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## **PARENTING AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING PROCESS**

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*Abstract: Transformative learning theory is a domain still little explored in research and practice. Transformative learning – specific to adults – comprises ten phases most often encountered in experience (Mezirow, 1978) but other authors in the field argue that we can pass a transformative learning process with fewer steps (Lytle, 1989; Cesar, 2003). My question is whether we can demonstrate that becoming a parent is a process of transformative learning. This study aims at developing a qualitative measurement instrument for the transformative learning perceived by parents when their child is born or during the child's growth and education. What skills do parents need to be open for transformation? Could this theory be related to the social change that we face every day?*

**Keywords: transformative learning, parenting, adult education, skills, social change**

“One thing I find amazing; we learn all kind of skills in life, some harder and some easier, and we believe the easiest one is being a parent, hence we do not learn it; however, nothing is harder than being a parent” (Mironescu, 1915, p. 11).

### **Introduction**

Transformative learning is an approach to adult learning that was introduced in 1978 by Jack Mezirow. His initial study was conducted on U.S. women that returned to postsecondary school or workplace after an extended time out. Mezirow emphasizes that learning in childhood is a formative, socializing and acculturating process, but adult education can be transformative and move “the individual toward a more inclusive, differentiated, permeable (open to other points of view), and integrated meaning perspective, the validity of which has been established through rational discourse” (1991, p. 7). The author (1991) articulates what the term transformative theory emphasizes on “meaning – how it is construed, validated and reformulated”. He notes that the meaning is an interpretation that is formed through both perception and cognition and that meaning is made both unintentionally and intentionally. Two of the central concepts of Mezirow’s theory are meaning schemas – specific beliefs, attitudes and emotional reactions articulated by an interpretation and meaning perspectives –, groups of related meaning schemes that act as perceptual and conceptual codes to form, limit and distort how we think, believe and feel and how, what, when and why we learn. They have cognitive, affective and conative dimensions. Other concepts closely related to theory are critical reflection and perspective transformation.

From the beginning, it is worth mentioning that even though Mezirow’s definition is the most recognized and criticised in the field of adult education (Taylor, 1998), many others researchers have defined transformative learning (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Daloz, 1986; Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1991, 1997, 2000, 2004). A simple and elegant definition of transformative learning is included in the work of Cranton (2000), who underlines the idea that people change the way in which they interpret experiences and interact with the world. “Through some event, traumatic or ordinary, individuals become aware of holding a limiting or distorted view. If they critically examine this view and are open to alternatives, they may consequently

change the way they see things. They have then transformed some part of how they make meaning out of experience.” Another definition for transformative learning is “a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings and actions”, provided by Transformative Learning Centre (2004).

Mezirow (1997) suggests that learning is more than the accumulation of new knowledge that is added to existing knowledge; he describes a process in which the underlying assumptions by which we view the world are changed through the learning process. In his initial research conducted on women who were re-entered in high school after a long pause in their lives, Mezirow identified ten steps that were experienced by these women: a disorienting dilemma; a self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame; a critical assessment of assumptions and relationships; a recognition of one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared; exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions; provisional trying of new roles; building competence/confidence in new roles and relationships; planning a course of action; acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans and a reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective. Taylor’s (2000) analysis of transformative learning research found that while the theory is widely applied to a diversity of situations, very little of the research available provides data supporting Mezirow’s comprehensive model. For example, the research available focuses on portions of the theory, critical reflection and context or perspective transformation. Lytle (1989) uses a questionnaire based on Mezirow’s ten stages in semi-structured interviews and found thirty percent of a class of nursing students experienced all ten of Mezirow’s stages. All participants in the study experienced the first four stages, but only those who had experienced all nine of the previous stages experienced stage ten, a reintegration back into one’s life. Cesar’s (2003) dissertation research, which clearly uses Lytle as a model, of adult learner motivation, found forty percent of his subjects experienced all ten stages. Cesar found consensus was less in the early stages of TL compared to Lytle’s findings. Cesar did find that ninety-seven percent of his subjects experienced stage three, ninety-three percent experienced stages one and four and seventy-three percent experienced stages two and five. Cesar found a clear trend of fewer students experiencing stages six through ten.

Boyd and Myers (1988) studied the theory of transformative learning based on Jung’s theory. Basically, transformative education refers to understanding the dynamic between the *inner* and the *outer* world. Authors focus on the dimensions of deep emotional and spiritual learning, different from Mezirow’s view, which focuses on the rational and cognitive process related to critical reflection (Dirkx, 2000). The key-idea for transformative education is the concept of *self*, proposed by Jung.

The two theorists posit that you reach transformation through individuation, which is an extension of awareness through a dialogue with yourself/ interpersonal between the ego and the shadows (unconscious). They say that the transformative journey focuses not that much on a series of rational problem-solving procedures, but on judgment (Boyd and Myers, 1988, p. 280). The sense of judgment comes from within, it is a personal illumination gained by putting things together and by seeing the bigger relational picture.

Dirkx's ideas are also based on Jung. Different from Mezirow, who focuses on the centrality of rational self-reflection and critical thinking, Dirkx sees emotions as the key-element for transformative learning and he calls it logic of the soul, contributing to the development of self-knowledge (Clark & Dirkx, 2008). In Boyd's opinion, logic of the soul refers to a situation where all learn; not just the mind, but also everything becomes an entity (Boyd, 1991).

Dirkx appraises the role of emotion as integral, central and holistic in thinking, rationality, learning and building a sense. The decision-making process is not governed only by conscious rationality, but also by the extra-rational hidden in our unconscious – as emotions, subjectivity, memories, images, symbols, imagination, instinct and fantasy. All of these are an autonomous and important part of this process.

In his turn, Brookfield (2000) pinpoints the relation between critical reflection and transformative learning by noting that the first is a necessary condition for the emergence of the second. Transformative learning does not always follow critical reflection, just because we see things from multiple perspectives. More likely, transformative learning occurs when the basic premises governing our thoughts and actions change fundamentally (Brookfield, 2000, p. 143).

Another contribution brought by Brookfield to the theory of transformative learning refers to assuming the – psychological and emotional – risk, which can affect the ones who learn, but also to the ethical responsibility of adult trainers in the process of critical reflection for transformation (Brookfield, 1987, 1990 *apud* Taylor, Cranton et al., 2012).

The different perspectives on transformative learning, developed by numerous scientists from the initial theory elaborated by Jack Mezirow, shows the multitude of possible meanings ascribed to this process: rational and cognitive (Mezirow), imaginative and intuitive (Dirkx), spiritual or individuation-related (Dirkx, Cranton), relational or related to social change (Belenkey & Stanton, 2000 *apud* Taylor, Cranton et al., 2012).

### **Parenting – definition of the concept and researches in the field**

It has been said that parents “create” persons because mothers, fathers and significant others in the child's life influence the development of children in many ways. Direct effects are most obvious. Biological parents contribute directly to the genetic makeup of their children, and parents and others directly shape children's experiences. Parents and others also influence children indirectly by virtue of each partner's influence on the other and their associations with larger social networks (Bornstein & Sawyer, 2005). Parents' beliefs and behaviours influence children and child development via different paths. A common assumption in parenting is that the overall level of parental involvement or stimulation affects the child's overall level of development (see Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

Parents influence their children directly via their genes, beliefs, and behaviours, as well as indirectly via their influences on one another and the multiple contexts they choose for their children. An important aspect in parents' experience is that they remain life-learning adults; they have assumed the social roles and responsibilities of adulthood in their culture (Cranton, 1992). Whether becoming parents, progressing professionally or pursuing new interests, adults continue learning throughout their lifetimes and they continue to modify their

beliefs, their values and their knowledge (e.g. Brookfield, 1986; Cranton, 1992). Moreover, often parents need to cope with stressful situations (disorienting dilemma); they end either in favour of the relationship with the child (they adapt previous beliefs to overcome a new, unknown before situation), or in favour of old habits and beliefs (which means that transformative learning does not occur). Through critical reflection, adults assess whether their assumptions are valid given the new experience; the process tests the justification or viability of assumptions. According to Mezirow (1997), critically reflective thought is central to adult learning and is prerequisite to asking questions and discovering new and better solutions to problems.

Critically reflective thought need to be assumed when parents see that old experiences in relationship with the child are not good enough to resolve a new problem. For instance, how much are parents involved in the child's academic life and how much attention do they pay to the matter? Some parents reproduce attitudes and behaviours seen in their families of origin, while others simply choose to change and they look for alternative solutions and interpretations for the issues they can no longer solve with known methods. Often, social change and its benefits for improving problematic situations are mentioned. The issue is to what extent parents are aware of their role in promoting social change and mostly of the need to change their thought and action pattern. What are the determinants and skills necessary for parents to be open to the process of transforming the relationship with their child?

#### ***Method***

To study parents' involvement in a changing process because they wish to improve the parent/child relationship, I created a questionnaire with 12 open questions (Annex 1). I chose a qualitative measurement instrument to pinpoint the process of transformative learning and starting from Taylor's review (1998). The review posits that all studies in the field are based on qualitative research. The questions of the questionnaire refer to the process of transformation through which parents can go through, caused by a new and problematic experience that requires new skills in order to be solved. Moreover, parents are invited to talk about the factors they believe made them change, but also the factors that prevent other parents from reconstructing and reinterpret the parent/child relationship.

The questionnaire concerns a critical experience in the person's becoming as a parent or in her relationship with the child. Starting from this experience, the following questions concern the way in which parents found a solution (for instance, beliefs/values totally reconsidered, and the necessity of assuming the change by giving up old behaviours situation-solving habits) and the factors that helped them overcome it (perceived social support, spirituality). Furthermore, the respondents are asked about factors that influence the parents who do not make efforts to get involved in the child's life. The last question concerns the parents' opinion on setting up meetings and sharing parenting experiences, in order to make changes in the parent/child relationship.

#### ***Participants***

Respondents are parents of at least one child. All of them are college graduates and they are aged between 27 and 38. They participated voluntarily and only 10 of them completed it seriously.

#### ***Findings***

After analyzing the questions, the crucial event that changed the couple's life is finding out about the pregnancy and mostly the child's birth. One mother added that a disorienting dilemma was the child's teenage years. To cope with this period, the mother started to do some research and read books, but she also contacted other parents who went through the same thing. When explaining the way in which the event changed their life, the common denominator was becoming aware of their new responsibilities. Furthermore, mothers provided a 100% positive answer for perceived social support and for the relation with the divinity (parents, friends, family) to overcome the change brought by assuming the parental role. It is worth mentioning the answers of certain mothers, who reported fewer arguments and discontents within the couple, in favour of the child's well-balanced development; the couple became more powerful, in order to take care of the child.

As for the factors promoting change instead of reproducing old behaviours, mothers reported total identification with the child, love for the child, need to evolve by overcoming the barriers imposed by old beliefs and the wish of having a happy child, not a victim. Mothers believe that other parents fail to change mostly because they do not have time, then because they are ignorant of what the parental duty requires. Other factors are lack of financial resources and lack of a solid education, based on understanding the overwhelming role of parents in child development. It is also worth highlighting that all respondents reported 10 as the importance ascribed to the relationship with the child (on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 showed lack of importance).

The last question referred to the parents' availability on attending various meetings with other parents and sharing their experience. The goal would be assuming the change in the parent/child relationship; all of them answered positively, and some of them underlined that the partner should also be present. These meetings can actually lead to a transformation of parental attitudes and behaviours, by opening to the experiences of others and to new experiences, implicitly. It is still an open matter whether parental resistance to change can be changed and the ways in which they could be convinced to change the parent/child relationship.

#### ***Investigation limits***

This study included mothers with high instruction level. It is still to prove whether mothers or fathers with different social backgrounds have another perception on becoming parents or whether they see the child's birth as a life-changing event, which made them reinterpret their experiences from a different angle.

Another limit is the small number of respondents and the degree to which they understood the item. The questionnaire requires application and validation on a larger sample of subjects and the addition of less general questions.

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### *Annex 1*

#### Questionnaire

There is no wrong or right answer to the following questions. They concern an experience that you had in your capacity of child's parent. Express your opinions sincerely, because this instrument is confidential. Please offer details where you believe it necessary.

- Think of an event related to your becoming as a parent or to your parent/child relationship, of which you believe it changed your life radically. Please specify when it occurred, where and who was involved.
- Explain the way in which this event changed your life.
- Did you cope with change more easily through perceived social support from your significant others? Detail such experiences.
- Has spirituality played any role in this process?
- At that moment, did you question certain beliefs that you previously considered unshakable?
- Following the event, have you changed your mental or other habits? Provide details.
- Have you also felt that your values had been shaken from their foundation?
- Has the new experience made you understand the old experiences differently?
- What do you believe that made you change instead of reproducing old behaviours?
- On a scale from 1 to 10, how important is your involvement in the relationship with the child?
- Concerning parents who do not make efforts to be more presents in the child's life, what are, in your opinion, the factors preventing them from accepting the change?
- Do you believe that parents attending meetings with other parents and sharing their experiences could lead to assuming a change in the relationship with the child?