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Disturbing Outcomes: The Dark Side of Transformative Learning

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Abstract: *This paper argues for a need to expand investigation of transformative learning theory to include consideration of transformative learning processes, practices and outcomes that do not follow a 'positive' direction but traverse a wide band of possibilities.*

Introduction

Well into his book, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (2007), in his section on the Abu Gharib prison scandal, social psychologist, Zimbardo writes the following:

However, sometimes the “science of creating killers” can get out of hand and make murder become ordinary. Consider the reactions of a twenty-one year-old soldier who just killed a civilian in Iraq who refused to stop at a traffic check. “It was like nothing. Over here, killing people is like squashing an ant. I mean, you kill somebody, and it’s like, “All right, let’s go get some pizza. I mean, I thought killing somebody would be this life-changing experience. And then I did it, and it was like, “All right, whatever.” (p. 417).

In her book, *The Girls Who Went Away* (2006), Fessler, provides narrative accounts of birthmothers reflecting the circumstances and aftermath of giving up a child for adoption. One of them, Nancy states:

Losing him had such a profound influence on me. You know, my siblings all had fancy degrees and very focused careers, and they drew from that in order to define who they are. This is what I had; this is what influenced most of my life decisions, the development of my family, where I lived-I would never have moved out of this state because it is the last place I saw him...It’s changed my personality. I feel like I was in a car accident...I don’t really care if I have the popular view. I suffered this alone for twenty-one years so everyone around me would be comfortable. (p. 53).

In her report for Human Rights Watch, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda*, Des Forge (1999) describes a propaganda campaign employed to promote the torture and massacre of Tutsis and which purportedly drawn from the techniques of Lenin and Goebbels.

The propagandist ...“create” events to lend credence to propaganda. ...this tactic is not honest, but it works well, provided the deception is not discovered. The “attack” on Kigali on October 4-5, 1990 was such a “created” event, as were others—the reported discovery of hidden arms, the passage of a stranger with a mysterious bag, the discovery of radio communications equipment—that were exploited later. ... The propagandist calls his second proposal “Accusation in a mirror,” meaning his colleagues should impute to enemies exactly what they and their own party are planning to do. He explains, “In this way, the party which is using terror will accuse the enemy of using terror.” With such a tactic, propagandists can persuade listeners and “honest people” that they are being attacked and are justified in taking whatever measures are necessary “for legitimate [self-

] defense.”This tactic worked extremely well, both in specific cases such as the Bugesera massacre of March 1992... and in the broader campaign to convince Hutu that Tutsi planned to exterminate them. (p.57)

In the above accounts, Zimbardo, Fessler and Desforjes, in wildly different contexts, offer glimpses of the latitude of transformative learning and teaching processes and outcomes; ones not typically investigated or considered through the lens of adult education research. These experiences and events - compelling, authentic and provocative are illustrative of individual or societal transformations that are seldom analyzed or included in contemporary configurations of transformative learning models.

A Basis for Revising Transformative Theory

Taylor (2007) writes in his most recent critical review of the literature of transformative learning theory, that most of the 41 studies included in his review were situated in and involved members or formal higher education, “with little exploration in non-formal educational settings.” (p. 175). This description is telling given the fact that during the years covered (1999-2005) the U.S. experienced unparalleled terrorist attacks, the sequelae of which includes a declaration of and continued engagement in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a re-visioning of U.S. civil rights as manifested in the USA Patriot Act and promulgation of and public debate on U.S. military uses of torture: discourse made necessary following leakage of the photographs of Abu Gharib. It might logically be argued that these events formed a “disorienting dilemma” on a national scale, and the subsequent governmental and citizenry actions reveal a complex, divisive and still evolving process of “transformation” that should demand of us the need to question assumptions of directionality and outcome in models of transformative learning theory. Equally important is the need to question the absence of these considerations since elision might suggest a disciplinary wide distaste for attributing employment of a transformative learning theoretical perspective and praxis when the process and outcome results in evil or harm to self, others or society at large. That is, as we learn about and act on findings such as those identified by King (2003) in which adults reexamined their priorities, achieved greater “international perspectives, benevolence and increased patriotism” following 9/11, should we not also be attuned to other directions in which transformative perspectives are likely to fall and of the actions, perhaps stemming from new international perspectives or increased patriotism that evolves to a moral justification for war, violence or racial/ethnic intolerance?

This paper considers other directions for transformation; learning trajectories which frequently lie outside of “what is right, good and beautiful” but are nonetheless animated by new insights and negotiation of “one’s own purposes, values, beliefs, feelings, dispositions and judgments” (Mezirow, 2003). The major argument of this paper then is to challenge discourse on transformative learning theory - whether as a process or an outcome; as a journey of individuals or of societies - that almost ubiquitously delimits transformation to a direction “toward growth, enabling people to move toward habits of mind and habits of being that involve qualities such as greater inclusiveness, openness, wholeness, awareness, choice, wisdom, voice...” (Fisher-Yoshida, Geller & Schapiro, 2008, p.7). Merizow’s (2000, p. 9) view unabashedly entrenches this stance since he writes that the theory “assumes the perfectibility of human beings when this refers to improving our understanding and the quality of our actions through meaningful learning”. We argue paradoxically however, that the factors, steps and components of the theory informed by Cranton, (1994); Cunningham (1998), Mezirow (1991, 1997, 2000, 2003);

Taylor,(2009, 2000) and others do provide explanatory power to describe transformative processes whose disturbing outcomes may be less than “ideal” whether expressed through social or individual transformations. We suggest that the scale of these transformative outcomes may range from the truly horrific and historically significant to perspective transformations that usher perhaps more subjective, individualized but significant outcomes such as those marked by prolonged depression, more somber worldviews or even lifelong regret.

Delimiting Direction and the Problem of Language

While it is not difficult to find or provide examples of transformative learning outcomes or processes that illustrate less than benign or positive outcomes, it is difficult to describe the location of these (paradoxically) succinctly or comprehensively. A significant issue is the appropriation of the term “transformative learning” as a metonym for a process that goes only toward what can be described as a “positive” direction or outcome. The alternative then, the transformative learning processes that might be more circumspect or evolve and result in profound harm is left out of the discourse. Euphemistically the phenomena has been called ‘the dark side’ of transformation and is often tethered to Jung’s notion of the shadow but this is limiting and can add a pejorative notion that at times should be avoided.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) in its definition of transformation offers some girth in the term and reveals its non-axiological character. Transformation is defined as “the action of changing in form, shape, or appearance; metamorphosis “(OED) then offers the following examples: “Monstruous transformaciones of men in to bestes be made..thro charmes of wicches....” And from Shakespeare:,” Vpon whose dead corpes there was such misuse, Such beastly, shamelesse transformation” (OED). These examples remind us of the long and substantive history in theater, literature and film of linking the process of individual transformation to outcomes that harmful to self and others. Shakespeare’s great tragedies, *MacBeth*, *Otello* and *Hamlet* are exemplars of this convention. In each protagonist, Shakespeare reveals thoughtful, learned men who wrestle with disturbing dilemmas, engage in critical reflection (a thane can become a king, a husband learns that under the new conditions he has the capacity to murder his beloved) and consultations and produce plans of action that result in the death of others. Despite the OED’s implication that transformation from an etymological stance does not privilege direction, values or outcomes, and the rich bounty of literature, film, theater and other arts that over centuries have intentionally instructed us of the varieties of transformative experiences, by and large this “darker” direction of metamorphous remains largely unexamined in the canon of transformative learning studies.

Another Perspective on Perspective Transformation

Whether considering transformations writ small, as in the shifting career goals of law students (Granfield & Koenig, 2002, 1992) or lifelong grief of birthmothers (Fessler, 2006), or large (wars, genocides, social movements such as eugenics, white supremacy) they may best be perceived for the good of individuals and society as bi-directional. Moving outside of adult education literature to that of social work, social psychology, international education, law, and other disciplines one finds acknowledgement that the direction of transformation is not a foregone conclusion.

Granfield & Koenig undertook studies on the effects of pro bono service placements in the training of law students as well as the changing career aspirations of law students from working class backgrounds attending Ivy League law schools. In the latter situations they found that students entered graduate programs with goals to help people from (their) lower socioeconomic background only to revise their goals and assumptions as their education progressed with a net effect of aggressively securing jobs at high paying corporate enterprises. These students have as much to teach us as do the seemingly more evolved ones whose probono placements will lead to human service law. The changing worldviews of clinicians who work with trauma survivors has been increasingly investigated and offers insight into the how perspective transformations fall along a compendium of locations. For example:

The family violence therapists reported changes in their perceptions, which related to their beliefs and their schemata regarding spousal relations, the world, and humanity. The family violence therapists also reported that they viewed spousal relations more from the lens of power and control as a result of their work. In addition, the findings indicated that participants in that group had begun to view the world and humanity through “grey lenses,” and their faith in people was undermined as a result of their work. That is, they believed that the world was less safe and less just, and they perceived humanity and society as aggressive, evil and malicious (Ben Porat, A. & Itzhaky, H.2009)

Using tools of the master or “Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.” Voltaire

Serbia and Rwanda offer two contemporary examples (and other examples proliferate) of how “the tools of our trade,” as adult educators and as facilitators of transformative learning wield great power when employed by persons (governmental actors, guerillas, insurgents, among others) who may choose to use their power, charisma or resources to subordinate, persecute or harm others. Core elements, the essential components that frame a transformative approach to teaching,” (Mezirow, Taylor, & Associates, 2009, p. 4) may in fact be the scaffolding of propagandists and the leaders they serve as much as they are the lens of the cherished teacher.

Social psychologists,(Zimbardo, Waller, Bandura) psychiatrists (Lifton, Miles) journalists (Hedges, Power) and philosophers (Card, Arendt) and others are strident in their warnings of the dangers of denying or disavowing the power of educators, researchers, health and mental health professionals, politicians and citizens to experience, execute, or support exploitative transformative events. The literatures on evil and of genocide warn us to give serious attention to the conventional notions and agency of oppressors. The U.S. civil rights movements, the women’s movement, the anti-aparthied victory in South Africa, the liberatory and popular education programs of the priests and populace in Nicaragua and El Salvador are frequently cited examples offering socially transformative journeys from and over oppression. But what if Freire’s vox populi agitate on deeply held perceptions of being oppressed, victimized, maligned or aggrieved eventuating in a cohesive foment for liberation? And what if their word and world (developed and promulgated in propaganda, posters, radio broadcasts and other communicative tools) and the transformation of their limiting situation (Freire, p. 49) takes form in liberating massacres, mass rapes and the promotion and execution of pograms of torture? What if the “war of position” and the “organic intellectuals” of Gramsci (Cunningham, 1998), as phases and agents of social transformation are, for example, tethered to a siege in Sarajevo or the mass rapes and murders in Butare, Rwanda and undertaken by alleged war criminals such as psychiatrist/poet Radovan Karadzic, or social worker, and national minister of family and women’s affairs, Pauline Nyiramasuhuko?

If transformative education requires, “the articulation and remembrance of a vision and the values that sustain it, “(Dykstra and Law, 1994, p. 123, cited in Cunningham, 1998), what are we to make of leaders and educators who irrespective of hegemonic realities, organize and ignite solidarity around beliefs supporting ethnic, racial, economic or political difference? In, *We Make the Road by Walking*, Myles Horton links this to the adulterating nature of power:

In the process of mobilizing a crowd, I kind of got a sense of power, because the people were with me and the enemy was against me. You get those two things going and you’re sure you’re on the right track. I was enjoying it and suddenly I realized, “What the hell am I doing? What is this? I will never forget it.” ...“ I think you can learn from mobilizing, but you can learn to manipulate the people or you can learn to educate the people. There’s two kinds of learning that come out of the experience.”(p. 111).

Deliberate agitation of ethnic, racial or economic tensions by charismatic leaders is both historical artifact and current reality. For example with regard to the recent resumption of the Radovan Karadzic war crimes trial, (March, 2010) Sisodia, (2010) writes:

Bosnia is very fragile. It’s the worst [now] since the end of the war.” ... people in the former Yugoslavia were forced to deal with a history of ethnic conflict – including widespread atrocities committed in the 1940s by the Croat Ustase, Serb Chetniks and multi-ethnic Partisans, many of whom were never prosecuted. The crimes, particularly those of the Partisans, were not to be mentioned after the second world war (sic). “You did not talk about the past. But people did talk about it, in their families, within their ethnic groups, yet there was no political mechanism by which these feelings could be expressed. The [last] war was a result of that: people wanted revenge. I don’t want to witness revenge in 20 years’ time for what happened in the 1990s.”

Freire advises us to “interpret the dreams of the people who are making the leader become charismatic,” and we are well advised to pay attention to an emerging Mandela or Karadzic.

Rwanda in the 1990’s also experienced genocide; a horrific eruption of Hutu ethnocentrism emancipated with the death of Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana but brewed with centuries of resentments yoked to 16th century colonial rule and imposed social and cultural statuses and stigmas (Zimbardo, 2007; Logan, 2006; Card, 2005). The near extermination of the Tutsi group of Rwanda by the politically dominate Hutus was remarkable for its swiftness – an estimated 100 days (resulting in slaughter of 800,000 to a million Tutsi’s), scope of violence, and use of hate propaganda in written press and radio to promote widespread violence. Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, the educator, women’s rights minister and social worker was tried for horrific acts including a chilling episode in which, using loudspeakers and counting on her reputation as a home grown advocate, she rallied thousands of Tutsis, stating that Red Cross provisions and help would be available at a local stadium. The Tutsi’s were met by her militia and murdered with Nyiramasuhuko allegedly commanding: "Before you kill the women, you need to rape them." Shortly after this incident she had an additional 70 women burnt alive furnishing the gasoline herself. (Landesman, 2002).

Discussion: Why study “the Dark Side?”

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness: Gas chambers built by learned engineers, children poisoned by educated physicians, infants killed by trained nurses, women and babies shot and buried by High School and College Graduates. So I am suspicious of education. (Ginott, 1972 quoted in Coloroso, 2007)

In valorizing primarily transformative experiences which result in positive directionality, educators, therapists and other interventionists miss or undermine a full range of human experiences that have altered lives and history. Yet, in a response to a critique about his work by Newman, Mezirow, (1997) challenged the adult educator's role in international corporations' exploitation of workers. Mezirow, asked, "What if we encounter the enemy and find that they are us? This opening for inquiry seems to have long been paved over, perhaps, as Newman (2007) believes, by the decency,"...the inherent 'niceness of the adult educator,' that may obscure consideration of the person who can seed a "soil with landmines" and a bias toward collective belief that if we encourage personal growth, that growth will inevitably be towards a person who is admirable." It behooves us, we believe, to animate the inquiry.

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