

## Chapter 9

# Mezirow and the Theory of Transformative Learning

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### ABSTRACT

*Mezirow's theory of transformative learning has always relied on the work of Jürgen Habermas in order to give it a sound theoretical base. This chapter outlines Mezirow's theory of transformative learning attending to its reliance on critical theory which contributes important concepts such as domains of learning, emancipatory learning, critical reflection, and the discourse of communicative action. This chapter explores how the work of Habermas and elements of his critical theory not utilized by Mezirow enhance the rigor of Mezirow's work. An argument is made that allows us to interpret transformative learning theory as a critical theory. As a new generation of Frankfurt School scholars create the next iteration of critical theory, the implications of Axel Honneth's recognition theory are identified for the theory and practice of transformative learning. The communicative turn of Habermas and the recognition and emancipatory turns of Honneth contribute significantly to the evolution of transformation theory.*

### INTRODUCTION

Philippe Petit's successful high wire walk in 1974 between the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in Manhattan forms a tense holding point throughout Colm McCann's (2009) novel *Let the Great World Spin*. In stepping out across the wire, the possibility of disaster looms. The other stories in the novel are of tensions in the lives of New Yorkers as they also search for balance. Tragically, some do not make it and as Petit remarks 'nobody falls half-way' (p. 160). Our search for meaning may not have the same risks as Petit's, and for some it is not easily achieved. In ordinary lives there is still a metaphorical tight rope that we walk, sometimes with high stakes. But with practice it just may be possible to transform - to fly.

Achieving meaning and balance in life is a learning task that underpins Mezirow's theory of transformative learning that is based on findings from evaluation studies at Teachers College (Baumgartner, 2012) during the 1970s. His work builds on that of Tough, Knowles, Blumer, Kelly and Bruner but mostly on Dewey, Freire and in particular Jürgen Habermas. The theory develops from an interest in 'developing

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a research based body of theory indigenous to adult education and of practical utility to practitioners' (Mezirow, 1970, p. 1). Mezirow proposes social justice and change as an aim of adult education. Though this is not always explicit in his work those who worked with him confirm this (Fleming, Marsick, Kasl and Rose, 2016, p. 1). This chapter tracks the links between Mezirow's work and critical theory with the intent of linking transformation theory with critical theory.

In 1969 Mezirow made a strident criticism of the US Community Action Program that was part of the Government's War on Poverty. He accused the program of confusing 'professional competence... with technical expertise' and emphasizing 'quantitative results per dollar invested' (Mezirow, 1970, pp. 21-23). He critiqued the 'cavalier abandon' of evidence based research and proposed evaluations be conducted from a social justice rather than a functional perspective. This helps understand 'both the political and subversive aspects of Mezirow's work' (Rose in Fleming et al., 2016, p. 96). Though Mezirow was not a radical like Freire he supported challenging the dominant ideological assumptions of social and education policy.

The emphasis on andragogy in the 1970s (Knowles, 1968) pushed adult education toward emphasizing social philosophy rather than theorizing more deeply and inductively (Rose in Fleming et al., 2016). Adult education had been informed by humanism, Knowles and Gagne's emphasis on logical reasoning and problem solving (Brookfield, 1986) and Mezirow (1985) held that adult learning involved more than the self-directed learning of Knowles. He proposed instead that it be defined by the testing of assumptions.

In many interpretations of his work the emphasis is on psychological assumptions that require critique. In a filmed interview (Bloom et al., 2015) Mezirow makes a direct and explicit connection between his work and that of Marx, Freud, Freire, Habermas, Socrates and Lindeman. This places social, economic and cultural frames of reference on the agenda for critical reflection. This fits with his social justice interests and with one of the great traditions in adult education, even if a more liberal rather than radical version is his preference. Social action, social movements and community development are major concerns.

Mezirow relied on Dewey (worked at Teachers College) who contributed to understanding reflection. Dewey (1933, p. 9) defined reflection as a process of 'assessing the grounds (justification) for one's beliefs' (Mezirow and Associates, 1990, p. 5) and reflection on presuppositions is what he meant by critical reflection. Dewey (1933, p. 9) defined 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'. Reflection includes making unconscious assumptions explicit (Dewey, 1933, p. 281). It is a conscious and voluntary effort to establish belief upon a firm basis of reasons (Dewey, 1933, p. 6).

Mezirow relied on Fingarette's (1963) *The Self in Transformation*, a work recommended to him by his wife Edee who had read the book while studying at Sarah Lawrence College, New York. Fingarette explores ideas from psychoanalysis, existentialism and religious thinking and is a source of the concept 'meaning scheme' (Fingarette, 1963, pp. 21-29). The roots of some of the critiques of Mezirow's work come from his selective use of sources. Fingarette has little time for a social dimension and Mezirow leaves himself open to this critique. It is ironic that borrowing from Fingarette - that is so full of mysticism, Buddha and Karma - that Mezirow resists enjoying the possibilities that later emerged in the work of Dirkx (2012) on soul. A selective use of Habermas leaves him open to critique along similar lines. By selectively utilizing and ignoring the remainder of the critical theory of Habermas he leaves transformation theory open to the charge of ignoring what is called the social dimension of learning (Collard and Law, 1989). This chapter aims to reconfigure transformative learning theory and critical theory.

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