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Transformative Learning and the forms that transform: towards a psychosocial theory of recognition using auto/biographical narrative research

Abstract

In this paper I interrogate the changing forms that may be fundamental to transformative learning and how these are best chronicled and understood. Drawing on auto/biographical narrative research, I challenge the continuing primacy of a kind of overly disembodied, decontextualized cognition as the basis of transformation. Notions of epistemic shifts, for instance, and their central importance, can lack sufficient or convincing grounding in the complexities of whole people and their stories. I develop, instead, a psychosocial theory of recognition, drawing, especially, on critical theory and psychoanalysis: in this perspective, the experiencing self, in relationship, constitutes, agentially, the form that transforms, while fundamental changes in mind-set are deeply intertwined with shifts in inner-outer psychosocial dynamics. I challenge, in the process, some conventional boundaries between cognition and emotion, self and other, the psychological and socio-cultural, as well as collective and individual learning.

Key words: transformative learning, psychoanalysis, critical theory, self and recognition

Introduction

I want to focus in this paper on the forms that transforms when thinking about the nature and parameters of transformative learning (TL): a question originally posed by Kegan (2000) in his significant contribution to the literature. I have a concern – shared by many others (for example, Brookfield, 2000 and Newman, 2012) – that the concept of TL is in danger of being evacuated of real meaning and significance, too easily reduced to either a marketing slogan or an empty signifier without substance or distinctive terms of reference. Michael Newman goes as far as to propose, provocatively, ‘that we strike the phrase transformative learning from the educational lexicon altogether’ (Newman, 2012, p.51). For TL to mean something significant, distinct, worth preserving, in response, it has to encompass fundamental ontological as well as epistemological changes in the learner. Changes such as the capacity to internalise new and radically different ideas and to question the taken for granted and oppressive forces in a life; and to claim space agentially as well as compose greater personal authority (West, 1996). Yet how to frame and theorise such changes – and to decide what is fundamental – also remains a matter of debate. For Mezirow, (2000), the answer lay in a

metacognitive application of critical thinking. Critical thinking transforms a mind-set, to be replaced by a different, more assertive world view.

Any mind-set is of course composed of values, beliefs, feelings as well as concepts, but transformation, at core, in this view, has to do with fundamental change in epistemic assumptions. This may reflect the continuing influence of cognitivist understandings of change processes in the literature (Illeris, 2007, 2014). Modern philosophy, and educational theorising, in its search for epistemological certainty and clarity, tends, still, following Descartes, to split mind from body and transcendence may be seen to lie, if implicitly, in a kind of escape from our animal, corporeal base. Notions of TL may remain trapped in such a mind-set, rooted in Enlightenment assumptions. Autonomy, for Kant, that pre-eminent Enlightenment thinker, lay in rising above desire and acting according to intellectual and moral norms that are themselves created by the exercise of reason (Gaitanidis, 2012). Deep suspicion of the body and of feeling, and even resistance to engaging with subjectivity itself, or semantic levels of experience, remain embedded in contemporary thought, (partly, perhaps, because of their insusceptibility to direct empirical observation or modelling (Bainbridge and West, 2012)).

All of which matters because Mezirow's understanding of the forms that transform (Mezirow, 2000; Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton, 2006) seems, if anything, at least in one recent interpretation, to have shifted from greater sympathy towards a subjectively and psychoanalytically attuned sensibility – where thinking and psychic change are intertwined - towards more emphasis, in later work, on metacognition (Hunt, 2013). However, while radical changes in mind-set may be an important dimension of transformation, the question remains as to what makes radical cognitive changes possible, including challenges to oppressive forces, whether external or internal? Do we need a more fundamental level of analysis than cognition alone? A theory of recognition might provide more of a holistic analytical frame of reference.

It was Robert Kegan, as observed, who originally posed the question of 'what 'form' transforms?' His answer was that of a 'constructive development psychologist', drawing, among other things, on the writings of Ibsen as well as specific adult learner biographies. TL, for Kegan, involves '*a shift away from being "made up by" the values and expectations of one's "surround" (family, friends, community, culture) that get uncritically internalised,*

towards developing an internal authority that makes choices about the external values and expectations according to one's own self-authored belief system.' (Kegan, 2000, p. 59). There is, like Mezirow, an emphasis on epistemic change as an essential element in transformation: for Nora, in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, who Kegan quotes at length, there is a life changing challenge to the patriarchal authority of a husband, and through him, to a whole culture. This is the beginning of a journey into becoming more of a questioning, agentic, self-authored being: encompassing self-knowledge and interrogating the received wisdoms by which a life has been lived. Yet Kegan himself points to the limitations of a purely intellectual or cognitive approach: the qualitative evolution of mind, as he framed it, involves more than the 'bloodless' experience of notions like cognitive shift: rather it often entails a wrenching, no less, of self from cultural surround and into new sets of relationships, including with the symbolic order (Kegan, 2000, p. 67). I want to consider aspects of human wrenching, carefully, and in depth, through the eyes of learners, using auto/biographical narrative enquiry. I draw on psychoanalysis and critical theory to illuminate and theorise the complexity of the forms that transform.

Others too have challenged cognitive reductionism: Illeris (2014) uses the notion of identity and the necessity of building and maintaining a 'balanced identity', in a liquid, fragile, runaway world (p146). The concept of identity, he notes, has been elaborated in both psychology and sociology, over 3 decades or more. Engaging with inevitable shifts of identity, in liquid modernity – across life stages and in changing motivation, for instance – could serve as the prime focus in considering forms that transform. Interestingly, Illeris rejects employing concepts of the self, and changing experiences of self in relationship, as a potential focus, given what he sees to be an overly psychologistic and or essentialist baggage. This may connect to wider European suspicion, (if not exclusively so), about over individualising and over psychologising TL, to the neglect of ideology and power in shaping and constraining subjects. There is in this view a need for a more collective and even politicised understanding of transformation, grounded in critical theory and challenging ideology and oppression (Brookfield, 2000). Reference is made to historical traditions of popular education, for instance, and the importance of the collective wrenching of selves from oppressive cultures and ideologies, in struggles to build a more socially just world.

From a different perspective, John Dirkx does focus on struggles for self as well as meaning, with reference to the inner world. He conceives TL to be a dimension of profound, yet unconscious psychic shifts, in struggles to be more of a whole person (Dirkx et al, 2006). He takes us, in the process, into deeper, embodied territory, arguing that the forms that transform are located within changing experiences of self. Drawing on Jungian analytic psychology, the forms that transforms include shifting cast of characters in the inner world: of changing dynamics between, for instance, a censor, a judge and the young child, or maybe between a trickster and or deviant, in relation to the persona that we present to the world. In such changes, the quality of self, mediating and responding to such interactions, can be transformed, in life enhancing ways. John Dirkx writes: ‘Voices from this inner world continuously nag me with questions about the meaning of my life, of the work that I do, of relationships’, even following transformative moments (Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton, 2006, p. 127). Yet such voices, from the depths, also bring recognition of achievements, of greater self-knowledge and acceptance; of peace and ‘visceral understanding’ of beauty. Like Dirkx, I want to interrogate such self dynamics further, but using a different if potentially complementary frame. I want to build better understanding of the dynamics of socio-cultural and psychic worlds, of others and self in relation, including self to the symbolic order, and the capacity to play with and internalise new ideas.

The paper is grounded in auto/biographical narrative enquiry, in a clinical style, (see below), and, as stated, an interdisciplinary theoretical repertoire, shaped by dialogue between critical theory and psychoanalysis. In such a perspective, struggles for self – a contingent, socially conditioned, historically situated, deeply relational yet also developmental rather than traditionally essentialist self – are located within dynamics of recognition. These operate at a number of interconnected inter-subjective and socio-cultural levels: illuminating them can help us build better, more holistic understanding of forms that transform, and of how the will to know, and be, may be constrained by oppressive forces but can be liberated in new qualities of relationship.

Towards a theory of recognition

In my auto/biographical narrative work among diverse groups of marginalised learners managing change and disorientating dilemmas, I have frequently concluded that people, in effect, are re-negotiating selves and stories in new qualities of relationship with others and with the symbolic order. Students can find narrative, intellectual, emotional and human

resources, or 'objects' in psychoanalytic language, out there, in educational settings, which can be internalised through processes of projective identification. They may find new people who value them, in new ways, and whose views and achievements are respected. People, or for that matter a new idea, might become a good internal object, because of their (or its) resonance in illuminating, in meaningful ways, oppressive and or disabling experience and how to transcend this. Such objects can become part of a changing internal dynamic. (Although a new idea may also be resisted for fear of the implications: like mature women students who may initially reject feminism because it raises disturbing questions as to how a life has been lived and rationalised hitherto (West, 1996)). Auto/biographical narrative research has illuminated some of the deep ambivalence and ambiguity that may lie at the heart of really significant learning. There may be strong dynamics in play - rooted in primitive (that is early) experience, including memory in feeling (rather than more conscious processes) - of vulnerability, and the fear of exposure to powerful others. There may also be anxiety about depending on others, too, which may be problematic viewed through life histories of abusive interactions with authority (West, 2009). There is a potentially more complex theory of self here – drawing on psychoanalytic object relations theory - of how intersubjective dynamics get translated into intrasubjective ones, including abusive, life and self denying processes. Yet these dynamics can change in the light of new qualities of relational experience in which the self feels more legitimate, understood and recognised in the transitional spaces represented by education (West, 1996; Winnicott, 1971).

In other words, psychoanalytic object relations focuses on people in relationship, and the interplay of inner and outer dynamics, in considering forms that transform. The metaphor of psyche is one of an intersubjective theatre, in which some characters dominate and may negatively affect our relationships, including to the symbolic order (Frosh, 1991). Yet casts of characters can change. Donald Winnicott (1971) focused on the role of the (m)other and play in earlier change processes. He derived his ideas from infant and (m)other observations, over many years. He conceived play, and thinking, as deeply creative, relational activities, involving the imagination, heart as well as mind (although there is potentially a dark, destructive side to play, as André Green (2005) has observed). Play, however, requires what Winnicott called good enough spaces between people: a sort of neutral area where anxieties can be managed and it feels safe enough to take risks. Experiments with self, including with the stories we tell - about who we are, have been and might be - can take place. In such

processes, the response, encouragement and understanding of others – a kind of emotionally attuned recognition – is essential.

Yet change can be difficult because such processes often reach back to earlier struggles for separation. If relationships have not been good enough, as Winnicott famously framed it, we can become overly preoccupied with the other, and her well-being, in what may be self-denying ways. Winnicott applied these ideas - on separation, play and selfhood - to adult life. When, for instance, the taken for granted is shaken, we may hold rigidly to existing ideas and relationships and retreat to the culturally and cognitively familiar. We may struggle to play with new ideas, because they threaten our sense of who we are and make the wrenching of self from context seem unbearable. Anxiety can be a paralyzing companion, making the work of selfhood impossible. We may, like Janus, face both ways, in a struggle to separate from the old. What we term the 'child' in the adult may, consciously and unconsciously, be fearful as to whether s/he can cope, be good enough, or legitimate, in the eyes of significant others. As older learners, there can be anxiety – as past and present merge - that their ideas and contributions in a seminar room might be treated with disrespect or are never going to be good enough. And yet the good enough instructor or fellow student, in coming alongside, and through empathic understanding, encouragement and giving time, can contain such primitive anxieties, and allow some space to process new and radical ideas (West, 1996).

Using Winnicott as well as Freud, the critical theorist Axel Honneth takes these notions further, and builds a socio-cultural as well as intersubjective understanding of how the freedom of the will may be energised, encompassing primitive but also wider interactions. He reminds us, initially, of the profound anthropological insight at the heart of psychoanalysis: that human beings, relative to other mammals, are born prematurely, and rely absolutely on others for survival and well-being (Honneth, 2009). To transcend the inevitable anxiety generated in separation processes requires, drawing on Winnicott, loving relationships, in which the infant feels understood, yet encouraged to take risks and to engage fulsomely with the world. If there is some wrenching, there is the relational capacity to transcend this via 'recognition'. However, the infant, he notes, drawing on Winnicott, may have to work hard, at a psychic and relational level, to ensure the other's availability, at the expense of donning false or compliant behaviour. We can acquire, largely unconsciously, false self mantles to please and appease. It becomes too frightening to express desire openly in diverse contexts: the freedom to feel, imagine, play and think is compromised.

Yet – and Honneth himself does not fully develop this point – primitive processes of recognition, in Winnicott’s sense, can happen in later life, including in higher education and family learning projects, as chronicled in my own work (West, 1996; 2009; Merrill and West, 2009). If one experiences love, an ability to love one’s self and others, is developed. An identity (or selfhood) is being forged through receiving recognition. Without such a special relationship with another, it is impossible to become aware of one’s own uniqueness and thus experience a basic, positive sense of one’s abilities. Only by being recognized can we achieve a vibrant selfhood ((Honneth, 2007; Honneth, 2009; Fleming, 2010). Recognition, for Honneth, however, is more than an intimate experience but is also located in group and wider dynamics. If feelings of recognition – and the transformations that these can evoke - require love in the family or interpersonal sphere in order for the child, or adult, to develop basic self-confidence - self-respect is also needed. This can be generated when a person belongs to a community of rights and is recognized as a legally mature person. Through this comes the ability to participate in discussions and rituals of the group or wider institution, including being able to question taken for granted assumptions. Respect can then be more easily shown to others by acknowledging their rights. This form of recognition Honneth terms self-respect. Without rights there is no respect, to put it slightly differently. It is not just about having a good opinion of self but rather a sense of possessing a kind of shared dignity of persons as morally responsible agents and as capable of participating in public deliberations. The experiences of being honoured by a community for contributions leads to a third form of self-relation which Honneth labels self-esteem. People with high self-esteem will reciprocate a mutual acknowledgement of each other’s contribution to the community. From this loyalty, greater social solidarity and even democratic vitality can grow (Fleming, 2011; Honneth, 2007, p. 139).

There is an issue in Honneth’s work to do with the quality of groups, with the potential to liberate or constrain, despite people feeling recognized. He draws in fact on Dewey to consider what qualities are required for a more democratic and liberating forms of relationship. However, some may find recognition in quite different, even racist organisations. There can be powerful destructive consequences, for self and learning, even if social esteem is forged, as in Nazi Germany, in small quasi-militaristic groups, whose codes of honour were based on violence (Honneth, 2007: 77). If we have become accustomed to thinking that the personal is political, in potentially liberating ways, the political may be

deeply and dangerously personal too. Honneth (2007) notes how joining a fundamentalist group can seduce while closing down the possibilities of lifewide learning, in their rigid exclusions. Dewey (Honneth, 2007: 227-278) used the example of a robber band to indicate how particular groups constrain as well as recognise. The individual becomes a member but at the cost of repression of diverse possibilities for self and stories. 'The good citizen', Dewey observed, requires democratic communities to realise what s/he might be: s/he finds him or herself by full participation in family life, in the economy, in diverse artistic, cultural and political activities, in which there is free give and take. Instead of such positive dynamics, groups can involve rigid boundaries between self and other, and a sort of projective, reductive fantasy of the other, rather than stimulating self development through open engagement with what may be new, different and diverse.

It is also interesting, as we noted in a recent article (West, Fleming & Finnegan, 2013), how Honneth (2007, 2009) re-visited Freud's work and critiqued the contemporary trend to move away from an imperative to understand ourselves by reference to deep engagement with our past. Honneth argued that psychoanalysis in fact makes an important link between freedom, thinking and biographical work (Honneth, 2009, p. 126-156). Autobiographical work involves an ability through reflexive activity to overcome 'the rupturedness of each individual' and 'only by a critical appropriation of her own process of formation does the human seize the opportunity provided to her for freedom of will' (p. 127). In asking how freedom is attainable at all, Honneth asserts that we can re-appropriate our own will by means of recollective work. For Freud, according to Honneth, the individual is 'less a self-interpreting being than one who critically scrutinizes its own past to see whether traces of compulsions that have remained unconscious can be found in it' (2009, p. 139). As the desire for freedom resides within, we can turn to our life-histories as valid expressions of our possibilities as humans. In his remarkable departure from Marxism in general and most of early critical theory, and even, to some extent, from Habermas, Honneth attempts to reimagine the emancipatory project of critical social theory. His solution is to forefront a theory of intersubjectivity and the 'struggle for recognition' (West, Fleming & Finnegan, 2013). This takes us nearer to more fundamental forms that might transform. I will illustrate the utility of these ideas by reference to a case study taken from a European-wide research project on non-traditional learners in universities.

RANLHE: and psychosocial understanding of forms that transform

RANLHE was the title given to a European Union financed study of ‘non-traditional learners’ in 7 European countries (RANLHE Lifelong Learning Project: <http://www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl>.) The research teams worked with samples of students and staff in different types of universities (mainly elite (or older) and reform (relatively new)) in each country. The term ‘non-traditional’ was used creatively to encompass students from backgrounds normally under-represented in universities: from particular ethnic minority communities, and or working class backgrounds, including being the first in a family at university; and or from the disabled and or migrant populations, etc. The research also encompassed younger and older learners. For present purposes, the focus is on one very poignant wrenching: the narrative of an asylum seeker who entered, dropped out, and then re-entered university. The student was interviewed four times: at the beginning, the middle and at the end of three years at university in England. The basic questions we asked were what enabled someone like him to keep on keeping on at university, by reference to a life history, but also to do with experiences of transition and, perhaps, transformation.

We encouraged such learners (there were 100 students involved with each of the 8 university research teams) to tell their stories, over time, as openly and honestly as they could. Learners engaged reflexively with their material, using transcripts and recordings, to identify themes and to think about them with us, as researchers. (It should be noted that there were different methodological orientations among the teams of researchers, from different countries, despite a common ‘biographical research’ label. One orientation was more ‘scientific’ and objectivist; another, which reflects my own work, was more relational and auto/biographical in its framing, and worked in what we call ‘a clinical style’. In the former, attempts are made to minimise the presence of the researcher so as to build greater reliability and replicability in interviews; in the latter, the researcher’s presence, and especially her capacity to listen, carefully, and for the other to feel understood, is seen as an essential element in creating good enough space for exploratory, reflexive storytelling (West, 2011b)). Emphasis is also given to attentiveness and respectfulness and to taking time to build trust and mutual understanding; and to the importance of managing and containing anxieties, especially when working with unconfident people or difficult material. There is also a focus on the emotional qualities of the interaction between researcher and her subject, as part of making sense of narrative material (Merrill & West, 2009; Bainbridge & West, 2012). There are parallels in this kind of research with the ‘*me-search*’ of Robert Nash and colleagues (Nash and La Sha Bradley, 2012; Nash, 2008), and their desire ‘to resist the conventional academic temptation to be

‘objective’, stoical, qualified, subdued, abstract and distant’ (Nash and Bradley, 2012, p7). Rather it seeks to bring the ‘me’, or the subjectivity of the learner, into academic enquiry – in interaction with the ‘me’ of the researcher - to broaden understanding of knowing and for delineating themes that might connect with those among larger communities of learners (thus building some generalizability) as well as the literature. Participants, to emphasise, in our kind of research, are also involved in analysing their material, in this case by being given transcripts and recordings; and because of the longitudinal nature of the process – assuming relationships are good enough – we can think together about what is difficult to say, or may be missing from the account.

Sensitising frames

The RANLHE study played with three different but overlapping ‘theoretical sensitising frames’ in working with the learners. Bourdieu offered a sociological, social reproduction perspective when considering learner narratives and why particular students might struggle at particular kinds of university with some of the wrenching that might be involved. His work centres on the concept of habitus, which can be understood as a kind of embodied culture, in which ideas but also diverse practices and ways of being are in play (Bourdieu, 1990). Such cultures shape how people behave, speak, think and communicate one with another, and even how they deport themselves, as in studies of doctors and the medical training habitus (Sinclair, 1997). Bourdieu’s associated notion of disposition focuses on how people internalise an idea of what is expected of them in a particular habitus, in a particular family, community and or university. They will be more or less confident, dependent on class background, with the rituals of communication and language, for example, and with what is expected of them in writing, in presentations, and assessment; and even in self-deportment, as in seminars or a range of professional practice-based settings. Such expectations and ways of being in the world have been unconsciously internalised, in a previous education or social setting, while the habitus of particular middle class homes may be closer to the habitus of specific, especially ‘elite’ universities. People understand, intuitively, what is expected of them, of what counts as academic writing or discussion; and or how to engage in the diverse rituals that university involves, including rites of passage or ways of managing anxiety, via drugs, drink and or sex among younger students. Mature working class students, for instance, can struggle in particular universities, because their social and educational ‘capital’ can be someway removed from what is valued, understood or expressed in a new habitus; or they bring informal psychological capital, such as resilience, derived from wider experience,

which may initially go unrecognised. They can feel, in effect, in Bourdieu's famous phrase, like 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu, 1990).

However, Chapman Hoult (2009; 2012), among others, has observed that Bourdieu fails sufficiently to engage with how some students, from a non-traditional habitus, with apparently limited educational and social capital, nonetheless survive, prosper and become agentic in looking critically at the world and its assumptions, not least about people like them. They are able to play with new possibilities, and to manage some of the wrenching in their experiences. These are 'les miraculés', as Bourdieu frames it, 'an uncharacteristically metaphysical turn', as Chapman Hoult observes, 'for a materialist' such as him (Chapman Hoult, 2012, p. 9). How in fact they might prosper, or be transformed, even in a culturally exclusive habitus of an elite institution, is glossed over by Bourdieu. Of course he was aware of this phenomenon and argued, structurally, that these learners serve to mask systemic inequalities, as institutions proclaim 'look, we are open to all the talents!' Yet he fails to engage with 'the subjective experience of objective possibilities' among les miraculés: with those learners who buck the trend and prosper as well as challenge. It may be that Bourdieu's view of capital is overly constrained – with neglect of psychological or experiential capital (such as lifelong learning) – because his gaze is too deterministic. We need, it is suggested, more fine grained, psychosocial analysis of the forms that may transform, or inhibit the play of self.

Winnicott and Honneth

We turned to the work of Winnicott (1971) and Honneth (2007; 2009), as noted, for help in thinking about potentially transitional and transformative processes. As noted, Winnicott placed the capacity for play and creativity, for letting go of anxieties, within the context of good enough relationships, as fundamental. Particular writers have used Winnicott's concept of transitional space, when thinking of storytelling itself as a kind of transitional activity, a process of self negotiation, more or less productive of selfhood, depending on the recognition that may be received (Sclater, 2004). We can think of university, and also research, as a space for self-negotiation, and where struggles around separation and individuation take place. The stories people tell – including to researchers – can become vehicles for renegotiation, for a kind of narrative embodiment of selfhood, which is then recognised in the eyes and responses of significant others. Yet we also find evidence, in the stories people tell, of recognition forged in meso and macro level dynamics.

Forms that transform: a case in point

Take the case of Mathew, an asylum seeker, who knew something about wrenching in especially painful ways. He was forced to flee from his home, because of civil war, and from his family, on pain of death. When we (there were two of us in the interviews, working as a research team) first met him he described himself as a refugee and as a carer/student in his mid-thirties. He told us some of his life history and the difficulties he experienced as an Asylum Seeker: the outsider, the unrecognised, wrenched from one difficult milieu into a problematic other. He was now living in a materially poor part of London where racism could be rife. He talked fairly early on about his struggles with academic work, in an elite university, primarily because of limited confidence with English, (it was his fourth language). He had fled dangerous war zones. He also worked as an hourly paid-minimum wage carer since arriving on British soil, seeking asylum. He initially told us how he dropped out of an elite university, because of struggles with writing and misunderstanding the personal tutor system. He felt like a fish out of water, at times, in an unfathomable habitus, to mix metaphors. Sometime later, he took an Access to higher education course and made friends with an English couple teaching on the programme, in a college of further education. They supported him – at a time when he risked dropping out again – because of problems in the asylum status application process. They noticed, on the Access to higher education programme, that he kept missing sessions and asked what was wrong. He found it difficult to say, but later confided in them his problems, (made worse by political decisions to force asylum seekers to register at specified centres on a weekly basis).

Mathew, like a number of students, inhabited a world where boundaries between full and part-time study, work and university, family and student life, were blurred:

I do work...I used to work for agency but agencies shifts are not constant so I joined BUPA as a healthcare assistant. The rate is £5.90 for an hour... my partner is a nurse works shifts... I would be looking after the kids I have four boys... I've given up sleep lost hours of sleep to attend to the family and then education sometimes. I go to bed by three o'clock I get up by four o'clock five o'clock... I get up... prepare whatever I've got to take into [my] school, eat and shower the boys and leave them to dress by themselves and then go pack their bags/ lunch and leave home by 8 o'clock they're supposed to start classes by 8.30 I mean 8.45 I'm supposed to start by 9... I have to

drive to drop them to a neighbour who is very close to the school and who can just walk... so it's very much more difficult than people might think.

The two lecturers in the college were highly 'significant others', as Mathew struggled with self-confidence: he forged a close relationship with them, first as a student trying to work in written English, and then with his asylum application. They it was who recognised how he was missing sessions, and asked why. The two lecturers mobilised others, including a solicitor, to launch a campaign on Mathew's behalf. Five years later, he was recognised as a British citizen in a citizenship ceremony, and they were there as witnesses. '*They were like good parent figures*', he said, and he felt looked after and understood by them. He celebrated the ceremony itself, as a moment of transition, a benchmark of achievement and recognition in what could be a fragile world. And he worked hard to find supportive others in a new university in a more multi-cultural part of London. Finding a good personal tutor, and other sympathetic staff and students, was central to his progress.

A public healthcare degree appealed because of the shortage of mental health workers in the National Health Service. In a third interview, some 9 months later, he looked back on earlier problems with language and writing:

It is difficult because when we started in the first year they said to us OK this first year we give you the opportunity and accept your assignment as is... that has been changed because of the stage of second year so you're now needing proof reading and that makes it difficult for people like me considering my background which I'm always constantly worried about how to translate my thoughts my ideas from one language to another, from Mende/Kissi/Creole languages, to African English, then to British English is something that makes it difficult for me...

Yet cultural diversity, and the recognition this brought, was eventually seen by him to be a resource in negotiating a new identity. Mathew recognised the value of the languages he knew, viewing them as opportunities for better understanding of others' worlds:

Well from my languages from the various languages that I've gone through if you look at health for instance you cannot purely have a disease by itself. In that way you look at the medical models instead of looking at the social... or psychosocial aspect of

it for the patient...having got some ideas about the... psychosocial aspect of health, taking it back to my past cultures... without making the connection with the social aspect you cannot treat the patient... so I bring in this system where I realise or begin to understand how I can actually help the sick from different cultures.

In some cultures he said, mental illness was a spiritual problem, while in others it was transmitted intergenerationally. He was critical of the neglect of the socio-cultural, including the impact of poverty, in dominant approaches to health care and medicine. Over time, he also became a student advocate and community activist. He served as a representative for overseas students in the university and was a member of important committees. He learned to argue his case with university authorities, finding greater self-respect, self-esteem too, in the process (and in telling stories about it). He critiqued the neglect of minority communities and their experiences of health provision; and the failure to locate health and dis-ease, as noted, in a wider socio-political context. He felt increasingly recognised in diverse communities, and at different levels. Yet, Mathew's is no simple linear tale. He continued to struggle with written assignments and in both the second and third interviews, the research itself became, for a moment, an explicit counselling space, in which he thought about his options and looked to us for guidance, in an emotionally needy way:

I don't want it to be a sign of weakness if I ask somebody to help me [proof reading my essay], that might make me a weak person... but there are a lot of resources which they call academic skills... I did it once, I've never done it again... but I have to change that because if I want to succeed I have to do that because the system is set up for that.

He asked what we thought and the boundaries between biographical narrative interviewing and educational counselling, and between past and present, became blurred, and self-confidence, once again, was fragile. A colleague researcher encouraged him to seek help and to overcome his reluctance. He really wanted to know what she thought and began to talk at length. Admitting vulnerability was a dangerous business, he said, for someone like him, and he valued our meetings. He made the decision to try once more with an assignment. By the time of the fourth interview, he had organised a new pressure group for multi-cultural sensitivities in health care, building on his work as a student advocate at the university. Mathew became more of an agent, challenging taken for granted assumptions, and exploiting

aspects of his own biography and experience. He became more of a self in the process: vulnerable as well as agentic, critical and empathic, playful as well as challenging. We have glimpses here of the dynamics of recognition, and of certain forms that transform. At the most intimate level, new experiences of self were created in new relationships, through feeling seen and valued, including in the research; at the meso level, self-respect was forged in the university, by being accepted in a community of rights and responsibilities; and at a more macro level, being recognised as an effective and valued political activist, in the wider university and beyond, helped create a relatively vibrant self-esteem. Yet, to repeat, this is no simple, linear progression, as might be implied in Honneth's work: after the interviews, Mathew wrote a number of times, to us, asking for help with assignments, (which we gave). He constantly feared 'failure' in the rituals called academic writing. It remained hard to admit vulnerability in this regard and to ask for help. There is much material here that illuminates both the wrenching of self but also of the psychosocial forms that can transform, even in a sometimes hostile world (Kegan, 2000). A world of frequent displacement, of painful struggles over self, of a difficult, confusing habitus; yet also a world in which TL was possible, including finding a critical language to interrogate health provision. We have clear expressions of the role of love and wider cultural recognition, including in the symbolic, in illuminating what forms transform.

Conclusion: forms that transform

All of which takes us way beyond TL as a reified or empty mantra in education; or of the fixation with fundamental shifts in cognition alone. We move towards understanding more of the human complexity in forms that transform; and how TL requires new kinds of interdisciplinary understanding of whole lived experience. It includes how and why we may resist some of the work that makes TL possible; of how, in places like South London, we can experience the power of racism and oppressive populist politics that would deny us asylum; and space for being, thinking, and for citizenship: offering, instead, profound forms of disrespect that violate our 'intuitive notions of justice in everyday experience' as Honneth framed it (Honneth, 2007, p.71). Learning, of any significant kind, may be difficult when we are labelled as other, alien, threatening, and needing to be expunged, in the very antithesis of recognition. Yet someone like Mathew, notwithstanding, found, as well as created, agentially, sufficient psychosocial and educational resources to resist such oppression in profound if fragile transformation. This included epistemic shifts – in critically challenging conventional wisdoms about health and well-being – alongside ontological recognition in

claiming space, for self and others. Such movement, agency and self-formation justify some concept like ‘transformative learning’, although its use requires a grounding in learner narratives as well as in a rich and sophisticated interdisciplinary literature.

To understand, in other words, Mathew’s narrative and those of other learners engaged in fundamental change processes, requires challenging mind-sets that separate psyche and society – as in aspects of critical theory (Honneth, 2007; 2009) – ontology and epistemology, cognition and emotion, conscious and unconscious life, individual and collective learning. The capacity to challenge oppression and the taken for granted is, in a narrative like Mathew’s – and of others, across diverse studies (Bainbridge and West, 2012) - a deeply intertwined emotional, relational, psychic, socio-cultural as well as cognitive process. If Bourdieu helps us understand how a habitus may conspire against particular kinds of people, from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds, and thus the potential for TL, Honneth and Winnicott enable us to recognise, in vibrant ways, how learners, even those experiencing acute forms of wrenching and disrespect, may transform aspects of themselves and the habitus, through recognition. Yet narrative research, and psychosocial repertoires, remind us too of how human transformation is always provisional, and that worlds, selves and struggles are never complete. TL is in these terms a process rather than a point of arrival, given the perpetual fragility as well as potential resilience of our individual and collective condition.

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