

## **Perspective Transformation Theory and the Donald Woods Experience: From Racist to Anti-Apartheid Activist**

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### Abstract

This paper chronicles White South African journalist Donald Woods' life (1933-2001) as he transformed from holding racist beliefs that Blacks were "people who were there to be your servants," to becoming one of his country's leading anti-apartheid activists. Adult learning and development via perspective transformation theory are explored.

*Keywords:* perspective transformation, racism, apartheid, power, Donald Woods

Adults can learn what freedom, equality, democracy, and emancipation mean in microcosm as they strive toward the realization of these ideals in communities of rational discourse, and they can act politically to create interpersonal relationships, organizations, and societies in which others can discover the meaning of these values as well. (Mezirow, 1991, p. 208)

Prejudice-reduction strategies have traditionally centered on inter-group contact and dialogue across dominant and disadvantaged groups, with the objective of reducing prejudices and stereotypes. Studies by Dixon, Tropp, Durrheim and Tredoux (2010) in South Africa confirmed some success with these strategies where positive contacts between Blacks and Whites have been resulting in more tolerant racial attitudes for both groups. They also found evidence that disadvantaged-group members' trust in the dominant group have at times resulted in reduced awareness of the burning need for social change. Dixon et al argue further that in situations where one group started out with greater economic, political and social power, the typical outcome from cordial contact is entrenched unequal relations in which each group "knows their place" (p. 6). This change from hostility to cordiality is not the optimal outcome and must be distinguished from the complete transformative experience that some advantaged-group members undergo, seeking nothing less than radical social change and justice.

One such individual was South African journalist, Donald Woods, who eventually lost his privileged White status and was forced to flee his country in 1977 during the height of the apartheid era which spanned the late 1940s to the early 1990s. He went on to travel the world, exposing the injustices and brutalities of the apartheid regime and estimates that by 1981 he had addressed over 300 million people through radio, television and the press (Woods, 1981). He wrote seven books on his experiences, including his 1981 autobiography, *Asking for Trouble* and *Biko* (1987), a tribute to his slain Black friend who founded the Black consciousness movement in South Africa in the 1970s. These two books triggered a major film *Cry Freedom* (1988), starring Kevin Kline and Denzil Washington, and distributed by Universal Studios, it reached an audience of millions more across the globe.

The aim of this study is to explore Donald Woods' conversion through the lens of Mezirow's theory of personal transformation. I will review Mr. Woods' autobiography, *Asking for Trouble* and *Biko*, along with a 1988 recorded presentation he made at George Washington University, in an attempt to identify the psycho-social factors that facilitated the momentous shift in his meaning perspectives. Mezirow identified these conversions as typically starting with a disorienting dilemma, leading to self-reflection, feelings of remorse or shame and significant evaluation of previous assumptions. Learners feel more connected as they recognize that they are not alone in their struggle. They plan, explore alternative roles and relationships, acquire new knowledge and skills, while testing and embracing their new roles and finally, resume life on new terms dictated by the fresh perspective (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168-169).

A secondary objective is to add to the body of literature regarding informal and nonformal transformational experiences and on discrimination and prejudice in particular. Morrice (2013) laments the "paucity of studies that have explored perspective transformation from informal and nonformal settings" (p. 254). She further contends that some of the greatest learning comes from that which is experienced and applied informally. Additionally, while various studies have sought to increase our understanding of the nature, causes and consequences of prejudices and discrimination, Oskamp (2013) proposes that significant gaps remain in identifying more meaningful prejudice reduction strategies.

While Mr. Woods' journey focuses on racial prejudice, we need to understand and replicate where possible, those variables and contexts most likely to reduce or eliminate the many forms of existing prejudices and discrimination. Studies such as these will allow individuals, work-places, educators and policy makers to utilize their limited resources in the most effective manner to educate and ultimately effect cultural and political change.

Firstly, I will discuss the literature on transformation learning and prejudice and racism, after which I will chronicle Mr. Woods' transformation. His emotional experiences and responses will be evaluated against the social dimensions of power in the context of the South African society. Finally, I will identify the unique factors that influenced Mr. Woods' learning and transformation and conclude with recommendations for future research.

### **Literature Review**

Rational discourse and premise reflection are key elements for change in perspective transformation theory. Mezirow defines rational discourse as distinct from everyday dialogue in that "principles and operations are made linguistically explicit" (1991, p. 77). Under ideal circumstances, participants in the discourse have full and correct information, equal status, are able to objectively analyze arguments, and have the capacity to accept an informed and rational consensus (Mezirow, 1991). On the concept of reflection, Mezirow explains that reflective learning becomes transformative "when assumptions are found to be distorting, inauthentic, or otherwise unjustified. Transformative learning results in new or transformed meaning schemes or, when reflection focuses on premises, new or transformed meaning perspectives" (p. 111). Perspective transformation theory should therefore provide us with some structure for understanding how individuals with racist belief systems, learn through rational discourse and reflection to become non-racist.

Transformative learning is central to adult education, with development being the progressive realization that grown-ups are able to have rational dialogue, question their previous learning and experiences however troubling this may be, and take action based on discoveries at particular points in their lives. It is considered "more of a journey and less of a decision at one point in time" (McDonald, Cervero and Courtenay, 1999, p. 11). Mälkki (2012) advises further

that disorienting dilemmas can occur naturally in nonfacilitated environments via everyday living. When the learner discovers what he/she believes to be the truth, they “become free to examine or acknowledge the psychological distortions that have motivated them in the past” (McDonald et al, 1999, p. 16). A number of studies also confirmed the uneasiness that accompanies the catalyst for reflective learning (Kember, 2010; Brigham, 2011; Mälkki, 2012). Critical reflection then becomes the means by which individuals can change or revise their distorted perspectives (Mezirow, 1995).

The pitfalls of discourse are introduced by Hart (1990) who argues that it is subject to distortion at the socio-cultural, the interpersonal and the psychological levels. She further contends that all three levels are intertwined, with the dominant group communicating the preferred values and beliefs in order to maintain the status quo and their privileged position of power. Discourse at all levels is therefore tainted by the dominant belief system entrenched at the macro level. This premise is supported by Solórzano and Yosso (2002) who take the position that racism is about long-established power relations. Kucukaydin and Cranton (2012) also address this problem, expressing concerns about how communities arrive at agreement on issues, adding that mutual understanding is only possible through “domination-free interaction” (p. 52).

Research by Tropp and Pettigrew (2005) suggests that members of both the elite and minority groups have different challenges when intergroup contact is made. The underprivileged group is more likely to be focused on their low status while the dominant group tends to take their elite position for granted. Taylor (2007) identifies socio-cultural and prior life experiences as significant contextual factors in any analysis of transformational learning, and highlights “the enormous interpersonal and socio-cultural challenges associated with confronting the effects of power” (p. 184). Applying a simple and succinct definition of power as having the freedom to act, McDonald et al (1999) advise that individuals who consciously take on the status quo have to be prepared to battle relations of power with activities that are “sustained over time in the face of formidable cultural and interpersonal odds” (p. 20).

While social psychologists have mostly relied on intergroup contact to reduce prejudice, five other major techniques have been identified (Oskamp, 2013). These include a) reducing conflict, b) publicity utilizing role models, c) cooperative learning, d) exposure to personal experience of discrimination, and e) demonstrating inconsistencies among held values. Research over the past 20 years or so has also highlighted the importance of intergroup friendship in bringing more balance to the power relations among the groups (Pettigrew, 1998; Vincent, 2008; Finchilescu, 2010). Vincent (2008) distinguishes between contact and integration, with the latter being described as “something more than merely surface toleration of those being regarded as being of a different racial category,” to include “acceptance, friendship, equity and equality” (p. 1432). Pettigrew (1998) who has done extensive work on this topic underscores the role of friendship in prejudice reduction as follows:

Over 3800 majority group respondents in seven probability samples of France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and West Germany were asked their attitudes toward major minority groups in their country and whether they had friends of another nationality, race, culture, religion, or social class. In all samples, Europeans with outgroup friends scored significantly lower on five prejudice measures even after controlling for seven variables. The largest effect occurred for a two-item measure of affective prejudice. Those with intergroup friends significantly more often reported having felt sympathy and admiration for the outgroup. Few studies in the contact literature have used affective dependent variables. When they have, similar results emerge. (p. 72)

### **Findings/Discussion**

Born in 1933 in the rural Transkei territory of South Africa, Donald Woods grew up with his two siblings among the Bomvana tribesmen on a trading post run by his parents. As he was the youngest child and the last to leave home, for a time he was the only White child among the thousands of Black tribesmen. Up to age five he even expressed himself better in Xhosa than in English because it was spoken by his Black playmates and his nursemaid. (Woods, 1981)

Woods advises that for the most part, there is nothing in the national life of South Africans above the master/servant relationship that encourages contact or friendship between Black and White (1988). As an adult his contact with Blacks remained chiefly on an employer/employee basis, which helped him to maintain some distant empathy with their circumstances.

#### **Disorienting Dilemmas**

In spite of all the obvious signs of subjugation, the thought that South African Blacks were being oppressed first occurred to Woods when he entered university around age 18, while studying the principles of law and natural justice. He recalled an incident around 1951 with a revered barrister and role model, Harold Levy, which marked what could be termed the start of his disorienting dilemma:

One day in the class during a discussion on politics, Levy said “Woods, you are from the Transkei, you’ve lived among the Blacks there – what do you think is the best policy?” I said: They should all be sent back to the reserves, where they belong. They’re happier there. It’s no good educating them and bringing them to the towns. It’s either send them back to the reserves or shoot them – it’s them or us.” There was a shocked silence. Levy looked at me silently for a long time. “Do you believe that?” he asked “Is that really how you feel?” I said it was, and that ended the discussion, but in the days that followed I felt increasingly uneasy about my answer. (Woods, 1981, p. 59)

Approximately 37 years later, in a presentation at George Washington University, he once again identified this period in his education as the starting point for his discomfort:

I think it was only when I started university (Cape Town) to study the principles of natural justice and law and it didn’t seem to me to go exactly with what was going on around. But it didn’t send me starting out to demonstrating or becoming a radical student or anything; it just made me a bit uncomfortable. (Woods, 1988)

This supports McDonald’s proposition that transformational learning usually evolves over a period of time and includes ongoing interactions as the learner discovers how to apply the new perspective (1999, p. 11). Woods began questioning his previous assumptions and found them distorting, inauthentic and unjustified.

The interesting thing is that after his initial troubling awakening, Woods continued to face intensifying dilemmas at various stages of his transformation as even more epic distortions surfaced. In 1973 while employed as the editor of the Daily Dispatch, he met Dr Mamphela Ramphele who challenged his assumptions and invited him to meet Steve Biko in order to rectify the misinformation that he was publishing about the Black Consciousness Movement. Woods recalled this incident and its impact on him as follows:

I’ve been changing since the age of 20 painfully slowly but ultimately a remarkable lady walked into my office and tore a strip of me for writing editorials attacking Steve Biko saying I should go meet with him because I was doing what Whites normally do in South Africa; assume you know what Blacks are saying and then attack them for saying it when they haven’t said it in the first place. I went to meet him and it was indeed a very

educational experience. I realized then, the positive aspects of what the Black consciousness movement was saying. (Woods, 1988)

As his relationship with Steve Biko grew over the next three years, they developed a deep friendship, bolstered by lively debates and discussions. Biko was banned during this entire time but such was the impact of their one-on-one discourse that he was able to grasp for the first time the reality of the apartheid system from the perspective of the victims. In his 1988 presentation on the subject of apartheid, he shared his fully evolved perspective:

I believe nowhere in the world, including the United States, including South Africa or Britain, I don't think White people are capable; and I don't care who they are no matter how sympathetic, how supportive they are to the Black cause. I simply don't think Whites are capable of perceiving completely what it must be like to be in a Black skin in an oppressed society. What is possible, however, if you are lucky enough to meet someone who can articulate these things well, someone like Steve Biko, then what is possible is to get as close perhaps as a White person can to perceiving what it must be like. And once that happens, you have unconsciously crossed the line I don't think you can step back from. Because, certainly in the case of my wife and myself, we had been inhabiting this White world where your friends came round for dinner and your conversation had to do with your golf handicap or what was on at the theater or where your swimming pool is looking a bit murky. The next night you'd be with the likes of Steve Biko and his friends and the conversation around supper would be who is in solitary confinement, who is being tortured, what can we do? And so you get this crazily unreal world continually bumping up against the real world in a country like South Africa. Once that happens, it's not a question of political conversion, it's a question of the personal experience and when you hear or learn or read that one of these people has been imprisoned or has died in prison, it's not just a political issue, it's a personal friend. It is a personal experience. So, it becomes impossible, in fact, it is unthinkable to go back to what was before and say what amounts to - Gee, that's tough. Life must go on.

Steve Biko's murder and Woods' own banning marked the removal of the remaining scales from his eyes. With all the distortions and injustices that he had uncovered, it was still shocking and unfathomable to him that his government could kill one of its brightest citizens, and then dared to silence him as well. He became helpless against the full extent of power unleashed by the ruling elites and describes his experience as becoming "a pariah in his White suburban neighborhood... and subject to the ire of angry White enemies who considered it a patriotic duty to show their hostility" (1981, p. 5). His position became eerily similar to the Blacks, which moved him to the highest level of empathy and understanding.

### **Self Reflection and Evaluation of Assumptions**

Following each disorienting dilemma experienced a clear pattern of self-reflection and analysis took place over the years. Early on, Woods describes dents in his psyche as he struggled to justify his contradictions, telling himself that South Africa's situation was unique, and that apartheid was a practical necessity for Whites (Woods, 1981). He describes his early questioning of his beliefs and values:

... two further things set me questioning it all again. One was a sermon during Mass which criticized apartheid as un-Christian and a contravention of the religious ethics of Judaism and Islam as well, and another was meeting a Black American. English-language universities were not yet segregated and this man attended a couple of classes as

a student visitor. I was struck by the fact that his accent was as American as those of White Americans on the movie screen, and reasoned that, if accent was a matter of environment, so might racial culture be. And as he was the first Black foreigner I had encountered, I began to consider that the assumption of Black inferiority in South Africa might be a result of the environmental circumstances forced on South African Blacks... For me, this was a startling concept, because it challenged all my racial prejudice. It was a period of inner turmoil, because I was having to make major adjustments... (p. 61)

Feelings of guilt and discomfort were evident as he reflected on his assumptions and beliefs, but it was years before inner turmoil would turn to horror at racism, apartheid and the state's control of the media which he likened to Nazi Germany in the late 1930s. Woods (1987) ruefully admitted that "for the next twenty years I believed that my education out of racism was complete – until I met Steve Biko." (p. 44)

He credits Steve Biko with giving him a firm grasp of the realities of Black politics in South Africa and a clearer understanding of Black consciousness and its link to Black self-esteem. Woods was also learning just how far the powerful would go to maintain their position of privilege as he faced enormous interpersonal and socio-cultural challenges resulting from the confrontation. His contemplation at the news of Biko's death on September 13, 1977 foretold the major action to come with his departure from his country:

Within those shocked seconds South Africa became a different place for me, and when I called Wendy she had a similar reaction. For both of us the Nats (Nazi) were now the mortal enemy who had committed the ultimate outrage. She said: "I'm beyond feeling scared of them. There's nothing worse they can do" (p. 305).

While he knew people who had been banned, including Biko, he was shocked and indignant that he could somehow be subjected to the same fate. He wrote - "it seemed there was a special dimension to being a political captive in one's own country...my feelings of indignation grew. Who were these people to confine me to my own territory?" (Woods, 1987, p. 322)

### **Moving towards action and a fresh perspective**

In South Africa, the government controlled media was used to disseminate all forms of communication. They instituted hundreds of laws that kept the dominant and the powerless groups apart and applied numerous censors. By isolating the groups and pitting them against each other, it was near impossible for rational discourse to take place at the interpersonal level where human interaction is important for reflection to take place. Woods (1988) estimated that of the 5 million Whites in South Africa (20% of the population), way less than 5% had an appreciation for the horrors of apartheid and its impact on the Blacks.

Planning and action had taken varying forms as Woods evolved. As a young adult, his strategy was to seek election in order to effect incremental change through the political process. After losing the elections disastrously, he took up journalism in what he described as his quest to "convert his fellow Whites... with the pen" (p. 45). He would later describe this period of his life as being theoretically opposed to apartheid – "it was mostly up here (head), it wasn't in the gut" (Woods, 1988).

There were not many individuals in South Africa who held similar liberal anti-apartheid views, but that handful helped to make the journey more bearable. His wife Wendy, who also grew up in the Transkei region under similar circumstances, he describes as having insight long before he did. He mentions a few such as Rob and Hildur Amato who started a non-racial theatre group, through which they met for the first time, Blacks who spoke as social equals and with

whom they became friendly (Woods, 1981). So brutal was the government in silencing the voices of the dissenters, that Woods dedicated *Biko* to “all our friends now banned, exiled, detained or dead.”

Two distinct transformative phases were identified in Woods the adult between 1951 up to the time he fled South Africa in 1977; Pre-Biko (18 to 41 years), and Post-Biko (41-45 years). Although Woods had early positive contact with Blacks in childhood, he perceived them as lesser beings based on his socialization and as evidenced in his callous response to his professor to shoot or send them back to the reserve. His Pre-Biko transformation clearly started with his formal exposure to concepts of natural justice and fairness, enlightening literature and interaction with a few liberal role models. Travel to other countries and exposure to a few educated Blacks also helped him to reject apartheid in theory as he could logically rationalize and understand its inherent unfairness and injustice. During this phase he still however regarded himself as superior and untouchable by the state, except for some litigation and low level scare tactics and threats.

It was his post-Biko period and its repercussions that triggered a different level of self examination, reflection and terror, ultimately leading to a total transformation in his meaning perspective. The difference at this stage was the deep friendship with a Black man who he describes as even superior to himself in reasoning and charisma. Woods confessed that he didn't really understand racism until he met Steve Biko. He moved from superficial contact to what he identified as a personal experience with a personal friend.

This relationship ultimately led to Woods and his family getting a taste of what many Blacks experienced on a daily basis. By moving beyond the boundaries of South Africa's socio-cultural distortion and embracing another truth, Woods and his wife isolated themselves from the mainstream ideology and immediately became targets with family and personal safety becoming a very real issue. Their relationship with Steve Biko had forced a redefinition of values that they held for years, but so extreme was state control over communication that movement through discourse from the micro to the macro level with other Whites was almost impossible.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Two of Oskamp's (2013) prejudice reduction techniques of demonstrated inconsistencies among values and exposure to personal experience of discrimination were evident in Wood's journey; however friendship and affect stand out as critical components in meaningful perspective transformation. Mere contact between groups only results in incremental movement, although this contact is certainly necessary for any further relationship to develop. Donald Woods clearly attributes his transformation to his deep and profound friendship and the love he had for Steve Biko which developed through discourse and reflection. Their meeting was a watershed moment for him and we can assume that if he had not met Steve Biko, or someone like him, Woods would most likely have remained somewhat uncomfortable and against apartheid in principle, which would have been enough to assuage his conflicting value systems. While the Woods were White, they lost their privileged status as they were guilty by association and were effectively treated with similar contempt as the Blacks. This brought them as close as they possibly could in understanding the impact of discrimination and prejudice and their effects. Further research on the role of friendship in prejudice reduction is recommended as while its possibility is implied through contact and cooperative learning strategy theories, the conditions and affective dependent variables that allow its development, need to be more fully explored.

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