

Critical Theory and Transformative Learning: Rethinking the Radical Intent of Mezirow's Theory

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ABSTRACT

Mezirow relies on the critical theory of Habermas to give his theory of transformative learning rigor. Yet critiques persist and focus on whether the theory has an adequate understanding of the social dimension of learning and whether it is overly rational. This article addresses these issues and explores relevant ideas from Habermas and Honneth. Critical theory has evolved and Honneth's theory of recognition has implications for transformative learning. Following the communicative turn of Habermas, Honneth makes recognition and freedom key concepts that contribute to developing transformative learning theory. Intersubjectivity and recognition become the necessary preconditions for critical reflection, discourse, democracy and transformative learning. Freedom is also reconfigured and these ideas address the main critiques of transformation theory.

KEYWORDS

Critical Theory, Habermas, Honneth, Recognition Theory, Transformative Learning

INTRODUCTION

Jefferson, Marx, Gramsci, Dewey and Paulo Freire all note that democratic participation is a means of self-development and produces individuals who are more tolerant of difference, sensitive to reciprocity and more self-reflective (Mezirow, 2003). According to Dewey democracy "necessarily emerges on the condition of an antecedent intersubjectivity of social life" (Honneth, 1998, p. 767). Democracy and education presuppose each other.

Mezirow (1981) links transformative learning with the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas, a member of the Frankfurt School. His highly rational and abstract discourse and its rules influence transformation theory. Engaging in discourse requires the capacity to be critically reflective and the ability to engage in "critical dialectical discourse involving the assessment of assumptions and expectations supporting beliefs, values and feelings" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 60). Though Mezirow was aware of the Frankfurt School through the work of Schroyer (1975) and Jay (1973) he never fully adopted the critical theory of Habermas and this may have given traction to some of the critiques of transformative learning theory.

The theory of transformative learning views learning as having individual and social dimensions (Cranton & Taylor, 2012) and critiques argue that transformation theory has an inadequate understanding of the social (Clarke & Wilson, 1991; Collard & Law, 1989, 1992; Newman, 1993). Cranton & Taylor (2012) identify this as a continuing issue prompting clarifications and further development of the theory by Mezirow (1989, 1991a, 1995, 1996). Critics assert that Mezirow's emphasis on the individual does not accurately represent the emphasis in Habermas's work. According

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to Mezirow, they misunderstand transformation theory. This has prompted clarifications and further development of the theory (Mezirow, 2003). Transformation theory is built on two sets of assumptions. Firstly, there are humanistic and constructivist assumptions that focus on the individual as a unit of analysis (Cranton et al., 2012). Secondly, there are assumptions from critical theory that focus on the social as a unit of analysis (Brookfield, 2012; Mezirow, 1991b). Attempts have been made to address these comments (Fleming, 2014) and others argue that Mezirow was always convinced of the centrality of social justice (Rose, 2016).

Taylor & Cranton (2013) call attention to the continuing absence of theoretical developments in transformation theory. The high level of rationality, the demands of critical reflection, the developmental dividend of democratic engagements and the critiqued individualism of Mezirow's theory can be better understood by a more detailed engagement with the critical theory of Habermas. This paper explores how the theories of Habermas and Honneth have recently evolved, explores how this addresses critiques and enhances the theory of transformative learning.

WHAT IS CRITICAL THEORY?

Critical theory is an analysis of society intent on understanding how society is structured so that injustices and structural inequalities are understood as created and sustained by powerful people and systems. It has the defining characteristic that it is interested in changing this situation so that systems become more just. Horkheimer and Adorno along with Marcuse, Fromm and Benjamin (and others) gave the Frankfurt School a sound footing and they developed a body of scholarship that was not only a Marxist study of political and economic systems but included an integrated psychoanalytic analysis. One could only understand oppression, injustices and the willingness of people to agree to this by analysing both social systems and their dialectical relationship with the unconscious. The inner lives of people and their relationships are invaded by the exchange economy (Brookfield, 2005). Their critique also offers a vision of a world as it might be. For educators in this critical tradition (Freire) this is a learning project. We can learn our way toward a better and more humanizing future.

Habermas represents the second generation of the Frankfurt School and diagnoses the pathology of this age as distorted communication. He also contributes frequently to public debates in Germany. Few scholars operate on such a global stage (Müller-Doohm, 2016) and he is closely associated with efforts to make sense of democracy and its untapped possibilities. For him democracy is an always unfinished project. He proposes that any decision in society must be deliberated on freely and equally by all without being hindered or excluded by social inequalities. Bernstein calls him the “philosopher of democracy” (Bernstein, 1991, p. 207). We inherit this legacy in which reasoned discourse about the good life is once again possible, practicable and epistemologically legitimate.

WHAT IS TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING?

In the 1970s, according to Rose (2016), Mezirow held that adult learning involves more than the self-directed learning of Knowles and proposes instead that it be defined by the testing of assumptions. In a filmed interview (Bloom & Gordon, 2015) Mezirow connects his work with that of Marx, Freud, Freire, Habermas and Socrates and suggests that frames of reference be made subject to critical reflection. Mezirow relies on Dewey (1933) who defines reflection as a process of “assessing the grounds (justification) for one's beliefs” (p. 9) and critical reflection as “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends” (Dewey in Mezirow & Associates, 1990, p. 5). Reflection includes making “unconscious assumptions explicit” (Dewey, 1933, p. 281) and establishing beliefs upon a “firm basis of reason” (p. 6).

Fingarette's *The Self in Transformation* (1963) that explores psychoanalysis, existentialism and religious thinking and is a source of Mezirow's concept of “meaning scheme” (pp. 21-29) has little

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