Changing Lives: How Leaders of Philanthropic Organizations Understand Their Mission

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to better understand what leaders of local organizations mean by the phrase "changing people's lives." Three major themes emerged from the data, collected from interviews and organizational information, suggesting that people do make transformative changes in their lives and engagement with a philanthropic organization seems to facilitate the change process. Our research question was "How do staff members of local philanthropic organizations make meaning of the phrase in their mission statements 'changing people's lives.'"

Transformative learning implies that a fundamental change occurs in the way a person perceives the world. From a constructivist perspective, transformative learning acknowledges that individuals create new knowledge as they interpret and reinterpret the meaning of their experiences. Transformative learning is "a critical dimension of learning in adulthood that enables us to recognize, reassess, and modify the structures of assumptions and expectations that frame our tacit points of view and influence our thinking, beliefs, attitudes, and actions" (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009, p. 18). Individuals develop habitual expectations based on past experiences. These expectations, often uncritically assimilated from the social world, community, and culture, frequently contain distortions, stereotypes, and prejudices that guide action. In Mezirow and Taylor's view, transformative learning occurs when individuals have experiences that are not congruent with their expectations and as a result they critically reflect on their assumptions and engage in critical discourse to develop new and more expansive perspectives. An exploration of how nonprofit organizations make meaning of "changing people's lives" may expand the understanding of transformative learning for vulnerable people.

Our interest in conducting this study stemmed from the disjuncture between the real-world work of nonprofit organizations that are "caring for vulnerable people" by helping them change their lives and the inadequacy of transformative learning theory to inform practice in this area. This disjuncture arises from the notion that "hungry, desperate, sick, homeless, destitute and intimidated people obviously cannot participate fully and freely in discourse" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 60) and that discourse and critical reflection are essential components of key theories of transformative learning (Brookfield, 2000). Although we agree with the criticism that transformative learning theory over-emphasizes rationality (Cunningham, 1992) and inadequately accounts for other ways of knowing (Kasl & Yorks, 2002), research suggests that people in crisis cannot engage in transformative learning (Kilgore & Bloom, 2002). Yet, community-based nonprofit organizations claim they are helping people change their lives. Baumgartner (2012) suggests that to expand the theory of transformative learning continued exploration is warranted on the effects of various contexts on the transformative learning process including the sociocultural, interpersonal, historical, and situational. This is the first phase of a study examining how vulnerable people change their lives. This phase focuses on how staff members in nonprofit organizations that care for vulnerable people make meaning of this phrase in their mission statements.

Research Design

This was an interpretive, heuristic study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 2004) with the goal of understanding how leaders in philanthropic organizations made meaning of the phrase "changing people's lives." Based on a constructivist framework, we approached this inquiry from the perspective that reality is culturally, socially, and historically constructed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); therefore, we conducted our inquiry in a real-world setting and placed no prior constraints on what the outcome would be. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative methods are effective when the researchers' goal is a detailed understanding. These methods allow researchers to "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). In-depth interviews, one of the most widely used ways to gather qualitative data, provided a way for us to enter into the participants' perspectives on a particular phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Interview questions guided rather than directed the participants; therefore, follow-up questions occurred naturally as part of the conversation between the participant and the researcher. Purposeful sampling assisted us in "selecting information-rich cases for study in depth" (Patton, 1990, p. 169).

To recruit participants, we selected a bounded geographic area, identified community-based organizations in this area, and examined the organizations' websites for mission statements that included the phrase "changing people's lives." Personalized letters requesting an interview were sent to the top executive of each organization; eight organizations responded. Data sources included interviews, a demographic information form, and printed or online materials about the organization. Data analysis was a collaborative process among the researchers using the constant comparative method starting with open coding and continually merging the data into higher-level categories. We used ATLAS.ti, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) for qualitative data analysis, to assist in our collaborative efforts to code and compare the data (Anderson and Kanuka, 2003;). We first transcribed the interviews and relevant data from the demographic forms and/or websites and loaded this information into the software program. For consistency in coding, one researcher was designated as the codebook editor and was responsible for uniformly applying the codes within the software. From there, we read through each transcript collectively, looking for aspects of the data that stood out. Because we did this as a group, we explained our reasoning for marking a particular section of text. The software enabled us to map out ideas in diagrams or conceptual networks, so we could graphically portray our themes and visually represent the links between the mapped concepts. Finally, we found that using CAQDAS created an historical record of the process that contributed to the trustworthiness of our findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Three major themes emerged from the data. We labeled the themes using participants' words. Quotes are in italics. *Where do I turn?* describes the trigger events that led to interaction with the nonprofit organization. *Someone acting interested* describes the process between the organization and the client that either did or did not lead to change. And *fully on her own* describes the autonomy and stability achieved by a percentage of the clients.

Where do I turn?

"*For folks that are in need, one of the first things is . . . 'where do I turn?'*" This theme describes the types of problems faced by clients, systemic obstacles that impede the ability to change, and clients'

individual readiness for change. In all cases, individuals had reached an impasse and were not able to move forward without help. Participants often used the word "trigger" to refer to some point in an individual's life that resulted in homelessness, domestic abuse, drug and alcohol dependence, gang membership, extreme poverty, or criminal offense. Participants described the needs of their clients as, *"A lot of the women that come here have been just so emotionally and physically abused, they've never felt like they had any control over their own lives. A lot of them don't have an education. They didn't finish high school. They may have never had a well-paying job. They may have been controlled, if they did have a job, they had to give their money over. They never felt like they had any control over their children."* Most participants talked of the challenges that their clients face in the community. Systemic obstacles to change are the ways that the institutional or community systems function that make change difficult. For example, *"A guy gets out of prison. They usually give him a bus ticket somewhere. So they put him on a bus and give him, if it's his first time, a $75 check. He gets off the bus. If he has no one there, he has no way to cash that check to begin with, because he doesn't have an ID. And so, what do you do when they . . . put you off at the bus station? You have no place to go. You have a $75 check you can't cash. What do you do?"* Although hundreds of individuals seek help annually from these organizations, not all are ready to receive help. *"Well this is a free country, and they are free to not change."* Other organizations face reductions in their funding forcing them to select clients who are most likely to make changes. *"And it's not because our hearts or our spirits or our desire to help has changed, it's money. Plain and simple it's a budget issue. We cannot afford to be as helpful as we have been unless you are going to take some initiative."* The theme *"where do I turn?"* captured the way the participants explained the challenges faced by the clients of their organizations. Connecting with the organization was the first step in a process that sometimes was fairly quick and other times lasted for months or even years.

Someone acting interested

      "They've never had a support person in their life, so, just somebody acting interested and telling them that they can do it. [That] is all that they need." This theme described making connections, action steps, and education. According to participants, one of their main goals is making connections between the client and other service organizations, a mentor or individual, who follows the person while they are in the process of changing, peers who are in or have been in a similar situation, and others such as family members or employers. One organization used the term "circles of support" to indicate the various ways they connected their clients with others who could be a resource for them. For abused women, the support might include ending a woman's isolation by providing a safe haven and peers who have had similar experiences. *"And they get to talking about what they went through and it's just, it's amazing to see how they help one another through their own healing process."* A key part of this theme is working with individual clients to develop a plan of action to address the client's goals, whether it is stable housing, freedom from addiction, or placement in a job. Faith-based organizations develop a plan in partnership with the individual and a church. Other organizations help clients expand their goals by providing a range of choices and helping them create action steps to achieve those goals. The organizations provide both formal and informal learning opportunities including classes, coaching, and internships. Talking about how the organization changes lives, one participant said, *"We do it educationally. We teach life skills classes such as computer skills, personal financial management, fathering skills. We teach a class called 'Authentic Manhood.'"* This theme of "someone acting interested" showed the value of relationships that were meaningful to the organizations' clients. What the

organizations offered were meaningful relationships and choices to individuals who were isolated and often hopeless.

Fully on her own

  So that by the time she was actually responsible for paying her rent fully on her own, she'd already saved 3 months' rent. And so she was always paying ahead of the game. The goal of the organizations is to provide the help that people need until they can manage "fully on their own." While some of their clients never achieve this goal, many do. *So it's less than a year ago, this woman was standing out on the street with boxes full of wet clothes, her kids were going to school with wet clothes. Now she has a job. She has health insurance.* Participants recounted testimonials from former clients who returned to thank the staff for the help they provided. Their clients were fully on their own in that they did not return to prison, they were drug and alcohol free, they had stable housing and employment, or they were in school. Staff also recounted numerous stories of individuals who were hired by nonprofit organizations to help people similar to themselves and others who made financial contributions. *"And here's a guy that's giving back, devoted his life to giving back, so that's one of thousands of stories. He has come out of prison after 14 years and came through our program as a student and now has gone back to a previous employer. He's doing leadership work in his church and, just doing, doing really well."* Giving back also applied to what the clients' gave back to the staff members of the organizations. Staff members recounted the positive impact that the clients have on them and the organization. This theme has two subthemes, outcomes achieved by clients that indicate autonomy and stability and giving back. The themes, *"where do I turn?," "someone acting interested,"* and *"fully on her own"* use the words of the participants to show some of the aspects of the change process engaged in by their clients.

Discussion and Implications

  The purpose of this study was to better understand what staff members in nonprofit organizations based in a local community mean by the phrase in their mission statements—changing people's lives— and explore a possible link between the perceptions of changing lives and transformative learning. What organizations mean by "changing people's lives" is that their mission is to provide assistance to individuals in crisis who are asking where to turn. Staff members engaged in a process with the clients that included making connections to reduce isolation, overcoming systemic obstacles, and providing educational and informal learning opportunities. As a result of this process, the individuals who were ready and able to achieve autonomy and stability did change their lives. Some "give back" either to their communities or to the organization.

  Findings from this study suggest that "hungry, desperate, sick, homeless, destitute and intimidated" (Mezirow, 2003, p. 60) people do make transformative changes in their lives even though they may not meet the conditions of maturity, education, safety, health, economic security, and emotional intelligence that Mezirow says are preconditions for discourse, a key step in the transformative learning process. Merriam asks, "How related are the 'preconditions' of education, socioeconomic class, gender, and so on to transformational learning? Is a Western (male?) model of cognitive development with its pinnacle of independent, autonomous, critically reflective thought the only place to situate transformational learning? What about 'connected knowing' and 'interdependence' being the goal of mature thought?" (2004, pp. 65-66). The theme "someone acting interested" speaks to the questions raised by Merriam because relationships do not play a role in the rational approach to transformative learning that relies on critical reflection of assumptions and rational discourse. A part of the mission of philanthropic organizations that assist "vulnerable" people is to address their lack of interpersonal

networks and support systems (Aday, 2001; Mechanic & Tanner, 2007). Considerable research has been conducted to determine effective ways of fostering transformative learning in an instructional setting (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Much less is known about how helping relationships outside of these formal settings influence transformative learning and whether "vulnerable" individuals experience the type of critical reflection on assumptions that Mezirow (2009) describes. Our findings suggest that their experience of change occurred through some other process, such as engaging in helping relationships, an area that needs further research (Baumgartner, 2012).

This study did not answer Merriam's questions; it did shed light on the population of people who have been excluded from the opportunity to engage in transformative learning and change their perspectives based on Mezirow's theory. Clark said, "Transformational learning shapes people; they are different afterward, in ways both they and others can recognize" (1993, p. 47). Undoubtedly, the participants in this study said that a percentage of the clients in their organizations were different in ways that both they and the clients could recognize. None of these organizations intimated that change was rapid, but all said they believed their mission was accurate. Many of their clients were able to change their lives, implying that the clients engaged in transformative learning at some level.

A key limitation of this study is that it focused on staff members of philanthropic community-based organizations for a better understanding of what is meant by "changing people's lives." Staff members described the way they perceive that clients in their organizations changed. We have not yet talked with the individuals themselves about their experiences and these conversations may shed a different light on the change process. As Baumgartner (2012) suggested, to better understand transformative learning theory, more exploration is warranted on the situational and sociocultural aspects of it. Therefore, the next phase of the study will focus on the clients of these organizations to better understand how change occurs from their perspectives.

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