Toward a Critical Theory of Transformative Learning:
Learning From Oskar Negt

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how key ideas from the critical theory of Oskar Negt can be utilized to address critiques and further enhance Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. The implications of Negt's work on the dialectical nature of experience are identified. So too are the connections he makes between experience, social structures, and social change. Both Dewey and Mezirow build on the importance of experience for learning and education and their work will be re-framed and so contribute to the development of a Negt-inspired critical theory of transformative learning. In addition, ideas such as exemplary learning and competences are taken from Negt in a project that makes transformation theory more cognisant of the perceived missing social dimension in Mezirow's work. Mezirow commenced the task of creating a critical theory of transformative learning, and this paper continues the project. Implications for biographical/narrative research are identified.

KEYWORDS

Adult Education, Exemplary Learning, Experience

INTRODUCTION

…the mind is divided like a rider on an elephant and the rider's job is to control the elephant. The rider is our conscious reasoning….The elephant the other 99 percent of mental processes. (Haidt, 2016, p. xv)

This image from the best-selling work *The Righteous Mind* (Haidt, 2016) allows us play with the complex and challenging task of changing one's mind. Even if we

focus on the ways the rider and animal interact and impact on each other we can see metaphorical, concrete and heuristic dimensions to the story that fuel our imagination. In addition we can factor in the impact of the surrounding environment on the rider/ elephant as a concept of mind. Haidt in two recent books (2006, 2016) sometimes makes more behaviourist uses of such images and makes interesting links with cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Transformative learning does illuminate the ways in which metaphorically and concretely the rider and elephant (the human mind) forge a meaningful path through the delights and challenges of a life lived in society.

Much has changed since the theory of transformative learning was published in 1978 and it continues to play an important role in understanding adult learning (Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow & Marsick, 1978). Climate change, mass migrations, Covid-19 and other crises have provided a challenging environment for the theory (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020). A significant body of scholarship and research has been developed and the theory merits its title as a theory in progress (Mezirow, 2000). From the beginning Mezirow borrowed concepts from Jürgen Habermas in order to build a theoretical base for his theory (Mezirow, 1981). With recent iterations of critical theory by Axel Honneth, work has been undertaken to identify the implications of Honneth's work for a critical theory of transformative learning (Fleming, 2016, 2018a, 2018b). This is an opportune moment to assess the implications of more recent iterations of critical theory for transformation theory. Together Habermas, Honneth and Negt form a trilogy of critical theory influences on the theory of transformative learning.

Collard and Law (1989) say transformation theory is overly concerned with individual change. Clarke and Wilson (1991) say it is too individual and "fails to explore the constitutive relationship between individuals and the sociocultural, political and historical contexts in which they are situated" (p. 90). Newman (1994) asserts that Mezirow was not concerned with equalizing the power relations in society, thus depoliticizing transformative learning and stripping it of its potential for social transformation. More recently, others have critiqued transformation theory and identified a certain "stuckness" in the theory as critiques are repeated without adding to the debate (Hoggan, at al., 2017, p. 49). And these authors refer to the impossibility of disconnecting emotions from rational processes and also personal from social concerns. A dialectical process of critique and development progresses (Hoggan, 2016). Recently Formenti & West (2016) have re-directed transformation theory toward narrative explorations. American influences on the theory have evolved and gradually an active community of scholars in Europe and other places has made the theory less culturally specific (Fleming, et al., 2019).

These studies prompted clarifications and further development of the theory (Mezirow, 1991, 1995, 1996, 2000). Mezirow (1997) spells out the connection between transformation and social action by recommending that learners be helped to analyse their common problems through participatory research, discover options for social action, build solidarities and the ability to work with others in order to take social action (p. 61). Mezirow (1997) always draws a distinction between fostering critically

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