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Transformative Learning and Identity: A review and synthesis of Dirkx and Illeris

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Transformative Learning and Identity: A review and synthesis of Dirkx and Illeris

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Abstract: This review explores transformative learning and identity focusing on the works of John Dirkx and Knud Illeris. The synthesis creates a theoretical framework for research and continuing professional education practice.

Numerous adult learning theorists have critiqued and called for greater theoretical precision in conceptualizations of transformative learning (Dirkx, 2012b; Fenwick, 2010; Hoggan, 2016; Illeris, 2014a, 2014b; Taylor & Snyder, 2012). Concerns underlying these critiques include: (a) limited exploration of theoretical conceptualizations other than Mezirow's model (Taylor & Snyder, 2012), (b) failure to differentiate metatheoretical models form narrower specific theory (Hoggan, 2016), (c) inadequate critique of empirical studies (Taylor & Snyder, 2012), (d) lack of connection with models of general learning (Illeris, 2017b), and (e) theorizing learning as a single object (Fenwick, 2010). As Taylor and Snyder noted (2012), wide ranging reviews of the literature have often resulted in high levels of abstraction. As the transformative learning (TL) literature has grown, there is a need for more narrowly focused reviews on specific theoretical conceptualizations. Recent work on TL as a qualitative change in identity by Knud Illeris (2014a, 2017b) parallels work by John Dirkx (1997, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2006, 2008a, 2012a, 2012b) warranting an in-depth analysis and review

Purpose and Scope of the Literature Review

The purpose of this paper is to review, contrast and integrate conceptualizations of TL as a change in identity focusing on the literature of John Dirkx and Knud Illeris. In Dirkx's work, identity represents a wholeness of the self comprised of the conscious and unconscious. The self is complex and multifaceted. Identity is prominent in his theorizing and research of TL in continuous professional education and work as a vocation (Dirkx, Gilley, & Maycunich Gilley, 2004; Dirkx, 2013; Kovan and Dirkx, 2003), but is also connected to ideas of a holistic self described in his other works. Recently, Illeris (2007, 2011, 2014a, 2014b, 2015, 2017b) has developed a conceptualization of TL as a qualitative shift in identity and he also has focused on the context of vocational training and work-related learning. While philosophically Dirkx draws on Carl Jung and Illeris more on Erik Erickson, their focus on identity as a holistic and situated psychosocial construct reflecting a multifaceted self has conceptual similarities meriting review. In addition, they are both concerned with learners' continuous exploration of identity and its everyday experiential qualities in contexts of intentional instruction.

Conceptualization of the Self as Identity and Transformative Learning Outcome

Building from Erikson and other contemporary identity and learning theorists, Illeris (2104a) conceptualized identity as the "mental centre of the individual and its self-understanding, self-confidence and self-realization" (p. 37). However, he also elaborated the structural and multifaceted character of identity (Illeris, 2014a). It is comprised of three layers. The core identity, as the innermost layer, reflects the deep qualities of being a distinct individual with a relative sense of coherence. It coordinates the complexity of identity elements. The

second layer, called personality, is less stable than the core identity and includes one's principles, behavior patterns, values, meanings, and social conventions such as habits of communication, patterns of collaboration, empathy, social distance, and belonging (Illeris, 2014a). The outermost layer of preference is comprised of experiences and meanings somewhat related to one's identity but relatively receptive to change. Illeris (2014a) sees the personality as the target of TL, thus the framework helps differentiate TL from other kinds of learning.

In addition to this general structure, Illeris (2014a) conceptualized identity as having extended or satellite parts, which he called part-identity. These components reflect an individual's multiple types of roles and corresponding identities such as family, work, interests and other defining characteristics. Part-identities are similarly layered with inner core, personality, and preference but how these satellite elements connect to the inner core is highly variable and affected by the subjectivity and life story of a learner.

Dirkx's (Dirkx, 1997, 2012a) conceptualization of identity aligns with that of Illeris regarding the self as psychosocial construct comprised of complex and multifaceted aspects of the self which coalesce in a sense of narrative biography. In addition, both acknowledge the challenge of self-coherence given the social demands of modern life. However, Dirkx's (1997, 2000, 2001, 2006) conceptualization is more explicit about the character and role of the unconscious in one's overall sense of being.

TL as a Change in Identity

Both Dirkx and Illeris conceptualize TL as a type of deep learning characterized by a shift in consciousness and self-understanding. They see Mezirow's theory of transformation as change in a meaning perspective as too narrowly framed.

Broadly, and building on the work of (Boyd, 1991), Dirkx (1997, 2000) situates transformation in Jung's theory of individuation, a bidirectional process of the self being formed and differentiated through attending to and reckoning with emotions and images surfacing from the unconscious. Transformation is fostered by what Dirkx (2012) calls soul work, which involves "becoming aware of the presence of the different selves operating within the psyche" (Dirkx, 2000, p. 3). Dirkx and colleagues (1997, 2000, 2001, 2008a; 2012a; Dirkx et al., 2004; Kovan & Dirkx, 2003;) have conceptualized TL as fostered by attending to everyday interactions in contexts of learning where emotions, images and conflicts arise. Dirkx's (1997, 2001, 2006, 2008a, 2012a) argument is that when learners reckon deeply with the meaning of these emotions, images or disruptions they can experience a dramatic shift in consciousness fostering a deeper personal understanding of who one is, a type of becoming and self-formation. Many of Dirkx's (1997, 1998, 2000) illustrations of soul work and transformation have drawn on interpersonal dynamics in the learning context, with TL as "a process that takes place within the dynamic and paradoxical relationship of self and other" (Dirkx, 1997, p. 83).

While Dirkx built explicitly on Jung, Illeris' (2014a) conceptualization of identity transformation draws more on Erik Erikson's view of transformation as difficult work of self-understanding. However, Illeris (2014a) also goes beyond Erikson integrating more contemporary psychological and sociological conceptualizations conveying transformation as testing and re-understanding of one's attitudes, values, and convictions. Transformation builds new capacities to learn and deal with innovations, unexpected problems, and choices brought forth in everyday life in modern society. Common to Dirkx's and Illeris' conceptualizations of transformation are deeply personal changes in consciousness associated with testing and

reconstructing a multifaceted, narrative self. Change involves both internal and interpersonal work as well as reckoning with the fragmented social realities of everyday life.

The Process of Identity Transformation in Learning Contexts

Other similarities in identity transformation processes between Dirkx's inner work of self-formation and Illeris' self-understanding extend from Illeris' (2017a) argument that TL must be situated in a model of general learning. Illeris' (2004, 2014a, 2017a) learning model involves cognitive (i.e., content knowledge), emotional (i.e., motivation and emotions), and social (i.e., self-other experiences) dimensions as well as interactions between these dimensions. Moreover, the substance of these dimensions and interactions is affected by social context (Illeris, 2004, 2014a). Illeris' general learning model informs his process descriptions of TL in several ways. First, identity transformation may be progressive, regressive, restoring, or collective. Second, the internal and external motivational and emotional characteristics of learning both afford and constrain identity work. Third, the cognitive dimension is closing aligned with Illeris' (2011, 2014a, 2017a) conceptualization of sense of competence and identity development.

Types of Transformation. Transformative learning is commonly understood as a progressive change. However, Illeris (2014a) has argued that this positive orientation does not account for the full range of changes evident in learning contexts and thus, conceptualized three additional types, regressive, restoring, and collective. Collective transformations are mentioned by Illeris (2014a) as similar to collective consciousness raising, but this line of thinking is not well developed. However, the regressive and restoring types of transformations provide a more complete description of the withdrawing and rebuilding aspects of identity work in learning.

Regressive TL is associated with the need for a learner to pause a learning trajectory (Illeris, 2014a). A learner feels the demands of TL are too much and feels overwhelmed and unable to cope. In this situation a learner is either deadlocked or reverts back to "a less challenging attitude, understanding or behavior" (Illeris, 2014a, p. 94). Needing to stop an intended growth trajectory is a regressive change from active engagement with learning to dealing with uncertainty, confusion and the inability to move forward. At some future time, the type of TL may be restorative. It requires a learner to confront the specific situation and work his/her/their way through the sense of being overwhelmed. With effort the learner may reconfigure a new understanding of what was wrong, why it did not work and a new direction or pathway for growth (Illeris, 2014a).

Illeris' (2014a) description of regressive and restoring forms of TL focused more on the identity narrative underlying the pause or restart than the embedded emotions, but the emotional work is implied. Thus, there is a clear connection with Dirkx's (1997, 2001, 2008, 2012a, 2012b) explanation of intense emotions as catalysts of TL. However, from Dirkx's view, the emotion of being overwhelmed is not exclusively a conscious phenomenon, but rather an outer expression of the unconscious. Similarly, emotions associated with the restoring type of transformation align with descriptions of TL by Dirkx and colleagues (Dirkx et al. 2004; Kovan & Dirkx, 2003; Dirkx & Dang, 2009; Dirkx & Espinoza, 2017) in their work on displaced workers and environmental activists.

Thus, both Dirkx and Illeris question the exclusivity of a positively progressive transformation and are interested in how learner reactions may awaken, restrain or propel deeply personal change. These dynamics and elements are similarly addressed in Illeris' (2004, 2014a, 2017a) emotion and motivation dimension of learning.

The Emotion and Motivation Dimension of Learning. To illustrate TL and the dimension of emotion and motivation, Illeris (2014a) presented an extended example of a regressive learning situation. Illeris (2014a) described a case of a worker who lost his job and needed to retrain for a new type of work. The unwanted job loss meant a loss of the worker's identity and initially he was reluctant to engage in the activities of the new training course. However, over time, the learner found a way to overcome his initial resistance and fear, creating a qualitatively different sense of self and work potential.

Dirkx (1997, 2001, 2006, 2013) and colleagues (Clark & Dirkx, 2008; Dirkx & Dang, 2009; Dirkx et al., 2004) have similarly described and researched how learners work through effort, interest, emotions, and resistance as key elements that propel or constrain transformation. Also, in Clark and Dirkx's (2000) critique of conceptualizations of a unitary self, they noted how the awareness of multiple selves fostered insight into the dynamics of motivation and resistance in adult learners. That is, encountering new knowledge challenged existing gendered or spiritual identities.

In the dimension of emotions and motivation, the works of Dirkx and Illeris are also closely aligned. In fact, it is in this dimension that Illeris (2004, 2014a, 2017a) also incorporates aspects of the unconscious. The concepts of mental and identity defenses address a leaner's deeply rooted inhibitions (Illeris, 2014a, 2017a). Mental defense concerns elements of the unconscious that inhibit engagement. Identity defenses are deeper because they have been constructed over the life span and are connected to the inner core of identity. An identity defense protects a learner from ideas and meanings that fundamentally threaten the sense of self.

The Cognitive/Content Dimensions of Learning. In the cognitive dimension, Illeris (2004, 2014a) focused on the acquisition of new content knowledge and the development of skills, understanding, behavior and empathy. The alignment with Dirkx is limited except in conceptualizing the totality of factors in learning contexts and critical reflection. In Dirkx's (2013) discussion of spirituality and work, TL is described as a dialogical process extending from relationships between the self, *the content* and the context though the dimension of content is not as well-developed as it is in Illeris' work. However, recently Dirkx, Espinoza, and Schlegel (2018) described an alignment of critical reflection and imaginative engagement, which expands Dirkx's framework. It also opens up examining content and emotion interactions as articulated in Illeris' model.

Identity Transformation and Competence. For Illeris (2014a), an impact of identity transformation is an increased capacity of self-understanding that is connected to one's sense of competence. As he explains, one's sense of competence is mirrored in identity. And, competence is a function of the underlying interests and strengths of one's identity. In the realm of professional learning, Illeris (2011, 2014a) posits that a meaningful sense of competence must be a deeply integrated element of the identity as it is this feature that affords a worker to adaptively confront evolving and unforeseen problems of practice. Dirkx and colleagues (Dirkx, 2013; Dirkx et al. 2004; Kovan & Dirkx, 2003) similarly conceptualize developing professional knowledge as intertwined with a holistic sense of self and being however, Illeris is more explicit on the impact of transformation.

Implications for Research and Practice

This integrative review provides specification of identity transformation addressing definition, outcome and process. The framework resulting from synthesis supports research inquiries into TL as change in identity that: a) incorporate emotional, social and cognitive dimensions of identity in context, b) explore identity as both affording and constraining TL, and c) study instructional designs and learning attending to variation in individual experiences, identity reconstruction, and multiple types of TL, which can be contrasted with other kinds of non-transformative learning outcomes. It also provides a framework for conceptualizing teaching and learning in continuing professional education.

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