

# **What is critical in transformative learning theory? A critical review of the research on transformative learning in intercultural contexts (1990–2020)**

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**Abstract:** Intercultural contexts provide richer socio-political environments for the fostering of critical reflection for transformation, but no known critical review has been dedicated to examining how research demonstrates the connection. Hence, our critical review answers the following questions: (a) How is transformative learning theory used to explain adult learners' engagement in critical reflection on their first and second culture? (b) To what extent is critical reflection used to foster transformative learning that challenges the second culture? We critically analyzed 15 intercultural transformative learning studies published between 1990 and 2020. Emerging results showed that only 8 studies regarded the process of critical reflection, and the process was not significantly used to foster transformative learning that challenges the second culture's assumptions. Empirical research is needed in the perspective of critical pedagogy which is not only about questioning the self but also about questioning the other.

**Keywords:** perspective transformation, critical reflection, cross-cultural contexts, migration

## **Introduction**

The evolution of transformative learning has enjoyed some significant critical reviews (e.g., Taylor, 1997; Taylor, 2007; Taylor & Snyder, 2012; Taylor & Laros, 2014). Most of the reviews mostly covered various specific timelines but did not focus on specific fields or contexts. Intercultural contexts, whether migration, traveling, study, business, or any other transcultural, cross-cultural, and multicultural interactions—organized or informal—deserve special attention. In response to some earlier critics of transformative learning theory (TLT), Mezirow (1994) states that transformative learning does not have to include “a critique of society or of social organization” (p. 228). However, with the increased tendency to shift the utility of adult learning towards the neoliberalist extreme (Guo, 2010), TLT is useful as a two-edged sword in intercultural studies. Otherwise, learners are burdened with the guilt of inadequacies and consequent compulsion to align their perspectives with the worldviews of the second culture without sufficient humanistic scrutiny. Despite the uniqueness of the connection between transformative learning and intercultural contexts, no known critical review has been dedicated to examining how research demonstrates the connection. Hence, the questions that this critical review answers are: (a) How is TLT used to explain adult learners' engagement in critical reflection on their first and second culture? (b) To what extent is critical reflection used to foster transformative learning that challenges the second culture?

## **Transformative Learning Theory**

Paulo Freire's critical philosophy is one of the key pillars of Jack Mezirow's TLT. Freirean critical pedagogy is for social change and Mezirow also acknowledges the role of the transformative adult educator in helping learners learn to think for themselves towards social action/change (Mezirow 1994; 2000). Although TLT focuses on the individual, Mezirow

emphatically indicates the usefulness of TLT for social change by stating that there is a reciprocal relationship between democratic theory and transformation theory (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow foresees that TLT can lead to the development of emancipatory autonomy in adults toward greater understanding and assessing of the assumptions underlying their and the other's beliefs. This principle can be used in an anticipatory mode for perspective transformation in the sense that learners do not only challenge the worldviews that they are used to but also the worldviews that a new culture might present to them.

## **Methodology**

Fifteen studies that were selected for this critical review are peer-reviewed articles and dissertations/thesis that (a) deal with the subject(s) of migration, intercultural learning, and/or transcultural experiences within national or transnational spaces, (b) are explicitly pivoted on the Mezirow's TLT, with or without any other theory, and (c) indicate or not indicate any objective bothering on critical reflection/pedagogy in their titles/purposes. Based on these criteria, relevant studies were retrieved from online databases. Scores of items were found relevant and the findings in this article are emerging results from our ongoing research.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The studies focused on various purposes and deployed various methods and cut across varied intercultural contexts.

### ***Critical Reflection Definitions and Processes***

Studies reviewed can be grouped into two based on if they regard the role and process of critical reflection in their empirical inquiries or not. Only seven of the 15 studies indicated how the participants engaged in reflection mainly by journaling and blogging (reflective practices) (Senyshyn & Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2009; Addleman et al, 2011; Addleman et al, 2014; Teran, 2016; DeCapua et al, 2018; Phillips, 2019; Chwialkowska, 2020). Taylor (1994) viewed self-assessment in terms of non-reflective and reflective cognitive orientations. Only Addleman et al (2014) reported a robust process for critical reflection. The stimulator role played by the researchers in Addleman et al (2014) and Teran (2016) appear to align with the model of critical reflection that includes a preliminary phase of acknowledging the unconscious assumptions followed by the identification of willingness and readiness to consider alternative perspectives (Cranton, 2002). This approach was to "maximize critical reflection through cultural engagement" (Addleman et al, 2014, p. 198). Surprisingly, one of the seven studies that did not detail the critical reflection phase/component was a study that promised to explore how migrants "manage the self" (Webb, 2018). Within the framework of Mezirow's TLT, paying attention to critical reflection or at least self-reflection is central to managing the *self* (Mezirow, 1990, 2000).

### ***Critical Reflection Results***

A study reports that learners' non-engagement in critical reflection limited their transformative learning (Chwialkowska, 2020). Studies showed results of critical reflections in one, some, or all the research subjects indicating bases for a course of action and fostering of perspective transformation based on the critical questioning of their worldviews (Taylor, 1994; Senyshyn & Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2009; Addleman et al, 2011; Addleman et al, 2014; Teran, 2016; Phillips, 2019). These studies cared less about if the learners wanted to challenge perceived assumptions of the second culture. Addleman et al (2011) reported a participant that expressed "I find myself somewhat divided". This seems a subtle way of challenging an

assumption of the other. Detailing the traveler-learners' negative experiences of unease and dangers that were caused by the local cultures, Phillips (2019) had the opportunity to explore the possibilities of how the participants learned by also critically challenging the assumptions of the second culture.

## Conclusion

Our critical review shows that assessing and reporting critical reflection in TLT-framed studies is still a challenge for researchers in the field (Taylor, 2017). It also shows that even in intercultural studies of transformative learning, the scope of critical reflection is not being extended for challenging the second culture. Empirical research is needed in this respect in the perspective of critical pedagogy which is not only about questioning the self but also about questioning the other.

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