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What can the ‘transpersonal’ contribute to transformative research?

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Abstract

Since Mezirow, there has been considerable research into transformative learning. However the research methods generally used have been of the same kind that are drawn on to inquire into any area of interest. A key aim of this journal is to explore the transformative possibilities of research, and in the process to investigate creative methods which are expanding and transforming our understanding of what constitutes valid research in a postmodern world. In this context, where the assumptions and worldview of classical Newtonian science are being fundamentally challenged, the idea of the ‘transpersonal’ is receiving increasing attention, particularly within the field of psychology. This paper explains the origins of interest in the transpersonal, and provides an introduction to some emerging research methods which accept the idea of the transpersonal as valid. It concludes with the recognition that for many it will require a transformative shift in thinking and beliefs to accept a transpersonal worldview. However recent findings suggest that engaging in research which is accepting of this worldview can be truly transformative in its outcomes for the researcher, the research participants, and for the reader.

Keywords: transformative research, transpersonal, transformative learning.

Setting the context: The concept of 'transformative learning'

The concept of transformative learning was introduced in 1978 by Jack Mezirow, as a consequence of a study he was undertaking into women who returned to community college to continue their education. Mezirow observed that, as they became more aware of their personal, social and cultural histories, there was a consequent growth in their ability to critically evaluate and modify their assumptions and expectations of learning. He defines transformative learning as a 'process of exploring, assessing, and working to change limiting frames of reference and habits of mind'. (Mezirow, 2000, p.233). A later definition by Morrell & O'Connor says that transformative learning involves 'a deep structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world'. (2002, p. xvii)

Since the 1970s, research into transformative learning has thrived. Taylor (1997) undertook a critical review of the studies undertaken since it was introduced. He discovered that most of the published work was theoretical in nature. The empirical work that had been undertaken had been produced mainly by doctoral students in unpublished dissertations, meaning that there had been little in-depth exploration as to its practical applications: how, for example, teachers might foster transformative learning in their classrooms, a gap that Taylor thought needed addressing.

In an update of his review, Taylor (in Mezirow, 2000, pp. 287-315) continued to argue for a development of thinking around transformative learning. This included a call to conceptualise transformative learning more holistically, placing greater emphasis on the

importance of feelings, the significance of relationships, and the role of the collective unconscious in looking beyond the self and recognising others.

Despite Taylor's recognition that there needed to be a broader understanding of transformative learning, there was no indication that there should be a similar shift in relation to the research methods used. His discussion on future directions of research (ibid, pp. 315-323) focused mainly on well-established ideas, including more investigation into theoretical comparisons with other models of learning, identifying variables that affect the process of transformative learning, and an exploration of how transformative learning can be cultivated with students. He does introduce the idea of designing more 'innovative' methods (ibid, p. 323) such as longitudinal collaborative studies, and action research as a means of bringing transformative learning into the classroom. However, although such methods may be innovative relative to those generally used in the field of transformative learning, there is an implicit acceptance of the assumptions that traditionally underpin research activities. Unlike his exposition on the development of transformative learning, Taylor makes no reference to feelings, relationships, or the collective unconscious of the researcher having a relevance in the creation of new knowledge.

A similar situation is evident with other writers. For example, King (2004), a committed researcher of transformative learning, also sought to widen the range of methods used. One project involved her facilitating a collaborative inquiry with an international group of adult educators, who researched their experiences following the attacks on the New York World Trade Centre in 2001. However, although the research process resulted in transformational learning for the participants, the research methods themselves were familiar and well-

tested, including theoretical analysis, questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, and personal narrative.

King (2009) developed her work in a book which includes in its title: *Handbook of the Evolving Research of Transformative Learning*. In this she advocates a multi-method approach to researching and enhancing transformative learning. Although her examination of the subject is detailed and broad-ranging, she is in essence presenting herself as an 'expert' who is offering tools she has developed, which others can use. As with Mezirow and Taylor's work, it is written from a traditional western perspective. Building on the work of Miles and Huberman (1994), she develops the idea of a 'transformative journey' which leads to 'perspective transformation'. This again, though, is discussed only in relation to the learning of the participants. There is no suggestion that the researcher herself might engage in a transformative journey through reviewing her ideas and assumptions about research.

One assumption that might be reconsidered, for example, is the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the research participants. It has been asserted that the conventional academic world does not question the idea of 'separateness' between the two, because of its deeply entrenched commitment to a Newtonian scientific paradigm (Wallace, 2000). A central element of this paradigm is its view of the world as consisting of living beings and inanimate objects which are individually delineated by their physical fixed boundaries, and separated by empty space. Many researchers, although interested in transformative learning, continue to work within a Newtonian worldview without questioning the assumptions and beliefs that underlie it. If researchers are to experience a

‘a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions’ (Morrell & O’Connor, 2002, p. xvii) in relation to their research activities, then they may well learn what this means through looking at the research findings of those who have inquired into transformative learning. They could, for example, consider the implications for their research practice, if they were to pay attention to Mezirow, and ‘question their existing frames of reference’ and ‘habitual ways of thinking’, through ‘trying on another’s point of view’ (Mezirow, 2000, p. 21). One means of doing this could be to look at the work of transpersonal theorists, and consider how their ‘point of view’ might influence the research process.

Transformative research

The term ‘transformative research’ has a more recent provenance than transformative learning, and to date has received relatively little attention. It was introduced as a specific way of identifying, gaining and applying knowledge. One writer, Mertens (2009) presented a ‘transformative paradigm’ as a major influence on contemporary research methodologies. Within this paradigm, she describes a group of approaches, which include feminist, Freirean, participatory, emancipatory and critical theory. She states that she chose the term ‘transformative’ to emphasize that ‘the agency for change rests in the persons in the community working side by side with the researcher toward the goal of social transformation’ (p.8). At an earlier stage, Guba and Lincoln had said that the aim of inquiry for those working within a transformative paradigm was:

..the critique and transformation of the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender structures that constrain and exploit humankind, by engagement in confrontation,

even conflict....The inquirer is cast in the role of instigator and facilitator, implying that the inquirer understands a priori that transformations are needed. (1994, p.113)

These writers are seeing transformative research as a means of achieving change at a community and institutional level. However transformation can also take place on a personal level; and indeed the argument can be made that transformation at any level has to begin with transformation of the individual (Walton, 2008). Anderson and Braud (2011) have written about 'transforming self and other through research', where they say that being part of, or learning about a research project can lead to greater self-awareness, enriched psycho-spiritual growth and development, and other changes of major importance to the individuals involved. They maintain these kind of transformations are connected to the wider political, social and cultural transformations advocated by Mertens, and Guba and Lincoln, but involve different processes.

The most significant element of transformative research as explained by Anderson and Braud (2011) is the fact that they see transpersonal research methods as being central. The introduction of the transpersonal is also relatively new within human science research. The next section provides a brief historical overview.

The significance of the transpersonal for transformative research

A definition of 'transpersonal' is 'of, denoting, or dealing with states or areas of consciousness beyond the limits of personal identity' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2014). Accepting that there are states of consciousness that exist beyond the individual is not usual within conventional research. Anderson and Braud explain why they think the transpersonal has been a neglected concept:

By copying the objectivist and positivist views of the physical scientists (who are now abandoning that model themselves) and owning radical positivism and psychological behaviourism as the epistemological imprimatur, psychologists and other human scientists have ignored and even trivialised vast realms of fascinating human experiences (2011, p.3). Vich (1988) charts early uses of the term 'transpersonal'. Its first appearance is attributed to William James in a 1905 lecture at Harvard University. He created the idea of 'radical empiricism', a theory of knowledge which states that you should study only that which is based in experience; but that you can include anything that is directly experienced. The implication is that it is acceptable to research subjects that would normally be excluded by conventional science, such as subconscious processes and spiritual experiences. Carl Jung, disaffected by Freud's theories of sexuality, engaged in his own exploration of the unconscious, and the spiritual dimension of human consciousness. Scotton et al (1996) identify four key areas where Jung has contributed to ideas of the transpersonal:

1. The belief that psychological development should include growth to higher levels of consciousness.
2. The idea that the transcendent exists within and is accessible to each individual.
3. The willingness to explore the wisdom traditions of other cultures for insights relevant to clinical work.
4. The recognition that personal healing and growth often result from states of consciousness that cannot be understood by rational explanation.

In the 1940s and '50s, with the emphasis on experimental science and behaviourism, there was minimal academic interest in the wider reaches of human experience. However in 1967, a small group of people interested in humanistic psychology including Maslow (1969), Sutich (1968) and Grof (1972), came together in California, with the express aim of creating

a new psychology that would honour the full range of human experience, including different states of consciousness. They agreed to call this new discipline ‘transpersonal psychology’, and started the Association of Transpersonal Psychology (Exploring the Transpersonal, 2014) and the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology (ibid), both of which are still flourishing. Despite this, and the fact that some universities are recognising it is a field of growing interest (for example, Masters programmes in Transpersonal Psychology have been offered at Liverpool John Moore’s University, UK, for a number of years), it still does not gain much attention from the academic community.

The resistance of the academic world to the transpersonal

A major reason for the transpersonal being so little accepted in the academic world, is that the dominant culture of the Academy has been shaped by views and beliefs that are intrinsically very narrow when located within a historical and global context. The influence of a Newtonian paradigm, introduced earlier in this paper, has been clearly explained by Wallace (2000). Since the 18th century, when Newton’s scientific findings challenged and displaced religion as the means of gaining knowledge about reality, a worldview based on scientific materialism has dominated western culture. Scientific materialism specifies that the physical world is the only reality, which originates from impersonal natural forces, devoid of any intrinsic moral order or values. There is no place, for example, for intangible spiritual dimensions of reality in this worldview. Wallace explains:

Life in general, and human life in particular, has no meaning, value, or significance other than what it attributes to itself. During the course of an individual’s life, all one’s desires, hopes, intentions, feelings, and so forth – in short, all one’s experiences and actions – are

determined solely by one's body and the impersonal forces acting upon it from the physical environment. (2000, p.160)

This view of the world and humanity is presented as having been proven scientifically, supported by empirical evidence, and obvious to any 'rational' thinking person (Dawkins, 2011). However what is increasingly evident is that these assertions form a dogma, which once accepted is difficult to displace. The academic world, having been subject to this dogma over a long period of time, is having difficulty coming to terms with the increasing range of evidence which suggests we need to open up to and investigate a more expanded worldview.

One factor that does not help achieve a more inclusive methodological paradigm is the cultural imperialism (Said, 1994) that was evident in the west as it engaged in its global colonial expansion. This continues to exist in the form of a sense of superiority in the methods that it uses for understanding the nature of reality. It could be contended that it is this implicit sense of superiority that has contributed to the resistance of academic institutions to be open to different ways of knowing. And yet, there is no evidence-based, rational explanation for being hostile to the view that we might gain a different, but none-the-less valid, understanding of reality from an exploration of our inner feelings, intentions and what we experience as meaningful; and no evidence to deny the possibility of spiritual dimensions to life, which cannot be accessed and understood by employing traditional research methodologies.

This point is being recognised by an increasing number of people, who realise that there may be more to life than is indicated by scientific materialism. One of the greatest

influencing factors in this shift in thinking are the findings that are coming from within science itself, particularly from quantum physics. For example, physicist John Bell (1987) demonstrated that quantum mechanics is incompatible with the idea that there is an underlying reality which contains separate physical parts linked only by causal dynamical relationships. This understanding of the quantum world intimates that matter is not in fact the primary constituent of reality, but is a 'potentiality' within the quantum domain. An implication is that reality exists ultimately as a unity in which everything is intrinsically interconnected; and our sensual perception of 'separateness' in the external world is an illusion. Such a perception can be difficult to hold in our consciousness given its unfamiliarity in conventional western thinking; but it is a perception that is being progressively supported by new findings in science.

A further challenge to scientific materialism is presented by the many spiritual, religious and indigenous traditions that exist around the globe. The western world has become more aware of Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism and Hinduism in recent decades; but there are hundreds, possibly thousands of wisdom philosophies and practices that exist worldwide, any one of which may have something important to offer our search for knowledge of ourselves. Who knows how our lives and understanding may be enriched by engaging with the experiences and insights of different cultures living with different worldviews and ways of knowing? Again, for those of us living in mainstream western industrialised societies, we need to remember the imperialist culture that has informed our 'developed' world, and carefully scrutinise its effects on our own individualised beliefs and ways of living.

In this paper, I am not seeking to promote one way of knowing, nor one worldview, over and above any other. What I am proposing is that we need, collectively, to show more humility in relation to what we claim to know and not know; and in our search for knowledge, we need to be 'open to possibilities' as to the nature of ourselves and of reality. If we are to discover that of which we are fully capable, we must explore different ways of knowing, even if they overturn our existing belief systems.

If we find this difficult to do, the first stage is to remind ourselves that each of us has been subject to the socialising processes of the culture in which we have been brought up. Then, if we realise we are resistant to an alternative way of seeing the world, we need to question ourselves as to why? What messages have been given to me from within my culture which lead to me having difficulty in being open to different worldviews? We as researchers will need to question our existing belief systems concerning what counts as valid research, and revisit from a personal perspective Morrell and O'Connor's ideas of 'transformative learning', in order to open ourselves up to 'a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions' (op.cit).

My contention is that in privileging only certain ways of knowing, and by ignoring or devaluing others, we are limiting what we can learn about what it means to be human. To test out other methods of research that assume a transpersonal perspective does not mean that we have to commit to a belief in wider realities than the material; it just asks that we be open to the possibility of them, and in researching in a planned and systematic way, we should be able to gather evidence that either supports or negates each possibility. As Braud

and Anderson suggest: 'We need an imaginative, even outlandish, science to envision the potential of human experience and awareness, not just more tidy reports' (1998, p.xxvii)

Transpersonal methods for transformative research

Anderson and Braud in their 2011 book *Transforming Self and Others Through Research: Transpersonal Research Methods and Skills for the Human Sciences and Humanities*, are building on earlier work by Braud and Anderson (1998), in advocating for research to include inner experiences which are not observable by an external observer. They do not diminish the value of traditional research methodologies, and are clear that their intention is to add to and complement these, rather than replace them. There is a continuing emphasis on the need for methodological pluralism, where researchers from a range of disciplines including the social sciences, natural sciences, humanities and arts, can engage in individual and collaborative approaches to generating knowledge that will address issues of global concern. Their commitment to research that is of social value is consistently emphasised, their fear being that 'academic inquiry will become increasingly sidelined from the global discourse that resolves real problems' (2011, p.303).

They explicitly express a vision for research and scholarship which recognises the reciprocal interaction of the individual, collective and global; and refer to the deep interconnectedness of these, which is evidenced not only by quantum physics but also by diverse wisdom traditions. This means that there are benefits whether one studies on a small scale or on a large scale:

..one does not really leave the study of one's immediate community or the global community when one studies individual inner experience, and this can be useful, especially if motivated by a concern for its relevance to the collective, and to end goals and values (ibid, p.305)

Anderson and Braud emphasise the transformative possibilities for all involved in the inquiry process, including the researcher, participants, audience, colleagues, and others connected to the project. They state that this transformation may be experienced through increased self-awareness, enhanced psycho-spiritual development, and a qualitative shift in worldview. Such transformative shifts can be recognised by 'changes in one's body, feelings and emotions, ways of thinking, forms of expressions, and relationships with others and with the world' (ibid, p. xvii).

As examples of transpersonal methods that can be used, Anderson and Braud develop in detail three approaches which they have used in many contexts and which are well proven to have transformative outcomes. These are entitled intuitive inquiry, integral inquiry and organic inquiry. **Intuitive inquiry** is based on a belief that there are 'direct and embodied ways of knowing' (ibid, p.20) which are felt before coming to any intellectual interpretation of what has happened. There is a recognition that some kind of lived experience takes place before the rational mind takes over, and that it is important to connect with that initial perception. The contention is that with practice, individuals can learn to witness these perceptions, and integrate them with other ways of knowing. As with other transpersonal methods, it is understood that intuitive perception can help achieve richer forms of understanding when used to complement processes such as analytical reasoning and information gained from the conventional five senses.

Intuitive inquiry contains five iterative cycles that create a complete hermeneutic circle of interpretation. These are: a) engaging in an imaginal dialogue in order to clarify the research topic; b) researching literature across diverse disciplines and sources that help the inquirer to articulate her personal values, assumptions and prior understanding of the research topic; c) gaining data from sources that best suit the researcher's unique interest in the study, using intuitive processes and insights to help them determine what these are; conventional research methods using a mix of qualitative and quantitative data can be used whenever it is felt they can make a useful contribution to the research topic; d) transforming and refining the findings as a consequence of interpretation of the data; e) integrating the results of the inquiry with the initial literature search.

Throughout this process, the researcher is honouring her own voice and intuitive perceptions, using a range of imaginal and creative processes, sensory awareness, and empathic identification, to provide an added dimension to understanding the topic being studied which would not be achieved solely by using conventional research methods.

The second method, **integral inquiry**, deliberately sets out to integrate three main areas normally kept separate. Firstly, the researcher aims to generate knowledge for the discipline she is representing, for the educational or other benefits of the research participants, and for the psycho-spiritual growth and possible transformation of the researcher, research participants, and eventual readers of the report. Secondly, attention is paid to subjective experiences relevant to the topic of inquiry, their history and conceptualisation, the processes that help or hinder the unfolding of the experiences, and the outcomes for the researcher and others affected by the research. Thirdly, the inquirer will use many forms of

knowing which may be diverse in nature, and may include tacit, intuitive, body based, and feelings-based methods, as well as more conventional methods grounded in analysis, narrative or creative forms of visual presentation.

The intention is to blend qualitative and quantitative forms of knowing in a way that evidences that unique contribution of an integrated approach towards a more inclusive understanding of human experience. It encourages the tailoring of a unique blend of methods to suit the purpose and topic of the study; and encourages a wide range of styles of presenting data and findings to suit different audiences.

The third method Anderson and Braud expand on is that of **organic inquiry**. This approach is termed 'organic' because it is seen as a living process where information and transformation are viewed as inseparable through an integration of thought, sensations, feeling and intuition. The method has been developed specifically for those interested in researching and experiencing psycho-spiritual growth, initiated by the researcher's personal connection to the topic, where the researcher 'becomes the subjective instrument of the research, working in partnership with liminal and spiritual influences'. (ibid, p. 131).

Organic inquiry is based on bringing together in-depth narratives of both the initiator and the participants in the research. A final aim, and a criterion for validation, is that the results of the research, including individual and group narratives, are told in a way that has a transformative effect not just on the participants, but on those who read the final writings or who are exposed to the research findings.

Conclusion

This paper has explored transformative learning, transformative research, and transpersonal research methods, in their own right, and in relation to each other. The claim has been made that research into transformative learning has generated knowledge about processes that lead to the transformation of learners. However there is no indication that the same processes have been applied to the research methods that are used, nor that the researchers have been transformed as a consequence of their own inquiries.

The early literature on transformative research has focused on the transformation of social, political and cultural structures, and the emancipation of communities, but with little attention paid to the individual. It is only since the introduction of transpersonal psychology that there has been firstly, a fundamental challenge to the worldview which assumes a separation of the researcher and researched; secondly, the development of a worldview which supports the idea of an underlying unity to reality, an emphasis on the importance of inner as well as outer worlds, and a belief in the interconnection of individuals with each other and the wider world; and finally, the creation of research methods to explore the validity of this worldview.

It is my contention that we urgently need to review the research methods we use, and the issues we choose to research. The discoveries that have been made based on a combination of a belief in scientific materialism and the scientific method have been great, producing incredible achievements such the Apollo Moon programme, the Large Hadron Collider and MRI scanners. However the materialist worldview, and research methods based on the assumptions underpinning it, have not produced a just or peaceful society. They have not produced a sustainable world or a stable and fair global economy where

everyone is fed, cared for and educated. War is as prevalent today as it has ever been in the history of humankind, with technological progress and sophistication being used in the murder and maiming of civilians. Famine and disease kill millions of people each year. So, while the achievements that are a consequence of the progress of science can be commended by those living in material comfort, it is important to remain aware that the suffering of countless numbers of people continues, and the problems of mental health, exploitation, drug addiction and poverty exist even in wealthy countries. The Academy has so far failed to develop ways of knowing and research methods that enable us to make an appropriate response to these issues.

There is an urgent need to radically evaluate the research methods we use, and to create new and transformed research methods which will address, at an individual and collective level, the urgent social, ecological and economic crises that threaten our human existence. The aim of this journal is to open up an informed and scholarly dialogue about what these methods might be, based on accounts of research where the objective has been to realise the transformation, not just of research participants, but also of the researcher and all those affected by the research process. The purpose of this paper is to make an initial contribution to this dialogue. My hope is that you, the reader, will be inspired to think about how you might actively contribute, by planning, participating in, and presenting the outcomes of transformative research relevant to your own life and practice.

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