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# Methodological Challenges in Studying Transformative Learning

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**Abstract:** First discussed are philosophical perspectives in relation to the research design and methodology for studying transformative learning. Second, several promising research designs for studying this phenomenon are reviewed including narrative analysis, arts-based research, critical approaches, and action research. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of methodological challenges at this point in the evolution of the knowledge base of transformative learning.

## Selection of a Research Methodology

The selection of an appropriate research design or methodology to study transformative learning is inextricably interrelated to researchers' philosophical perspectives, the research questions, and how well the phenomenon is understood at a particular point in time. All three factors are important in the selection of a research methodology.

### *Philosophical Perspective*

Different researchers assume different epistemological perspectives. A positivist or post-positivist perspective views reality as stable and measurable and thus, seeks to predict future behaviors. A constructivist approach assumes there is no single, objective reality because reality for an individual is constructed by his or her interpretations. From a constructivist perspective, questions are asked about meaning and understanding from the participant's point of view. As Krauss (2005) stated, "people impose order on the world perceived in an effort to construct meaning; meaning lies in cognition not in elements external to us" (p. 760). A constructivist perspective underlies various types of qualitative research.

A critical-epistemology goes beyond the constructivist goal of understanding a phenomenon and seeks to empower participants to be able to change their lives for the better. The influence of Habermas, a critical theorist, and Freire, who spoke of a process of conscientization as well as empowerment and liberation can be seen in Mezirow's theory, most prominently in his critical reflection and action components. In yet another perspective, a postmodern epistemology posits that there is no single reality, indeed, no single "truth" but rather there are multiple "truths." The world is diverse, with multiple realities, none of which is more privileged or more powerful than another. Postmodern research questions anything and everything; it "problematizes" assumptions and views; it "deconstructs" ideas and it "interrupts" taken-for-granted narratives. Whether coming from a positivist, constructivist, critical or postmodern perspective, one's philosophical perspective is intimately linked to the manner in which a research study is constructed and carried out. Interrelated with the philosophical

orientation is the nature of the question being asked and the maturity of the phenomenon being studied.

### *The Research Question and Maturity of the Phenomenon*

The choice of research methodology also reflects the maturity of the phenomenon being studied. When a new concept, model, or theory is first proposed, research studies tend to be designed to advance an understanding of the phenomenon in question. A qualitative design is often employed in the early stages of research because it provides the researcher with insight when important variables have not yet been identified (Cresswell, 2009). This has been the case for transformative learning (Taylor, 1997, 2007). As our understanding of transformative learning has expanded or “matured,” research methodologies have included the use of surveys (Mallory, 2003), mixed-methods (King, 2009; Madsen & Cook, 2010), and experimental studies using arts-based methods (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2009; Clover, 2006; Taylor, 2003). These diverse efforts to understand transformative learning have reflected the epistemological perspectives that researchers bring into their studies.

In sum, it is important to underscore the fact that these factors of epistemological perspective, research question, and phenomenon maturity are inextricably interrelated. What questions one asks about a phenomenon and the subsequent choice of methodology depends to some extent on what is known about the phenomenon. Further, one’s perspective on reality and the nature of knowledge leads to raising certain questions and not others. In the case of research on transformative learning and perspective transformation, all three factors have come together to produce a vibrant body of research and theory-building. In the following section, we discuss four methods (narrative analysis, arts-based research, critical and emancipatory research, and action research) that have advanced our knowledge of transformative learning—methodologies particularly appropriate at this point in the evolution of the knowledge base of TL.

## **Research Methodology for the Study of Transformative Learning**

Initially derived from a grounded theory study of women returning to higher education (Mezirow, 1978a, 1978b), research on transformative learning continues, in general, to employ a constructivist epistemological perspective, albeit in expanded and creative ways. In particular, four approaches (narrative inquiry, arts-based research, critical and emancipatory research, and action research) have deepened our sense of what transformative learning is.

### *Narrative Inquiry*

Narrative inquiry, which allows people to express personal experiences and revise their stories in the process, is a powerful way to understand people’s meaning-making through stories (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2008). Narrative analysis is particularly well suited for the study of transformative learning because it allows people to convey their personal experience of this type of learning through stories. In an interesting discussion of storytelling and its intersection with Mezirow’s conditions for critical discourse in the process of transformative learning, Tyler (2009) points out that stories of personal experience “may be told from the heart rather than from the head [and] they may emerge as messy and as nonlinear as some of the events that they convey” (p. 138). Yet another connection between narrative analysis and Mezirow’s theory is in the developmental potential of both. Mezirow unequivocally states that the process of perspective transformation is “the central process of adult development” (1991, p. 155).

Likewise, one's "story" can be restructured and reinterpreted to accommodate developmental change. Just as a perspective transformation leads to a "more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 14), one can re-story one's life in a way that is "big enough, with a horizon broad enough, to account for as much as possible of my actual life and render it available to me as a coherent, re-membered whole" (Glover, cited in Randall, 1996, p. 240). For instance, drawing on a theory of grief, Sands and Tennant (2010) explored meaning making as a form of "a repositioning of the relationships with the deceased, the self, and the others" (p. 116) among the suicide bereaved. The shift from the narrative of despair towards the narrative of hope established multiple perspectives on the ongoing construction of meaning whereby grief experiences were constantly revisited and reinterpreted in a developmental way.

### *Arts-Based Research*

Drawing on people's unconscious, emotional, and intuitive aspects of *meaning-making*, the arts-based research approach promotes the power and appreciation of critical reflection complemented by creative and expressive ways of knowing (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2009; Clover, 2006; Knowles & Cole, 2002; Taylor, 2003). It is particularly appropriate in understanding the affective, intuitive, relational, and often irrational ways of knowing beyond the limited cognitive perspective. Arts-informed research as an intuitive or nonrational means of transformation provides opportunities to empower people and help them create their own voices (Knowles & Cole, 2002).

An increasing amount of research has revealed unconventional ways of knowing through the arts, including photography, portraiture, painting, poetry, and theater, just to mention a few. Taylor (2003) used photography as an interview prompt in an attempt to understand the teaching belief change of entering graduate students. In another participatory photography project (Clover, 2006), marginalized groups such as homeless people and women in poverty and violence exhibited pictures of themselves and their families as a form for transformative narrative, thus becoming activist artists.

### *Critical and Emancipatory Approaches*

This research is more than constructivist or interpretive: a critical stance has the goal of not only understanding a phenomenon but analyzing the power dynamics of a situation. By critiquing the status quo, it is hoped that people can become empowered in order to transform their situation. For example, a critical emancipatory methodology has been used to investigate transformative learning with women at risk (Kilgore & Bloom, 2002), changes in teachers' perspectives (Carrington & Selva, 2010), and the possibilities of social justice and democratic education among adults participating in a community program (Armstrong, 2005). A number of discussions in the literature on transformative learning, especially research on how to foster this type of learning are framed from this critical perspective. Taylor and Jarecke (2009) in their summary review of chapters in *Transformative Learning in Practice*, point out the critical dimensions of fostering transformative learning in an educational setting. They note that this view is framed in terms of "confronting power and engaging difference" (p. 278). Thus, power relationships between instructor and students and among students are part of the analysis.

### *Action Research*

Some recent research on transformative learning is focused on how to bring about this type of learning in an educational or organizational setting. Along with other emerging approaches to transformative learning, action research invites the participants into the research process, thus engaging dialogical practice and facilitating action (Gravett, 2004). Action research is site-specific, designed to address a specific problem or issue within a specific setting, such as a classroom, a workplace, a program, or an organization. For example, Marsick and Maltbia (2009) write about the use of action learning, a variation of action research, to bring about reflection and learning with regard to an actual problem or project in an organizational setting. Action learning goes through six recurring phases or cycles, phases which are congruent with Mezirow's transformative learning. For example the "disorienting dilemma" in Mezirow's process is "framing of the challenge as a question" in action learning (p. 162). This is followed by questioning, sharing information, and "identifying assumptions that underlie current ways of framing the challenge" (p. 162). Finally "informed action" is taken to address the challenge.

### **Methodological Challenges in Studying Transformative Learning**

A researcher's philosophical stance cannot be separated from her or his research methods and research questions; it permeates the ongoing construction of knowledge of transformative learning. Furthermore, as our understanding of the phenomenon matures, we are more likely to engage in increasingly diverse research approaches that provide promise for future research on transformative learning. There are, however, some challenges to doing research on transformative learning. We address four methodological challenges that concern how to (1) maximize the use of arts-based research, (2) design longitudinal studies, (3) incorporate context and (4) study different theoretical orientations to TL.

First, Mezirow's theory basically lays out a cognitive process of change, yet we know from much of the research that transformative learning is much more than a rational process--it's complicated, personal, and often powerfully emotional. In order to understand the multiple dimensions of transformative learning, researchers have increasingly implemented creative and alternative methods. In particular, increasing experimentation with arts-based inquiry to help capture noncognitive dimensions has extended transformative learning (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2009; Clover, 2006; Taylor, 2003). There is some blurring of purpose here, however, in that it is not always clear whether arts-based methods are being used to foster transformative learning or/and to study its occurrence. With imaginativeness and creativity, researchers might strive to make something new out of the extant approaches to transformative learning and in turn enrich evolving TL theory without losing its essential nature and uniqueness.

Second, transformative learning experiences typically a process, not a one-time event. This experience often involves an ongoing construction, reconstruction, and refinement of one's new or changed meaning-making system and functions to bring together a series of changes in one's internal and/or external self. Thus, to understand this transformational process better, enough time is needed to investigate processes or dynamics involved in TL experiences. In this vein, a longitudinal study is the optimal approach to examine the embeddedness of individuals' internal and external transformations. A longitudinal study on TL will yield abundant and theoretically relevant evidence and in turn bring together the development in theory and practice of TL.

Third, the context of TL presents yet another challenge. Transformative learning is about change and empowerment. Mezirow emphasizes personal change and empowerment, but several theorists see a social dimension as equally important. The question becomes how to design a research study that can identify the link between personal and social change and the power dynamics involved. A critical research approach would seem to be a suitable methodology but, as with any study, there are issues that need to be addressed in studying transformation and empowerment. For example, what are the ethical issues involved? What might be the unanticipated consequences of engaging in this type of research?

Context is important especially in terms of attention to the relationship between an individual's biographical history and socio-cultural factors. Researchers are challenged to maintain a close balance between pivotal-individual experiences that lead to a critical awareness and contextual factors that create those experiences. A deeper understanding of the external factors--societal changes, demographic features, and historical events beyond gender, race, and ethnicity--could add insight and significance to TL theory. A multicultural approach to TL research that seeks to understand individuals-in-context is a valuable alternative that enriches the theory of transformative learning in a constantly changing and globalized world.

Finally, there are a number of other conceptualizations of transformative learning. Taylor (2008) has identified four alternative views: neurobiological, cultural-spiritual, race-centric, and planetary. These views bring additional challenges in studying transformative learning. For example, given that a neurobiological approach requires an understanding of a unique knowledge of neurobiological systems, what training would researchers need to investigate neurobiological-based transformative learning? Furthermore, when we seek to understand "the interconnectedness among universe, planet, natural environment, human community, and personal world" (p. 9), how can we assess planetary consciousness changes? These questions invite us to another dimension of transformative learning.

In summary, we discussed philosophical perspectives and methodology in relation to transformative learning. We found that the selection of research design and methodologies for studying transformative learning is closely interrelated to researchers' philosophical perspectives, research questions, and the maturity of the phenomenon being explored. Narrative analysis, arts-based research, critical and emancipatory research, and action research were reviewed as four methods that show promise for the development of the theory of transformative learning. There are, however, some challenges to doing research on transformative learning. For example, while arts-based research might be particularly useful in understanding noncognitive dimensions of transformative learning, it is not always clear whether this methodology is being used to study TL or foster TL (or both). Second, while difficult to implement, longitudinal designs hold a lot of potential for examining both internal and external dimensions of the transformational process. In a critical approach to TL, the outcomes of the research will enrich our understandings of personal and societal change but close attention to the ethical issues is crucial. Finally, consideration needs to be given as to including into the research design contextual and external factors that might affect transformative learning.

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