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## Beyond personal transformation: Engaging students as agents for social change.

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## Beyond Personal Transformation: Review of Literature on Engaging Students as Agents for Social Change

Although Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) has been around for more than 40 years, few studies empirically engage critical theoretical frameworks to move beyond *personal* learning to identify the impacts of transformation on *society*. The purpose of this article is to discuss academic literature that expands TLT in the direction of societal transformation rather than merely personal change. The idea, supported by myriad scholars (Brookfield, 1998, 2002, 2012; Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; O’Sullivan, 1999, 2012), is deeply rooted in my desire to understand what transformational learning moves students toward acting as agents of social change (Gambrell, 2017a; 2017b). As a professor of teacher candidates, I teach several foundational classes that encourage students to be educators to work to dismantle structures that uphold White supremacy, (hetero-)patriarchy, cis-normativity, neoliberalism, linguicism, among other educational injustices.

This article begins with a brief history of TLT which shows that for decades scholars have criticized the desired outcome of personal change of Mezirow’s theory (Baumgartner, 2001, 2012). Following, I explain the process of transformation in order to be able to understand how TLT has both personal and societal possibilities. Next, I synthesize the three paradigmatic underpinnings of TLT: constructivism, humanism, and critical social theory, and outline how critical scholars have argued that personal awareness without social activism reifies existing power structures rather than dismantles it (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Johnson-Bailey, 2012; O’Sullivan, 1999). Finally, I call for a new form of learning, specifically aiming at societal transformation with students as agents of change that I label *critical social transformative learning*.

## **History of TLT: Toward Social Transformation**

Over the last 40 years, Mezirow's (2000) theory of how humans change worldviews has become the most widely used model of adult learning in universities across the United States. However, beginning in the 1990s, critics maintained that Mezirow's version of TLT still did not adequately contextualize or address issues of gender, sexuality, class, and race (O'Sullivan, 1999). In addition, they stated that Mezirow's theory asserted that personal transformation was sufficient, regardless of social transformation. Furthermore, critiques came from postmodernists who argued that Mezirow's focus on a unified self failed to explain the multifaceted, complex nature of humans (Alhadeff-Jones, 2012; Baumgartner, 2012). Also, critics stated that Mezirow's theory reflected White, Western values of individualism, self-direction, and human agency, which is not the case for all cultures (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Ntseane, 2012).

In the early 2000s, Merriam (2004) suggested that although the connected, more integrated, affective parts of transformative learning might be *possible* in less mature minds, the psychological and cognitive capabilities of transformative learning that looked beyond the self often required higher levels of cognition than those possible by young, undergraduate students. Merriam maintained that this level of critical thought is not possible until individuals reach their thirties, or even forties (Merriam, 2004). Additionally, neo-Piagetian constructivist scholars argue that Piaget's age of adolescence might be too early for humans to fully acquire all of the tools for abstract thought (Case, 1992). This is one reason that TLT is considered an *adult* model of education. Baumgartner (2012) also concluded that Mezirow's 1969 grounded theory research to understand how adults understand things differently than children studied of "non-traditional" female college students returning to college after a significant time away. Therefore, the very foundations of this theory is rooted in learners in their 30s through 50s.

In 2000-2012, Mezirow began to address the social context of learning, calling for transformative learning that focused on economic, cultural, political, and educational power within cultural and media narratives, systems, organizations, and workplaces (Mezirow, 2000). However, throughout the past decade, TLT researchers have been looking *beyond* Mezirow for other theoretical orientations of transformative learning (Taylor & Snyder, 2012). For example, empirical research is beginning to indicate that reflective discourse and critical reflection may not be as effective in transforming frames of reference as experience (Baumgartner, 2012). In addition, Johnson-Bailey and Alfred (2006; see also, Johnson-Bailey, 2012) posit that marginalization may be the more powerful transformer than critical reflection. Additionally, Taylor (2007) stated that studies have shown that context may be the most important variable on transformative learning outcomes and called for experimental approaches with different sociocultural variables (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and culture). Moreover, Taylor and Snyder (2012) found that “few studies explore whether there was something unique about the participants’ background, culture, and/or positionality and the experiences in relationship to transformative learning” (p. 40). However, because individuals occupy multiple contexts simultaneously, it is difficult to ascertain the role of the influence of context on transformation within individuals (Crenshaw, 2009). Nevertheless, Baumgartner (2012) asserts that despite the difficulty in teasing out the different variables of marginalization, studies that address sociocultural variables still need to be carried out.

### **TLT Process**

Humans acquire a working knowledge of informal logic, beliefs, natural dispositions and skills for reflection through life experiences, parents, culture, and education before arriving at adulthood (Mezirow, 1998). Usually this system of beliefs, called a frame of reference, is

represented in intentions, morals, feelings, and assumptions that may or may not be completely understood by the individual (Kegan, 2000). According to Brookfield (2012), this system of beliefs, assumptions, perspectives, and worldview govern a person's thoughts in a particular situation. However, the term *transformative* has been overused or misused to the point that any type of learning is called transformative, rendering the word *transformative* nearly meaningless (Tisdell, 2012). Therefore, in the next section I outline what transformative learning means for the purposes of this article, before discussing how transformative learning theory must be moved away from personal transformation toward critical transformation of social power structures.

**Frame of reference.** While definitions of transformation (and how the process unfolds) vary among TLT theorists, the outcome is generally similar: “a deep shift in perspective, leading to more open, more permeable, and better-justified meaning perspectives” (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 3; see also Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow (2012) maintained that we all come to derive meaning from philosophic, economic, social, and psychological systems that take place in our everyday lives. This meaning perspective is the “structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions” (Mezirow, 2012, p. 82). Whether we intentionally or unintentionally incorporate these meaning schemes, they become part of how we see the world and our place in the world. These “socialized ways of knowing” (Taylor & Elias, 2012, p. 152) become what is called a “frame of reference” (Mezirow, 1997, 2000). A frame of reference consists of the mental structures of thoughts and feelings—shaped by social, economic, political, religious, and psychological structures—that help us understand ourselves and our relationships (Baumgartner, 2012).

**Cognitive dissonance.** Frames of reference that may have worked for a child often do not when that person becomes an adult (Mezirow, 2012). Cognitive dissonance occurs when an

individual is confronted with an idea or experience that contradicts prior epistemological assumptions (Ettling, 2006; Mezirow, 1998, 2000). It typically takes a series of cognitive dissonance experiences, accompanied by critical reflection, to bring about a change in a frame of reference leading to a paradigmatic shift (hooks, 1994; Taylor, 2008).

**Incremental transformations.** Much of the TLT literature uses the terms cognitive dissonance and disorienting dilemma synonymously. However, I separate the terms because I believe that the kind of reframing they require leads to different types of transformative learning. While some transformations alter our very being, our core, our sense of self, and how we define ourselves to the world, there are also incremental transformations that happen often—even daily—that transform our frames of reference over time (Tisdell, 2012). In my experience as an educator, these incremental transformations are often the results of dozens or hundreds of encounters with cognitive dissonance (see also, Ettling, 2006). Furthermore, while cognitive dissonance may or may not lead to transformation, a disorienting dilemma often leads to transformation.

**Disorienting dilemma.** As a person works through one (or more) experience(s) that challenge a previous paradigm, inner conflict leads to a “disorienting dilemma,” which *requires* a complete reordering of epistemological assumptions (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22). A disorienting dilemma characteristically results from a major life transition, change in roles or relationships, acute personal or social crisis, death of a loved one, or an intercultural experience (Ettling, 2006; Taylor, 2008). In transformative learning theory, however, a disorienting dilemma is not necessarily a grand scale phenomenon; rather, transformation takes personal, intentional, inward soul searching (Mezirow, 2000). While we have many experiences with cognitive dissonance

throughout our lives, the affective emotions associated with a disorienting dilemma are too intense to reject, ignore, or dismiss (O'Sullivan, 2012).

**Epochal transformations.** Because disorienting dilemmas are often attended by intense emotions, they often lead to epochal transformations. Epochal transformations are dramatic changes that challenge an individual's core identity, worldview, or very sense of who they are (Mezirow, 2012). Epochal transformations invite a person to live more deeply, which cultivates hope in the capacity for personal growth. In addition, emancipation from unsustainable attitudes and behaviors often encourages an individual to make society a better place for others (Tisdell, 2012). Once a person has had an epochal change they never go back to the old way of seeing the world (Mezirow, 2012; O'Sullivan 1999, 2012).

**Critical reflection.** Critical reflection is a mental deliberation process whereby individuals come to understand not only their own pasts, but also social, economic, political, educational, and psychological power systems (Mezirow, 1997). Moreover, critical reflection requires students to understand intentions, purposes, feelings, values, and moral decisions behind what someone means when they communicate an idea (Mezirow, 2000). Ideally, critical reflection of beliefs or ideology leads a person to emancipatory action, making the person whose worldview has been transformed aware of the possibility of being an agent for change (Baumgartner, 2012; Merriam & Kim, 2012).

**Subjective and Objective Reframing.** According to TLT, students transform fixed frames of reference (or construct knowledge) by critically reflecting on assumptions in two different ways (Mezirow, 1998). One is by objective reframing, which involves becoming critically reflective of another person's assumptions in a text, narrative, or premise and then analyzing and redefining the problem (Mezirow, 2012). Objective reframing is the most common

form of transformative learning. Objective reframing involves becoming critically reflective of a text, narrative, or premise, and then analyzing and redefining the problem (Mezirow, 1998).

Another type of transformative learning is "subjective reframing," which focuses on critical reflection one's *own* assumptions and critical examination of the reasons for limited personal frames of reference (Mezirow, 1998). Subjective reframing requires one to look inward rather than outward to see how one's values and beliefs lead to distorted, constrained, or discriminating ways of being (Brookfield, 2002; Mezirow, 2012). Brookfield (1998) argued that it is almost impossible to see the flaws in personal assumptions and likened it to a "dog trying to catch its tail, or of trying to see the back of your head while looking in the bathroom mirror" (p. 197). Therefore, subjective reframing is much more difficult than objective reframing (Mezirow, 1998), and may be too difficult or too painful for younger learners (Merriam, 2004).

**Transformation.** The end goal of transformative learning theory is perspective transformation, the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why personal assumptions have come to restrain how we see ourselves and our relationships and then reframing assumptions to permit a more inclusive frame of reference and then acting on the new perspective (Baumgartner, 2012). This change in worldview involves understanding the cognitive (conscious thoughts), conative (impulse to act), and affective (feelings about) dimensions of one's own frame of reference (Baumgartner 2012).

### **Paradigmatic Underpinnings to TLT**

There are diverse theoretical perspectives that explain why humans transform including spiritual experiences (Dirkx, 2012), ecological awareness (O'Sullivan, 1999, 2012), marginalization (Johnson-Bailey, 2012), a transformative class/instructor (Ettling, 2012), life crises (Mezirow, 2000), awareness of societal power structures (Brookfield, 2012), and

experiencing other cultures through travel/tourism/study abroad (Morgan, 2010). However, most of the literature surrounding transformative learning contains elements of three paradigmatic underpinnings: constructivism, humanism, and critical social theory (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). Transformative learning theory uses a constructivist epistemology, meaning that much of how learning takes place within TLT is based on this constructivist view of knowledge: knowledge exists within people's brain and they interpret experiences by examining, questioning, and revising perceptions based on previous experiences. Next, a humanist axiology shows what values are important within TLT. Humanism posits that humans are inherently good, value personal freedom and autonomy, have a capacity to become self-actualized, and have a responsibility to make their own life better while also improving the conditions of those around them. Finally, a critical social ontology urges individual constructivist epistemology to be tied to political action, thereby creating structures, systems, and institutions that equalize access to healthcare, education, and economic social mobility (Brookfield, 2012). Therefore, TLT is at the intersection of personal and social, which hopefully leads to a greater sense of social accountability and action (Taylor & Snyder, 2012).

**Constructivist epistemology.** The first paradigmatic underpinning of transformative learning is a constructivist epistemology. Epistemology deals with the nature of knowledge and how humans systematically arrive at knowing something (Falk, et al., 2012; Merriam & Kim, 2012; Taylor & Elias, 2012). Liable (2000) called epistemology “a branch of philosophy that investigates the origin, nature, methods, and limits of human knowledge” (p. 686). Epistemology deals not with *what* we know, but *how* we know—our way of knowing (Kegan, 2000). Because transformative learning theory is a *learning* theory, it is essential to understand how theorists operating under this model believe learning is constructed.

Constructivism assumes that there exists no single, objective reality. Rather, in both constructivism and TLT, knowledge is what an individual creates, or constructs, in the mind versus what can be scientifically measured, or what others tell us is right or wrong (Fosnot & Perry, 2005). Matching constructivism's independent construction of knowledge, Mezirow (2012) stated, "As there are no fixed truths or totally definitive knowledge, and because circumstances change, the human condition may be best understood as a continuous effort to negotiate contested meanings" (p.73). Furthermore, Taylor and Elias (2012) postulate that "we do not merely *gain knowledge* and experience as we mature (the *informational* explanation for change and growth); we also *know in a different way* (the *transformational* explanation)" (p. 151, italics in original). Moreover, a defining characteristic of transformative learning that matches constructivism maintains that individuals interpret personal experiences in their own way by examining, questioning, and revising perceptions based on previous experiences (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). In this way, TLT studies the making or remaking of individual meaning (Dirkx, 2012). In a review of empirical studies on TLT from 2006-2010, Taylor and Snyder (2012) noted that a growing body of research suggests that "fostering transformative learning is not a 'one size fits all' approach, but rather it is necessary to consider the individual in a particular context" (p. 45).

Mezirow (2012) argued that all understanding is contextual—dependent on the circumstances, culture, and experiences of the individual. Likewise, Merriam and Kim (2012) claim that, in TLT, reality is how individuals interpret it to be in their minds, meaning there will be *multiple* perspectives, constructions, or interpretations of reality. Similarly, Falk, et al. (2012) posit that the outcomes of transformative learning are highly individual, that learning is a process of constructing meaning, that learning is dependent on context, and that learning is a cumulative

process that happens over many experiences and interpretations of those experiences. Likewise, Taylor and Elias (2012) comment on the complexity of context: “at every moment, we seek to make sense of what goes on around us and within us; however, the process of that sense-making changes as it becomes more complex” (Taylor & Elias, 2012, p. 151).

Knowing *how you know* something to be true also involves awareness of context (Mezirow, 2012). These contextual understandings are one of the reasons Mezirow defends the need for constructive discourse within TLT. He maintained that humans become aware of how we know what we know and the values that lead to our different perspectives by “trying on” (p. 86) another person’s perspective.

Another nuanced version of constructivism in the transformation process is becoming aware of what we *do not know we know*. Cranton and Taylor (2012) assert that we uncritically assimilate perspectives from our social world, community, and culture. These perspectives go unchallenged until we find a situation that contradicts former experiences. Therefore, they maintained that transformative learning happens when an “alternative perspective calls into question a previously held, perhaps uncritically assimilated perspective” (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 8). In this way, we construct narratives or myths around that which we unconsciously construct of our lives, causing meaning-making to involve “unconscious, imaginative, and extrarational processes” (Dirkx, 2012, p. 116). Consequently, transformative learning analyzes, defines, and explains how outward expressions are products of unconscious mental constructs. Similarly, Dirkx (2012) proposed “consciousness always stands in relation to unconsciousness. Whereas consciousness refers to what we know, the unconscious constitutes what we do not consciously know” (p. 118). Thus, TLT helps us develop consciousness, or

become aware of *both* what we display for the rest of the world and what we experience in our brains.

*Constructivist scaffolding and transformative andragogy.* Constructivist teachers are not solely teaching subject matter, giving tests, and transferring knowledge. Rather, they scaffold activities directed at developing the mind of active, rather than passive, learners (Harris & Graham, 1994). Constructivists believe individuals learn through a series of experiences (Dewey, 1910). Both the concept of an active, engaged learner, and the idea of learning through experiences match TLT (Mezirow, 2000). Consequently, in both transformative learning theory and constructivism, education must engage and expand experience.

From a constructivist perspective, negative encounters of oppression, marginalization, and disorienting life crises might be seen as experiential learning rather than an outside person or system imposing external stimuli on an unwilling participant. Thus, Johnson and Bailey (2006) argued that persons from marginalized groups are often aware of unjust societal power structures while individuals from dominant identities may not see ways in which they are privileged. They critiqued TLT in university classrooms, stating that Mezirow's theory is often about how to teach *privileged* individuals about injustice, further centering discussions on Whiteness and patriarchy.

Fenwick (2000) noted that almost all constructivists agree that a "learner is believed to construct, through reflection, a personal understanding of relevant structures of meaning derived from his or her action in the world" (p. 248). This inward mental searching closely matches the transformative learning theory view of critical reflection. In order to "think like an adult" (Mezirow, 2012, p. 73), one must learn to become aware of, and justify—or reframe—personal assumptions. This happens through critical reflection: "The research on transformative learning is ever growing, particularly as a means to frame pedagogy, with explicit practices for fostering

critical reflection, self-efficacy, and an overall constructivist approach” (Taylor & Snyder, 2012, p. 47).

Piaget, a constructivist, saw learning in childhood and adolescence pass through a system of four stages. The final developmental stage, called the formal operational stage, deals with how adolescents learn to develop thought that moves them into adult ways of thinking (Piaget & Inhelder, 2000). Learning, from Piagetian constructivism, requires abstract thought and problem-solving skills. Piaget’s formal operational stage closely parallels Mezirow’s (1998) theory on how critical reflection leads to reframing of underlying assumptions. Transformative learning theory maintains that as individuals move into adulthood, it becomes necessary to develop a more critical worldview in understanding their experiences (Taylor, 2008). Also, Mezirow (1997) declared that transformative learning should foster critically reflective thought through constructs of imaginative problem posing/solving; discourse that is learner-centered, participatory, interactive, and involves group deliberation and group problem solving; and small group discussion. Consequently, an educator scaffolds learning through metaphor analysis, group discussion, learning contracts, group projects, role play, case studies, concept mapping, life histories, participation in social actions, and classroom simulations of real life events, which are consistent with constructivism’s use of scaffolding and focus on lived experience. Moreover, learners are frequently and repeatedly asked to identify the underlying assumptions behind their actions and beliefs as they participate in these activities (Brookfield, 1998; hooks, 1994). Accordingly, these methods encourage discourse and critical reflection, which should bring about a broader, more inclusive worldview (Mezirow, 1997, 1998). Students are encouraged to assess how they know something to be true and the consequences of actions based on such knowledge.

**Humanist axiology.** Transformative learning theory's second paradigmatic underpinning is a humanist axiology (Brookfield, 2012; Pritchard, Morgan, & Ateljevic, 2011). Axiology is the branch of philosophy that deals with what is intrinsically "good" or valued by a person or paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 2003). Humanism was one of the predominant theoretical paradigms in the 1970s when Mezirow's theory was developing, and TLT fits with this philosophy (Baumgartner, 2012). Humanism is based on the following underlying assumptions: (1) human nature is inherently good, (2) individuals are free and autonomous (capable of making major personal choices), (3) human potential for development is virtually unlimited, (4) how individuals view themselves plays a major role in development, (5) individuals desire self-actualization, (6) reality is personally defined, and (7) individuals have responsibility to improve both themselves and others (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). Aligned with humanism, Mezirow (2012) stated that freedom, agency, tolerance, social justice, rationality, and adults' capacity for continual improvement provide essential norms for TLT. Mezirow's belief that a liberated person is free from unwarranted, unjustifiable beliefs or unsupportable attitudes is congruent with humanism. Furthermore, inclusion and egalitarianism are underlying values of both humanism (Bolman & Deal, 2008) and the transformative learning model (O'Sullivan, 1999; Taylor, 2008). Finally, as individuals become increasingly autonomous and reflective, they move toward consciously constructing personal knowledge/assumptions and become increasingly responsible for their actions (which is how humanism works with constructivism mentioned above) (Taylor & Elias, 2012).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs had a strong influence on adult education, but on Mezirow in particular (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). Maslow's self-actualization is deeply embedded within TLT. Mezirow (2012) stated that "hungry, homeless, desperate, threatened, sick, or frightened

adults are less likely to be able to participate effectively in discourse to help us better understand the meaning of our own experiences” (p. 82). Aligned with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, TLT assumes that humans share a need for connectedness, common interest, communication, and to realize learning potential (Mezirow, 2012). Additionally, a humanist axiology presupposes that individuals bring patterns of behavior—both positive and negative—learned in early life to educational settings (Brookfield, 1998). Thus, a humanist imperative is to establish how choices made from these patterns shape social contexts within the classroom (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Moreover, core assumptions underlying individual behavior have strong influence on classroom actions, and are a key component of the transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1998, 2000). Because personal relationships are a key part of humanism, understanding what a student brings into the classroom is necessary for transformative learning (Ettling, 2006).

***Humanism in the transformative classroom.*** TLT’s focus on lifelong learning shows the strong value it places on the humanist core assumption of almost limitless potential for human growth (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). Falk, et al. (2012) identified four distinguishing features of adult lifelong learning within TLT: “the recognition of both informal and formal learning; the importance of self-motivated learning; an emphasis on self-funded learning; and the idea that participation in learning should be universal” (p. 909). All of these characteristics ideally occur in a supportive environment, which also shows TLT’s humanist underpinnings (Baumgartner, 2012). In order to give full support, an educator must be responsible for developing compassion, empathy, and awareness and have the unseen and the voiceless students always present with her or his thoughts, actions, worldview, and especially, in andragogical practices (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006). Therefore, educators must constantly work to become aware of personal

assumptions, paradigmatic underpinnings, and worldview (Mezirow, 2000). Likewise, Ettlting (2006) stated:

What is needed is a series of guidelines that can be held in common by humans everywhere, regardless of race, culture, or societal status. Each of these viewpoints increasingly supports a consciousness on the part of the educator to recognize the dynamic nature of the learning situation and assume the responsibility inherent in a leadership role. (p.61)

Moreover, educators should not attempt to indoctrinate or coerce their students to make changes (Mezirow, 1997; 2012). Rather, they become collaborative learners with their students and encourage their students to do the same with each other (Mezirow, 2000). This vision of teacher and adult student on a similar developmental trajectory toward transformation highlights TLT's underlying value of humanism (Taylor & Elias, 2012).

**Critical social theory ontology.** The third theoretical underpinning to transformative learning is critical social theory ontology. Ontology is the “branch of philosophy that studies the nature of existence” (Liable, 2000, p. 686) or what we believe about the nature of reality (Merriam & Kim, 2012). Cranton and Taylor (2012) maintained that this particular theoretical underpinning may seem misplaced after reading about the theoretical underpinnings of constructivism and humanism. They stated, “when we first come to critical social theory, at first glance there seems to be a serious disconnect with the previous philosophical perspectives” (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 8).

While humanist axiology emphasizes empowerment of individuals, the critical social ontology is organized around power—who has it and who does not (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Furthermore, interdependence, scarcity of resources, divergent interests, and power

relations are realistic and everyday features of educational systems. From a critical social ontology, one comes to understand that governmental, legal, educational, and social systems have been historically designed to oppress, marginalize, and to reinforce White, male, Christian, upper-class, heterosexist patriarchy (Brookfield, 2012). Consequently, discrimination and unfair, biased policies, norms, and practices exist within our educational organizations to an extent that freeing the entire system of inequity will be a slow process if current structural frames remain. Although the original intent of public education was to eliminate oppression, reliance upon educational institutions and organizations that created hundreds of years of systematized repression has not successfully eradicated problems of racism, sexism, heterosexism, ethnocentrism, and classism within schools (Marina & Holmes, 2009; O'Sullivan, 1999). The futility lies in expecting the organizations and systems that created the problem to fix the problem (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Within TLT there exists a tension between individual awareness and societal change, however. The critical social theory stance goes beyond the constructivist goal of understanding a phenomenon and moves to empower *participants* to change *their* lives for the better. Instead, the critical social theory paradigm insists that participants act to improve society, as well. Transformative theorists posit that although reality is multiple (constructivist) it is also highly political, leading to contrasting dynamics of privilege and subjugation (Merriam & Kim, 2012). In order to better understand oppression, critical research draws from critical race, feminist, and queer studies (Merriam & Kim, 2012). Additionally, transformative educators help students understand that capitalist culture conspires against collaborative thinking and teaches individuals to think adversarially rather than collectively (Mezirow, 2000). Moreover, in order to critique and change society, critical social theory maintains that Western democracies are highly unequal

societies where economic disparity, racism, and class discrimination exist, and the dominant meta-narrative perpetuates these inequities as normal, natural, and inevitable (Brookfield, 2012; Cranton & Taylor, 2012).

The individual aspects of TLT (the epistemology) are only the beginning of transformation, however. A critical social theory perspective requires *individual epistemology to be tied to political action*: “to creating structures, systems, parties, and institutions that equalize access to common resources to democratize access” to healthcare, education, and economic social mobility (Brookfield, 2012, p. 136). Therefore, TLT lies at the intersection of personal and social, which should lead to a greater sense of social accountability (Taylor & Snyder, 2012). Consequently, despite critiques to the contrary, TLT has *both* individual and social dimensions (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow (2012) stated, “transformation theory attempts to explain this process and to examine its implications for action-oriented adult educators” (p. 74). Likewise, Brookfield (2012) maintained that the only way to change hegemonic forms of thought and practice is to change the structures and systems that produce and uphold dominant ideologies.

Both TLT and critical social theory challenge dominant ideology, which is the broadly accepted set of values, beliefs, myths, explanations, and justifications that appears to be true and morally desirable to the majority of the populace (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). At the heart of TLT is the idea that we uncritically assimilate beliefs, assumptions, and perspectives as the natural and normal way to act-- even when they are in direct contrast to our own needs/interests (Brookfield, 2012; Mezirow, 2000). Thus, when we realize they are against our own needs/interests, a TLT experience opportunity emerges (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). Additionally, Merriam and Kim (2012) maintained that “some realities are privileged over others and that for

people to be empowered to free themselves from an oppressed state, the power dynamics of any situation must be uncovered and made visible” (p. 61). Furthermore, Mezirow (2004) asserted that arriving at a more inclusive epistemology should transcend the restraints of ideological, political, religious, class, gender, and race constraints. Finally, according to transformative learning theory, in order to be able to understand presuppositions about race, gender, and sexual orientation, it is imperative that all humans recognize that we are all interconnected and connected to the earth (Ettling, 2006).

Mezirow’s theoretical underpinnings also referred to Freire (Baumgartner, 2012; Mezirow, 2000) in that he saw similarities in TLT and Freire’s concept of “*conscientização*” (Freire, 2000, p. 109). However, the differences between Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed and Mezirow’s TLT are in epistemology, or how knowledge is constructed. Freire (2000) saw the village influencing transformation, whereas Mezirow (2000) stated that transformative learning starts from an inward personal disorienting dilemma. Social constructivists, like Freire, see learning as an active social and cultural process whereby a series of multiple interpretations of differing worldviews leads to a *shared* sense of reality (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006). In contrast with constructivism, social constructivists concentrate on how the context of social interactions influences the thoughts and actions of the individual rather than how the mind of the individual perceives reality devoid of social interactions (Freire, 2000). Consequently, constructivism (TLT) describes social interactions as how the mind perceives and responds to them— inward looking out—while social constructivism portrays the lower level biological-mental functions being formed and developed by higher level sociocultural influences—outside forming in (Matusov & Hayes, 2000). Therefore, both Freire and Mezirow had goals of developing awareness and social action, but many scholars would argue that Mezirow’s theory

did not go far enough toward social action (Brookfield, 2012; Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Curry-Stevens, 2007; Johnson-Bailey, 2012; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; O'Sullivan, 1999, 2012; Tisdell, 2012). Likewise, Merriam and Kim (2012) asserted, "For Freire, the goal of education is to become aware, through critical reflection and action (praxis), of the various oppressive forces in the world in order to transform it" (p. 66)—society permeating individual to *collectively* act. In contrast, Mezirow (2000, 2004, 2012) insisted that becoming aware of other viewpoints will eventually lead a person to social action—aware *individual* acting to improve society.

***Critical social ontology in a transformative classroom.*** In order to uncover power dynamics that students bring with them into the TLT classroom, differences of culture, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, language, nationality and disability must be taught to students in a way that allows students to collectively work together for transformation (O'Sullivan, 1999). In transformative learning classrooms, students and teachers are taught to recognize individual and collective strengths. Therefore, transformative educators disrupt hegemony by unmasking power structures, overcoming alienation, teaching liberation, reclaiming reason, practicing democracy, and encouraging rational discourse (Cranton & Taylor, 2012). Hegemony transpires when individuals "embrace (and see as normal) the conditions that serve those in power but work against the people's own interests" (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 9; see also, Brookfield, 2012). Similarly, Cordero and Rodriguez (2009) define hegemony as "the deliberate social, political and economic dominance of a particular group that saturates the consciousness of the nation" (p. 139). While critical exploration can help individuals understand their own pasts (Mezirow, 1997), "critical theory's focus on how adults learn to challenge dominant ideology, uncover power, and contest hegemony is crucial for scholars of transformative learning to

consider if transformative learning is to avoid sliding into an unproblematized focus on the self” (Brookfield, 2012, pp. 131-132).

Transformative educators work to challenge systems of privilege and oppression to create emancipatory learning (Tisdell, 2012). Later qualitative studies of TLT have been less about describing TLT and the nature of it and more about fostering transformative learning (Merriam & Kim, 2012). Indeed, Mezirow (2012) stated: “fostering...liberating conditions for making more autonomous and informed choices and developing a sense of self-empowerment is the cardinal goal of adult education” (p. 90). Therefore, a transformative educator realizes that transformative learning must aim to free educators from unjust power structures that exist between teacher and students and among students. Likewise, Ettlting (2006) argued that transformative learning “implies a deep structural shift in one's consciousness and way of being in the world” and “presumes an authentic, value-based awareness” (p.65).

Educators must come to understand that all educational ideals have political implications (hooks, 1994; Mezirow, 2004). Likewise, Ettlting (2006) stated “issues of race, gender, class, and ethnicity are constituent elements of the learning situation and place ethical demands on the educational process and the educator” (p. 61). She also maintained that the position, perspective and power of the teacher are always present in the classroom, even if she or he is trying to be a moderator or facilitator of discussions. Therefore, differences of culture, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, language, nationality, and disability must be taught to students in a way that allows students to collectively work together for transformation (hooks, 1994; O’Sullivan, 1999).

**Constructivism, humanism, and critical social theory acting together.** Because ignorance of privilege is intrinsically systematized within our educational systems (hooks, 1994;

McIntosh, 1990), individuals occupying positions of privilege and power will have to act first in order to break down existing barriers to equity thereby allowing transformation to come about in classrooms, educational organizations, and society (O'Sullivan, 1999). Therefore, change will be enacted only as *individuals* within educational systems are brought to more inclusive paradigms of understanding of *others* (Mezirow, 2000). Consequently, educators must guide students, other teachers, administrators, and legislators to break free of oppressive policies, practices, systems, and organizations if social change is to take place (O'Sullivan, 1999). Furthermore, transformation will take place only as the educators themselves are brought to more inclusive paradigms of understanding (Mezirow, 2000). From both a humanist axiology and a critical social ontology, it is evident that students are marginalized because of systemic inadequacies to identify racist, heterosexist, and patriarchal underpinnings that public schools have perpetuated (hooks, 1994). Ideally, as students become aware of their own assumptions, not only will they become more comfortable in educational settings, they will also be more productive and successful (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

### **Toward Political/Social Action: Critical Social TLT.**

Over almost 40 years, Mezirow's theory has generated much discussion, research, expansion, and critique (Baumgartner, 2012, Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Nonetheless, the most repeated critique of TLT maintains that it is overly focused on *individual* transformation and does not deal directly with *social* transformation (Tisdell, 2012). Mezirow (2000) asserted that a person must realize that every belief or action benefits some while discriminating against others. However, he also maintained that arriving at a more inclusive epistemology should be independent from ideological, political, religious, class, gender, and race constraints (Mezirow, 2004). It is this political-social neutrality that recent scholars criticize (Brookfield, 2012;

Johnson-Bailey, 2012). Many scholars argue that Mezirow's model of TLT is overly individualistic (Brookfield, 2012), gendered (English & Irving, 2012), raced (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006), self-centered rather than earth-centered (O'Sullivan, 2012), and North American (or Western value)-centered (Ntseane, 2012).

Taylor and Snyder (2012) called for an engagement of theoretical frameworks *beyond* Mezirow's dominant perspective to help create allies for social justice: "It is fundamental to theoretical growth for researchers to draw on multiple conceptions, inclusive of critique, that will potentially lead to a more integral view of transformative learning theory" (p. 42). Additionally, Cranton and Taylor (2012) stated: "despite the exponential growth of transformative learning theoretically, most research today continues to be based on Mezirow's work rather than the newer perspectives" (p. 16). Throughout this paper, I will call this push for greater social action and transformation *critical social transformative learning theory* (critical social TLT).

In order to push TLT toward social transformation, critical social TLT focuses on how North American ideology is saturated with "burgeoning inequalities in income and by pervasive power imbalances that are starkly illuminated through class, race, sexual orientation, gender, and ability" (Curry-Stevens, 2007, p. 33). The dominant North American narrative and ideology educates individuals to believe that capitalist society is organized in their best interest, when the opposite is often true (Solórzano, 1997). This cultural environment permeates powerful institutions, and therefore acts powerfully to maintain distorted personal perspectives (Taylor & Elias, 2012). Brookfield (2012) maintained that if transformation entails a fundamental reordering of the most deep-rooted and paradigmatic assumptions that we hold, a student must be able to "discern how the ethic of capitalism and the logic of bureaucratic rationality push people into ways of living that perpetuate economic, racial, and gender oppression" (p.

134). Consequently, the goal of a critical social TLT educator is not merely personal transformation. Rather, educators who share this worldview help students take action to create a more-fair society by understanding and then *challenging* the reproduction of social, political, and economic domination.

Critical social TLT educators must foster transformation that challenges students to identify dominant ideology, disrupt hegemony, unmask power, and then develop agency to oppose ideological forces that work against their best interests. However, Brookfield (2012) noted that purely individual changes are made possible only when structures, systems, and institutions change. Therefore, he argued that the developed world needs a *societal* disorienting dilemma in order to change culture, ideology, and reified forms of thought. In order to change capitalist culture, critical social educators utilize education, social protest, and social policy advocacy to narrow inequality (Curry-Stevens, 2007). Moreover, educators coming from a critical social TLT perspective focus on transformative education that inspires students to live more deeply rather than merely think more deeply (Tisdell, 2012).

In order to disrupt TLT's individual focus, critical social TLT asks, "Who is granted the opportunity to achieve autonomous thinking? Who is excluded, cast as the Other to be excluded and, by implication, dominated?" (Mezirow, 2012, p. 91). Obvious inequities in social structures influence how one understands experience, especially within classrooms. Moreover, many teachers—especially teachers from historically privileged groups—fail to notice how their own unfair and biased presuppositions about students and learning negatively affect the learning process (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006). Likewise, hooks (1994) noted, "most of my professors were not the slightest bit interested in enlightenment. More than anything they seemed enthralled by the exercise of power and authority within their mini-kingdom, the

classroom” (p. 17). Therefore, it is imperative that educators listen carefully to both what is voiced and unvoiced in the educational context. Consequently, critical social transformative learning theory recognizes those who have been silenced and allows educators to attend more fully to marginalized voices in the classroom (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006).

Curry-Stevens (2007) called Mezirow’s focus on helping learners come to grips with their own power a “pedagogy of the privileged” and stated that through TLT:

White learners can learn about racism, men can understand patriarchy, and ... both upper- and middle-class learners can understand neoliberalism and class exploitation. Unlike popular education, this form of pedagogy is not neutral. Rather, it is counterhegemonic in its goals and works within a framework of praxis, whereby assisting in transformation is linked with becoming an ally in struggles for justice. (p. 34)

It is important to note that educators, college students, travel participants, and workshop attendees are historically members of privileged, rather than oppressed groups. Therefore, this “pedagogy for the privileged” intentionally seeks to “engage privileged learners in workshops and classrooms and to assist in their transformation as allies in the struggle for social justice” (Curry-Stevens, 2007, p. 33).

Another well-cited critique of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory came from Johnson-Bailey and Alfred (2006), who argued that the model largely ignores and fails to fully include culturally-bound and consequently traditionally quiet classroom members (see also Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Tisdell, 2012). Johnson-Bailey and Alfred, as members of marginalized groups, asserted that marginalized members of the class often remain silent and, therefore, invisible from the class discussion. Consequently, the educator’s responsibility, according to Johnson-Bailey and Alfred, is to ensure that marginalized class members have full

access to and fully participate in class discussions (see also, hooks, 1994). Like Mezirow, they agree that full discussion is the key to transformative learning. They asserted that “students bring a wealth of experience and knowledge from their varying histories, contexts, geographies, and biographies. It is [the teacher’s] responsibility to recognize, highlight, and honor their contributions” (p.52). Johnson-Bailey and Alfred, therefore, concluded that educators need to allocate lesson time to specifically invite traditionally marginalized members of society to join the class discussion in ways that are not tokenizing or further underscore their already marginalized status.

### **Critical Framework for Understanding Critical Social TLT**

I finish writing this article on the day after Donald Trump was confirmed by the Electoral College to be the next president of the United States. Trump ran his campaign on a platform of racism, misogyny, xenophobia, ableism, and Islamophobia (Milbank, 2015). Increases in bullying and hate crimes toward members of all of these groups have increased since the election approximately a month ago (Bazon, 2016). I wrote above that constructivism (one of the paradigmatic underpinnings of TLT) looks at how an *individual’s* mind perceives and responds to social stimuli, while social constructivism sees the lower level biological-mental functions being *formed* and *developed* by sociocultural influences (Matusov & Hayes, 2000). This is more closely related to Freire’s (2000) *social constructivist* concept of “*conscientização*,” wherein he describes society framing transformation, rather than Mezirow’s (2000) view of transformation commencing from an inward personal disorienting dilemma. In a post-Trump-election-age it has become even more imperative for teachers to move toward a *shared* sense of reality wherein all voices are heard and valued (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006). It would be impossible to separate the current bullying and bigotry as individual acts based constructed in

individual minds in a vacuum void of the current political and media moment of President-elect Trump. Therefore, transformative learning toward social inclusion may not be classical TLT in Mezirow's constructivist sense, but rather a socio-cultural shift in epistemology due to newfound, *shared* values that permeate student and teacher co-consciousness.

Although TLT was created from a grounded study more than 40 years ago, a critical research perspective is beginning to have a major presence in TLT (Merriam & Kim, 2012). I believe Mezirow intended TLT to move *individuals* toward critiques of capitalistic society. However, power relationships between instructor and students, and researcher and participants, must be examined in order to move to the critical social TLT discussed by recent scholars (Brookfield, 2012; O'Sullivan, 2012). Additionally, the post-Trump-election era mandates a growing urgency to develop co-constructed social understandings that highlight and promote the experiences of traditionally sidelined classroom voices (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006). However, because transformative learning theory is not a political theory, it makes a poor framework for analyzing political systems, institutions, and organizations that impact transformation (Taylor & Snyder, 2012). Therefore, another framework must be used to critique policies that affect educators' capacity to carry out transformative learning activities in a classroom. Furthermore, many TLT researchers assert that a race-centric perspective like Johnson-Bailey and Alfred called for can be effectively used in TLT (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Taylor & Snyder, 2012; Tisdell, 2012).

Moving forward, scholars must move beyond Mezirow toward a deliberate and conscious strategy to employ a political framework like activism or consciousness raising within TLT (Taylor & Snyder, 2012). Emancipatory research shows a critical stance that seeks to not only understand a person; rather, it analyzes the power dynamics of a situation and critiques the status

quo, and seeks to empower participants to transform society. Therefore, critical race theory, feminism, critical ethnography, and participatory action research fall into this category (Merriam & Kim, 2012). Likewise, Mezirow argued, “it is essential to seek out and encourage viewpoints that challenge prevailing norms of the dominant culture in matters of class, race, gender, technology, and environmental protection” (p. 79). Consequently, more empirical analysis is necessary to engage theoretical frameworks *beyond* Mezirow’s dominant perspective to motivate participants toward social action (Taylor & Snyder, 2012). More importantly, I recommend that future studies be conducted to continue to focus on how race, gender, sexuality, cultural identity, language, and other socio-cultural variables impact critical social transformation.

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