clearly were separate preferences with a number of writers following the Freirean based global, social change direction (e.g., McCaffery, 2005) and others more interested in the more individual orientation of Mezirow (e.g., Armacost, 2005). Notable were those writers who made a concerted effort to tie their findings to either theory (e.g., Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Cranton & Wright, 2008). We challenge researchers to ask: Which theory is operative here and how am I building or refuting this theory? As well, we encourage theorists interested in women and learning to work further on healing the divisions between individually oriented and social justice oriented transformative learning, the two basic directions of the theory (Johnson-Bailey, 2006), and to establish a firm role for feminism in this dialogue.

*See also English, L.M., & Irving, C.J. (in press). Women and transformative learning. In P. Cranton & E. Taylor (Eds.), *Handbook of transformative learning theory*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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