

Typical Phases of Transformative Learning: A Practice-Based Model

Adult Education Quarterly
2015, Vol. 65(1) 35–49
© The Author(s) 2014
Adult and Continuing Education
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0741713614558582
aeq.sagepub.com



Arnd-Michael Nohl¹

Abstract

Empirical models of transformative learning offer important insights into the core characteristics of this concept. Whereas previous analyses were limited to specific social groups or topical terrains, this article empirically typifies the phases of transformative learning on the basis of a comparative analysis of various social groups and topical terrains. In contrast to the models proposed by Mezirow and others, the typology of five phases used in the present article underpins the incidental character of the beginning of transformative learning and accords a different meaning to crises and dilemmas—and to reflection. These empirical results point to the practical basis of transformative learning and necessitate revisions of its theory.

Keywords

transformative learning, phase, practice, typology, empirical reconstruction

Since the first publication on transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978), the concept has become a pivot of discussion in adult education, inspiring a broad range of scholars and adult educators in the United States and elsewhere. Transformative learning has been scrutinized in formal, nonformal, and informal contexts, and respective research was conducted on various subjects and different social groups (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Because transformative learning is defined as a process in which the “meaning perspective,” including “thought, feeling and will” (Mezirow, 1978, p. 105), fundamentally changes, understanding how these processes evolve over time is crucial.

¹Helmut Schmidt University, Hamburg, Germany

Corresponding Author:

Arnd-Michael Nohl, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Helmut Schmidt University, Holstenhofweg 85, Hamburg 22043, Germany.
Email: nohl@hsu-hh.de

Although many scholars, including Mezirow, proposed models that depict a certain course of phases in transformative learning, their empirical basis was limited to specific social groups of learners and/or narrow fields of learning. Therefore, this article proposes for discussion a model of transformative learning empirically grounded in the analysis of *several* social groups and *across* various topical terrains. This broad empirical analysis allows for new insights into the course of transformative learning and, using these empirical findings, the formulation of new research questions. Most important, the proposed model of phases in transformative learning points to the incidental and, at times, even casual mode in which the process is started on the basis of new practices and to the different meaning of disorientation and reflection. Although Mezirow and many other scholars of transformative learning have been concerned with formal and nonformal education, the typical phases carved out in this article were empirically identified in informal learning processes. The article starts by discussing the empirical basis of models for the transformative learning process. After a brief introduction to the methods and scope of the analysis, an empirical model of the typical phases in transformative learning is proposed. Finally, the theoretical import of these findings is discussed and new research questions are posed.

Transformative Learning Models

Jack Mezirow developed the very concept of transformative learning and his respective phase model on the basis of his research on women who, after a longer period of homemaking, reentered college. As he maintained, the transformative learning process in question started with a disorienting dilemma, such as “the prospect of an empty nest” after the children leave home (Mezirow, 1981, p. 8). He then included a series of the following “elements” (p. 7) that in a later publication were termed *phases*:

1. A disorienting dilemma.
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame.
3. A critical assessment of assumptions.
4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared.
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions.
6. Planning a course of action.
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans.
8. Provisional trying of new roles.
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.
10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22)

Thus, Mezirow’s phase model was initially limited to the study of “re-entry women” (1981, p. 7) from whose context-specific experience he “extrapolate[d] . . . to all adults in any context,” as Clark and Wilson (1991, p. 78) critically remarked. Only later was this phase model “confirmed in general by some studies,” whereas others found the “process of perspective transformation to be more recursive, evolving, and spiraling in nature” (Taylor, 1997, pp. 43-44). More recent studies either differentiated Mezirow’s phase model (e.g., the analysis of peer instructors by Erickson, 2007) or proposed alternative models: Courtenay, Merriam, and Reeves (1998) inquired into HIV-positive individuals’ lives (see also Baumgartner, 2002) and reconstructed several phases of

transformative learning, whereas Kovan and Dirxx (2003) interpreted the lives of environmental activists and proposed an alternative model also based on theoretical insights provided by Boyd and Myers (1988).

Similar to Mezirow's initial work, these analyses and most other studies reviewed from the past 30 years by Taylor (1997, 2007) and Taylor and Snyder (2012) were limited to specific social groups (e.g., women) and/or topical terrains (e.g., coping with an HIV infection). As such, their empirical results and the proposed models of transformative learning were restricted in scope. Moreover, these models only qualified for either confirming Mezirow's 10-phase model or proposing alternative ones. Because we do not have the opportunity to return to all of these models' empirical data, reanalyze the individual cases, and determine whether phases of transformative learning identifiable across the respective analyses, that is, across several social groups and topical terrains, existed, such a comparison needs to be based on new data specifically collected for this purpose. In fact, such a comprehensive analysis, as proposed for discussion in this article, will both take into account specific contexts of transformative learning (Clark & Wilson, 1991) and reveal those "transformational characteristics that transcend contexts" (Taylor, 2007, p. 184). Then, this approach may help elaborate a more general phase model and, furthermore, build a suitable background to inspire the ongoing theoretical discussions on transformative learning.

Method

To empirically identify the phases of transformative learning, biographical narrative interviews (Schütze, 1992, pp. 190-192; Rosenthal, 2004, pp. 48-53) with approximately 80 persons were conducted in a series of three research projects in Germany between 2001 and 2013. The interviews lasted between 90 and 180 minutes depending on the communicativeness of the interviewees. The interviewees were, initially, asked to freely give an account of their life history from the beginning to the present. Only thereafter did the interviewer pose questions to make the interviewee narrate parts of his or her life previously mentioned only in passing. Given the "narrative drives and constraints" that "propel the narrator (a) to go into details, (b) to close the gestalt, and (c) to assess the relevancies and to condense" during his or her account (Schütze, 2014, p. 229), such narrative interviews have a high validity as concerns the participant's biographical *experience* (though not necessarily regarding historical facts). In this sense, these "extempore narratives of one's own life history are a powerful means of recollection. They tend to express the personal experiences of the informant as *that* human being who acted and suffered *then*" (Schütze, 1992, p. 191).

These German language interviews were then transcribed and interpreted following the principles of the documentary method (Bohnsack, 2014; Nohl, 2010): In the first step, the overt topics and contents of these biographical narrations were summarized, and the second step served to reconstruct the manner in which the interviewees tackled the topics of their life experience, usually not explicated by themselves but implied in their narrations. Hence, this second interpretation step focused on the "modus operandi" of everyday practice, that is, on the tacit "orientations" within which problems

Table 1. Sample of Six Case Groups.

Case group	(1) Spontaneous practices of youth cultures	(2) Entrepreneurship at approximately age 35 years	(3) Internet practices at approximately age 65 years	(4) Intercultural experiences in late youth	(5) Social movement involvement during youth	(6) Social movement shift or drop out at ages 30-35 years	Total
Number, gender, and educational background of cases	3 ♂ (1 a, 2 v)	1 ♂, 2 ♀ (2 a, 1 v)	3 ♀ (2 a, 1 v)	7 ♂ (3 a, 4 v)	2 ♂, 4 ♀ (4 a, 2 v)	1 ♂, 2 ♀ (1 a, 2 v)	14 ♂, 11 ♀ (13 a, 12 v)
Approximate age at time of interview, years	17-19	35-40	65-68	30-40	30-40	30-40	

Note. a = academically educated; v = vocationally trained; ♂ = male; ♀ = female.

were solved and the world was perceived (Bohnsack, 2014, pp. 221-222). Special attention was given to those 25 biographies in which the core life orientations changed over time. Such a transformation of life orientations reflects, as a concept, Mezirow’s notion of a change of “meaning perspective” but underscores the tacit and practical aspects of “thought, feeling and will” (Mezirow, 1978, p. 105).¹ Most important, the actors actually may not even explicitly know that what they practically went through was a transformative learning process and how the latter began. The researcher’s, and not the actor’s, task is to identify and explicate this process in which the core life orientations are transformed.²

The reconstruction of implicit orientations was facilitated by comparing various biographical accounts with one another to elucidate the specific ways in which, for example, the beginning of transformative learning was experienced (Nohl, 2010). These comparative analyses also helped identify common patterns across different biographical narrations, most important, the phases of these transformative processes that were then captured in a typology. Initially, only biographies with similar characteristics were compared with one another (Table 1). The first such case group included young people whose life orientations were transformed when they indulged in the spontaneous practices of youth cultures (1); a second case group included interviewees who found new life orientations when they became entrepreneurs at approximately 35 years of age (2); female pensioners who, at the age of 65 years, discovered new perspectives for themselves through the Internet formed the third group (3); men and women who experienced transformative learning processes in the context of interculturality during their late youth were included in a fourth group (4); people who underwent such processes during their involvement in social movements in their youth comprised a fifth group (5); and those who later dropped out of or changed social movements at age 30 to 35 years formed a sixth group (6). Although this sample only comprises a few migrants and members of ethnic minorities, interviewees from different educational backgrounds and genders were included in equal measure.³

On the background of the analyses within each case group, the biographical narrations were then compared across the various social groups (gender, educational

background, and age) and topical terrains (e.g., youth cultures, Internet, and social movements) to identify and typify phases of the transformation process that are not specific to a certain terrain or social group; in other words, they are generalizable, to a certain degree. Precisely, the maximal contrasts between these biographies render possible the inductive development of a generalizable typology.

Five Phases of the Transformation Process

The transformation process begins with a (1) nondetermining start and continues with (2) a phase of experimental and undirected inquiry and a (3) phase of social testing and mirroring. The process is boosted during a (4) shifting of relevance and, finally, leads to (5) social consolidation and the reinterpretation of biography.⁴ The naming of the phases subsequently discussed is based not on any theoretical consideration but only on attempts to articulate the significance of the empirical data. To show that each typification is based on a thorough analysis of empirical cases, the following presentation of empirical findings combines short examples from selected biographies representative of all case groups with abstracted types. By doing so, this section first outlines general characteristics of each phase and, second, reveals how each phase was modified (but not changed in its constitutive essence) by other aspects. If not indicated otherwise, all quotes in this and the following section were taken from the interviews; only pseudonyms were used.

The Nondetermining Start

The process of transformative learning begins when novelty, neither anticipated nor planned, breaks into life. The new occurs abruptly, such as when Hubert Schlosser (Case Group 2), who at that time did occasional jobs and planned to get trained as an educator, was walking one day and suddenly encountered a Samba percussion group:

That wasn't so spectacular, I just saw them, the Samba group, and at that moment when I saw and listened to them and how they moved I didn't know that 8 years afterwards I would make a living out of this myself.

At this moment, Mr. Schlosser, who later became a professional Samba percussionist and founded his own Samba school, was only sure that he wanted to "do" Samba "as well." Otherwise, the encounter with the new "wasn't so spectacular"; in other words, it was a rather incidental event.

Similarly, Sascha Sperling (Case Group 4), the son of an Israelite-German couple who later converted to Islam, got acquainted in this first phase with some young Muslim women with whom he "talked a little bit" about their religion. These accounts and similar others of other interviewees imply that no direct line exists between the first and the novel event encountered by the actors and the subsequent transformative learning process. Even through the retrospective realization of the actors, the ensuing experiences that are captured as phases are rather contingent. Because these

first experiences do not in any way predetermine the (transformative) character of the subsequent process, this phase is called a “nondetermining start.” Indeed, certain interviewees mentioned similar break-ins of novelty into their life that did not turn into a transformation of life orientations. Therefore, these interviews were excluded from this sample and interpreted elsewhere (see von Rosenberg, in press).

Certainly, different ways exist to experience the nondetermining start. In adolescence, young people transform the orientations handed down by their families by developing their own. These adolescents predominantly plunged into the new practices of a group. For example, Anja Weber (Case Group 5) provided the following account:

I was in a crackbrained class insofar as all girls were totally dumb, pubescent dumb. [. . .] and then I got to know people and there it started that I took another path [. . .] that was rather funny we started to smoke weed . . . and went around by moped . . . it was the time when we considered the petty-bourgeois dumb.

These *collective practices* were not yet political, although the aversion to the “petty-bourgeois” already indicated a certain inclination. Indeed, these practices turned out to be the first step for Ms. Weber to get involved in activities of new social movements. When she finished school, she moved from the countryside to Berlin to join the autonomous political scene, live in squatted houses, and organize political rallies against the conservative government.

The beginning of Hubert Schlosser’s transformation process was not only different in that he experienced Samba percussion *individually*; he only later joined the respective music groups. Furthermore, Schlosser encountered the Samba percussion group in a *casual mode*. Although in a very different topical terrain, this individual and casual mode was identified in Mr. Sperling’s case as well, that is, in his first encounters with Islam. In contrast, Ms. Weber’s account is indicative of a certain *crisis* that she experienced during her adolescence: She was on bad terms with her classmates, particularly the girls. Other interviewees reported similar crises. For example, the women who were approximately age 65 years (Case Group 3) told me how they “got into a rut” when they retired and their children left home for good. Old habitualized practices (e.g., chatting with the girls in the class or caring for children and working), rather than fading away, are abruptly stopped by such a crisis. Moreover, when these old practices end, the orientations underlying them become ineffective, creating a free space for the novel element that—just at this moment—enters the lives of the actors (e.g., the new friends in Ms. Weber’s life). Because of the crisis that stops old habits, the new practices immediately become the focus. For example, Anja Weber centered on the new activities with her new friends and recently retired Bärbel Kiepert (Case Group 3) delved into the computer that she unexpectedly received for her birthday. In contrast, individuals, such as Hubert Schlosser, who did not experience a crisis at the beginning of their transformation process, pursued their new practices (e.g., Samba percussion), and no evidence existed to suggest that their old habits (e.g., occasional jobs, training as educator) were stopped. As is subsequently shown, another phase is needed (of

shifting relevance, accompanied by a crisis that stops old habits) to put the new practices into focus.

Phase of Experimental and Undirected Inquiry

After the new has found its way into their biographies, the actors explore the novel practices. For example, Hubert Schlosser acquired skills in Samba percussion and Ms. Weber learned to master the activities of her new friends. Mr. Sperling, who encountered Muslims and was intrigued by their religion, subsequently used every occasion to learn more about Islam:

We used to discuss a lot in my job and there was a Muslim in my travel agency who came every once in a while and we chatted a little and I always took part in the conversations [. . .] without having any idea about Judaism, about Islam.

Without having “any idea” of—nor any inclination toward—Islam on his own, Mr. Sperling engaged in discussing this faith, thus acquiring knowledge step by step. Mr. Sperling’s account is indicative of a particularly unstructured mode of inquiry that is yet to be given any biographical meaning, that is, it is not directed toward specific biographic aims. Moreover, in other accounts, it is documented that these inquiries, starting right after the first encounters with the new practices, were typically rather undirected, that is, the actors did not yet know the ultimate goal of their learning efforts. The experimental character of this inquiry is particularly evident among the women approximately 65 years of age who discovered the computer and the Internet (Case Group 3). Ms. Schwehn recalled that she was aware that she could “press on” every key without “breaking” the computer; thus, she and her peers, among them the previously mentioned Ms. Kiepert, did so and gradually explored the features of information technology.

These inquiries may be embedded in collective or individual practices, and instances exist of social learning (adapting to a group’s behavior) or of learning with artifacts. However, in every case, these inquiries were not directed or organized by others (or even by an educational institution) but were solely based on the actors’ own initiatives. Because the actors did not know the ultimate goals of their endeavors, they experimented with the new practices and took into account the (positive or negative) results of their efforts and readjusted them accordingly. The ensuing inquiries then continued during the entire transformation process. However, their experimental and undirected character decreased.

Phase of Social Testing and Mirroring

In the third phase, the actors exposed their new practices to the appraisal of other people and had the opportunity to reflect on them in light of the reactions of their interaction partners. For example, Mr. Schlosser’s first performances with the Samba percussion group encouraged him to continue and put even greater effort into this

endeavor. Together with her friends and on the basis of a growing political awareness, Anja Weber took part in environmentalist and peace demonstrations. Christiane Othmar (Case Group 5) got involved in Marxist political groups in the city where she studied at university and then started to make her activism known in her “hometown”:

Then I distributed pamphlets in my hometown on which I stated my name and my address that was somehow embarrassing for my parents and then I was eligible for voting and I was certainly the only one in my electoral district who voted for the communists [laughs].

To test socially one’s new practices does not imply that one seeks only a positive reaction, as is documented in Ms. Othmar’s account. Even the facts that her activism was “embarrassing” for her parents and that she apparently could not convince anybody in her “electoral district” to share her political position did not deter her from her new practices.

Apart from such occasions in which she exposed her new practices to people to whom they were distant and strange, Ms. Othmar—similar to all other interviewees—sought social encounters with like-minded people. When studying at university, she moved to an “international hall of residence,” where she met people who shared her political outlook:

We organized parties twice a year and these parties were very well known we had posted bills in all Bremen [a city in Germany] . . . and because we were all politically totally committed we always donated the money to liberation movements.

In this phase of the transformation process, the alternation between collective experiences (with people from the “hall of residence”) and the exposure of these ensuing practices to the wider public of “Bremen” (or distributing pamphlets in her hometown) made it possible for Ms. Othmar to both calibrate her newfound practices in a collective frame and test their significance in society at large.

Similar experiences were found among the other interviewees. For example, Mr. Sperling found a group of people who introduced him to the practices of Islam (e.g., prayer) during this phase of his transformation process; however, he also defended his new practices vis-à-vis old friends who found them “very weird.” Sandra Bach (Case Group 6), once coming out as a lesbian, not only joined a political network of lesbian women but also agreed to represent this network in the rather conservative (and certainly heterosexually dominated) “state council of women,” an experience that she described using the following words:

We as an association of lesbians . . . leftist-autonomous provide for a certain amount of disturbance. Because as an acknowledged member we, although we have only one voice in contrast to the conservative party with 350, but with this one voice we make a lot of noise. And every year they have to deal with our motions in their assembly whether they like it or not [laughs] and that’s good fun.

As is documented in this quote, the reactions of broader society need not necessarily be positive; even the disapproving attitude of the “assembly” encourages Sandra Bach to carry on with her new practice. Alternating between reinforcing one’s newly found practices in a group of like-minded people and exposing them to the appraisal of broader society help actors understand the significance of what has newly been included in their lives and constrain them to share their new knowledge and skills both within a group of insiders (implying specific, more indirect, and implicit forms of interaction) and when communicating with strangers and outsiders.

Phase of Shifting Relevance

That the newly introduced practice turned from a marginal into a focused experience, that is, its relevance shifted, was indispensable for the transformative learning processes. Indeed, cases exist in which the beginning of the transformation processes was already structured by a crisis, such as the problems that Ms. Weber faced with her classmates or the void that the women fell into after they retired and after their children moved out. As was previously stressed, such crises stop old habits and provide free space for the evolvment and expansion of the newly discovered practice. In this sense, old habits become unimportant and new practices are rendered relevant right from the start of the transformation process. That is, the relevance of specific practices has shifted since the nondetermining start.

However, many transformation processes exist in which the new practice is introduced and other, older habits continue to be performed. In such processes, the beginning of transformation is both nonintentional and casual; the new practice only gradually expands. In these cases, a discrete phase of shifting relevance was observed that accompanies a crisis. In other words, Hubert Schlosser, who pursued his Samba percussion practices along with other activities, was “down with” a “patellar luxation” for “3 months” and could not continue the performances in the Samba percussion group or his vocational training as an educator for kindergarten children. At this point in his life, he decided to become a professional Samba percussion teacher and open his own Samba school. Bettina Hintzer (Case Group 2) discovered a new technique of making felt dolls in the first phases of her transformative learning process as she continued to study at university and did occasional jobs. After giving birth to her second child and given the low income of her children’s father, she started to sell the dolls “in order to earn a little bit more money.” She turned out to be so successful that she later founded her own business as a felt puppet maker.

Similarly, at the culmination of his adolescent crisis, Bernd Meier (Case Group 1), who incidentally started playing the guitar when he visited a summer camp during his childhood, got into trouble at school (he had to repeat the 10th grade), with his parents (he missed Christmas Eve with his family in favor of a hashish party), and with his girlfriend:

There were events that I was at home, playing guitar and then she [the girlfriend] called me and I made it plain to her that it wouldn't work now and hung up [. . .] that is how the whole thing broke down because I had become set on making music I was totally fanatic then somehow.

As with Mr. Schlosser and Ms. Hintzer, the crisis (in this case, the adolescence crisis) stopped Bernd Meier's other habits and social relations (the "whole thing"; i.e., his relationship with the girl "broke down") and shifted the relevance to the newly introduced practice. This shifting of relevance, which occurs either as a distinct phase or in the beginning of the process, is a *sine qua non* for the latter's transformative character.

Phase of Social Consolidation and Reinterpretation of Biography

The transformation process ends in a phase in which the actors find social relations that stabilize their new practices. Moreover, they revise their biography, which they now perceive through a new outlook. Beate Brandt, one of the women who experienced retirement as a crisis (Case Group 3), discovered the computer and, subsequently, the Internet as a new space of activity during her transformation process. Along with developing a website on her own (with photographs, poems, and information technology advice for the elderly), she made friends with other Internet users, among them Swiss people:

I found a [mailing] list in Switzerland and with them I am still in great touch. Wonderful friendships in Switzerland [. . .] I had posted something in their guestbook . . . and the mum of the list that's how they call her . . . then sent me a mail . . . and referred others to my homepage . . . and then April 1st 2000, my home page existed since February 20th, I had 32 visitors from Switzerland. That was great.

Through her own home page and by contacting other groups, Ms. Brandt was able to embed her new practices in the frame of social relations. On the basis of these experiences, she reviewed her own biography and—when she first started to arrange a website on the Internet—sought to "give something to others." Now, as she recalls, "I get something back," and that is "wonderful" and "pleases me so."

Similar to Mr. Sperling, Andreas Helmer encountered Muslims and was fascinated by their religious behavior (Case Group 4). He converted to Islam, thus giving his biography a new shape. He narrated the following:

I found in Islam something which I didn't know before that it exists, such a cohesion which exists between Muslims in Islam which doesn't exist outside. I converted, when I went to the mosque for the first time, they all approached me and wanted to know who I was, they were happy that I was there and chatted with me, hugged me, that was a little bit strange for me but, on the other side, a really beautiful feeling that one is welcome.

When he converted to Islam, Mr. Helmer's new interest in this faith was consolidated by the new social relations he acquired in the "mosque." Consequently, Mr. Helmer

represented himself as a pious Muslim. In contrast to other reinterpretations of one's biography that underpin individuality, Mr. Helmer was happy to put himself in a new collective frame.

All cases examined documented that the new practices, after becoming relevant and after novel orientations were based on them, stimulate the actors to distance themselves from their prior biographies and open up new biographical horizons. For example, Mr. Schlosser and Ms. Hintzer restructured their lives according to their new commitment as entrepreneurs, and Ms. Weber and Ms. Othmar, as it were, came to see themselves as devoted social movement activists. The biographical self-reflections built on these new life orientations enable the participants to reinterpret their own biographies and, by doing so, to relate themselves anew to the world.

Discussion and Conclusion

The comparative analysis of cases from different topical terrains, age-groups, educational backgrounds, and gender allows for a broad perspective on the course of transformative learning processes. The empirical results of this inquiry also render possible the formulation of new theoretical questions and tasks. This concluding section seeks to draw the reader's attention to the relevance of the empirical findings and their theoretical import.

According to the practice-based model proposed by this study, transformative learning does not require the initiating occurrence of a disorienting or any other dilemma to be managed by predominantly resorting to cognitive means—which many scholars see as a cornerstone of the theory (Baumgartner, 2002; Courtenay et al., 1998; Erickson, 2007; Mezirow, 1981). Rather, transformative learning may begin unnoticed, incidentally, and sometimes even casually, when a new practice is added to old habits. Kovan and Dirx (2003, p. 115) also confirmed the subtle and “silent” character of this first phase and underpinned the importance of the actors’ “letting go, listening deeply to their being in the world” in the beginning of transformative learning. However, along with such “contemplative” work, our interviewees recalled highly active and emotional experiences that, at times, included “immersing themselves in new social practices” (Hodge, 2014, p. 173).⁵ Because this beginning does not necessarily lead to transformation—this contingency is confirmed in the entire body of literature—it is called a *nondetermining start*. Future theoretical work must consider this initial contingency of transformative learning, possibly based on empirical comparisons including cases in which such processes start but then fail.

The *phase of experimental and undirected inquiry* clearly shows similarities to what Courtenay et al. (1998, p. 72) viewed as an early phase of “exploration and experimentation.” At times, the “contemplative attitude” (Kovan & Dirx, 2003, p. 115) may be continued. This phase, which is early in the process, is certainly different from acquiring “knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22) because the actors do not yet comprehend the biographical significance of their new practice and, hence, cannot yet integrate it into biographical plans. Only later do they more deliberately acquire knowledge and skills, and their transformative process becomes more structured through cognitive endeavors.

In the subsequent *phase of social testing and mirroring*, actors calibrate their new experiences and actions within a group of people “who share the new perspective” (Mezirow, 1978, p. 105) and who meet “emotional needs” (Baumgartner, 2002, p. 55). The actors find “trustful relationships that allow individuals to have questioning discussions, share information openly and achieve mutual and consensual understanding” (Taylor, 2007, p. 179). However, they also expose their new practices to the broader society, thus seeking “feedback” (Mezirow, 1981, p. 7).

Whereas experimental inquiry and social relations are elements of transformative learning in which most scholars concur, the *phase of shifting relevance* is unique to the phase model proposed by this study. If the actors interviewed have not already shifted relevance in the very beginning of their transformation process, they now go into a crisis that stops old habits and puts the new practice at the center of their life. In a certain regard, this shifting relevance is *functionally* equivalent to the “disorienting dilemma” that Mezirow (1981, 2000)—and with him many other scholars (e.g., Baumgartner, 2002; Courtenay et al., 1998)—places at the beginning of transformative learning.⁶ Both stop old orientations and, thus, provide space for new perspectives. Contrary to the disorienting dilemma that challenges old meaning perspectives and is managed by developing new ones, the actors in the empirical cases at hand do not directly tackle, solve, or overcome the dilemma or crisis. In fact, by stopping old practices, the crisis only erases the relevance and practical feasibility of the orientations underlying these practices. Whether at the beginning of the transformation process or in a distinct phase of shifting relevance, this scenario then constitutes a space of freedom in which the newly started practice may evolve and expand. Because this *modus operandi* of transformation is counterintuitive, it requires further theoretical reflection.

Then, transformative learning culminates in a *phase of social consolidation and reinterpretation of biography*. Although Erickson (2007) only underpinned the significance of affirming the new perspective in the sense of “competence and self-confidence” (p. 78), my findings concur with Mezirow’s (1981) model, in which “a reintegration into society on the basis of conditions dictated by the new perspective” (Mezirow, p. 7) constitutes the 10th phase, and with Courtenay et al. (1998), who spoke of a “stabilization of the new perspective” (p. 75). While the reinterpretation of one’s biography leans on the immersion in a new social group, large or small (Hodge, 2014, p. 179), this social context also limits the rationality of this new outlook (Clark & Wilson, 1991, p. 89). As Baumgartner (2002) showed, this social integration, along with the new perspective, may endure.

The empirical typification shares some elements with other models; however, the five phases proposed significantly depart from them regarding the overall course of transformative learning. With the exception of Kovan and Dirx (2003), all models discussed view the new orientation or perspective as a reaction to disorientation or any other dilemma that needs to be overcome directly. In contrast, my typology of phases reveals that the seed of the new orientation and practices may be planted long before they gain relevance and become the focused concern of the respective actor. Thus, the new evolves only bit by bit until it leads to a full transformation.

With its departure from disorientation-driven transformative learning, my practice-based model bears resemblance to Clark's (1993) empirical finding that, for an "indefinite period," the actors "consciously or unconsciously" search "for something which is missing in their life" and that, as soon as they "find this 'missing piece,' the transformative learning process is catalyzed" (p. 81). However, in the empirical cases analyzed, the actors neither depreciated their pretransformative life as imperfect nor experienced their new practices as something they missed before. Rather, the new practices intruded, unsolicited, into their life and opened up new, unexpected horizons. A comparison of my empirical cases with biographies in which transformative learning starts with the search for the missing element in one's life or with a disorienting dilemma may provide further insight into the peculiarities of these competing models and may instigate new theoretical reflection.

The empirical investigation at hand, albeit being based on interviews with actors of different genders, educational backgrounds, and ages who are engaged in various topical terrains, certainly has its limits. First, the empirical typology pertains only to informal processes of transformative learning. Future research needs to explore whether and how this typology must be modified for transformative learning in nonformal or formal contexts. Second, the typology, although covering positionalities such as age, gender, and education, may have to be revised if biographies from ethnic minorities (Johnson-Bailey, 2012) and from other societies (Taylor & Snyder, 2012, pp. 42-44) are to be included in the sample. Despite or precisely because of these limitations, the hope is that the empirical results discussed inspire further empirical research and new theoretical reflections on transformative learning.

Acknowledgments

For their comments on previous drafts of this article, I wish to thank Steffen Amling, Edward Taylor, Katie Cofer, and James Morrison.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was partly funded by the German Research Foundation DFG (NO 736/2-1 and NO 736/2-2).

Notes

1. The concept of life orientations with its focus on practice corresponds to Hodge's (2014) assumption that meaning perspectives are "representations of the tacit understandings that structure social practice" (p. 178).
2. In the German research context, the transformation of life orientations is also used as an empirical instance of what in German is called "Bildung" (see Nohl, 2009).

3. The interviewees in Case Group 1 were contacted in youth centers, a funding program facilitated access to entrepreneurs, and the pensioners were identified using specialized Internet platforms. Case groups 4 to 6 were approached through personal contacts and by using a pyramid scheme. The German Research Foundation generously financed two of the projects. Under supervision of the author, Florian von Rosenberg and Sarah Thomsen as research assistants were responsible for data gathering and interpretation. They also constructed their own empirical typologies. For Case Group 4, see von Rosenberg (in press), and for Case Groups 5 and 6, see Thomsen (2014). Case Groups 1 to 3 were analyzed by the author.
4. The typology of phases was constructed in collaboration with Florian von Rosenberg.
5. The empirically grounded model of transformative learning proposed in this article concurs with Hodge's (2014) version, in that both see practices as a decisive point of the transformative process. However, whereas Hodge focused on those "social practices" (p. 167) that constitute the starting and the final point of transformative learning, the model proposed highlights the entire process, including the more individual practices.
6. That the shifting of relevance may occur abruptly in the beginning of transformative learning or may later constitute a distinct phase is an empirical phenomenon similar to Mezirow's (2000) differentiation of transformations that are "epochal," that is, "sudden" and "dramatic" versus "incremental" (p. 21).

References

- Baumgartner, L. M. (2002). Living and learning with HIV/AIDS: Transformational tales continued. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 53, 44-59.
- Bohnsack, R. (2014). Documentary method. In U. Flick (Ed.), *SAGE handbook of analyzing qualitative data* (pp. 217-223). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Boyd, R. D., & Myers, J. G. (1988). Transformative education. *Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 7, 261-284.
- Clark, M. C. (1993). Changing course: Initiating the transformational learning process. In D. Flannery (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 34th annual adult education research conference* (pp. 78-83). University Park: Pennsylvania State University.
- Clark, M. C., & Wilson, A. L. (1991). Context and rationality in Mezirow's theory of transformational learning. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 41, 75-91.
- Courtenay, B. C., Merriam, S. B., & Reeves, P. M. (1998). The centrality of meaning-making in transformational learning: How HIV-positive adults make sense of their lives. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48, 65-84.
- Erickson, D. M. (2007). A developmental re-forming of the phases of meaning in transformational learning. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 58, 61-80.
- Hodge, S. (2014). Transformative learning as an "inter-practice" phenomenon. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 64, 165-181.
- Johnson-Bailey, J. (2012). Positionality and transformative learning. In E. W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning* (pp. 260-273). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kovan, J. T., & Dirks, J. M. (2003). "Being called awake": The role of transformative learning in the lives of environmental activists. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 53, 99-118.
- Mezirow, J. (1978). Perspective transformation. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 28, 100-110.
- Mezirow, J. (1981). A critical theory of adult learning and education. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 32, 3-23.

- Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation* (pp. 3-33). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Nohl, A.-M. (2009). Spontaneous action and transformative learning: Empirical investigations and pragmatist reflections. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 41, 287-306.
- Nohl, A.-M. (2010). Narrative interview and documentary method. In R. Bohnsack, N. Pfaff, & W. Weller (Eds.), *Qualitative analysis and documentary method in international educational research* (pp. 195-217). Leverkusen, Germany: Budrich.
- Rosenthal, G. (2004). Biographical research in qualitative research practice. In C. Seale, G. Gobo, J. F. Gubrium, & D. Silverman (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice* (pp. 48-64). London, England: Sage.
- Schütze, F. (1992). Pressure and guilt: War experiences of a young German soldier and their biographical implications: Part 1. *International Sociology*, 7, 187-208.
- Schütze, F. (2014). Autobiographical accounts of war experiences: An outline for the analysis of topically focused autobiographical texts. *Qualitative Sociology Review*, 10, 224-283. Retrieved from http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php
- Taylor, E. W. (1997). Building upon the theoretical debate: A critical review of the empirical studies of Mezirow's transformative learning theory. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48, 34-59.
- Taylor, E. W. (2007). An update of transformative learning theory: A critical review of the empirical research (1999-2005). *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 26, 173-191.
- Taylor, E. W., & Cranton, P. (Eds.). (2012). *The handbook of transformative learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Taylor, E. W., & Snyder, M. J. (2012). A critical review of research on transformative learning theory, 2006-2010. In E. W. Taylor & P. Cranton (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning* (pp. 37-55). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Thomsen, S. (2014). *Bildung und lernen in sozialen bewegungen* [Transformative and accumulative learning in social movements] (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Helmut Schmidt University, Hamburg, Germany.
- von Rosenberg, F. (in press). *Lern-und bildungsprozesse im kontext kultureller pluralität: Erfahrungen der negativität, fremdheit, delegitimation und des grenzexperimenten*. [Transformative and accumulative learning in the context of cultural plurality: Experiences of negativity, strangeness, delegitimation and experiments of transgression]. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer.

Author Biography

Arnd-Michael Nohl is a professor of education science at Helmut Schmidt University, Hamburg, Germany. His research interests include transformative and accumulative learning, educational equity, the materiality of educational processes, and qualitative methodology.

Copyright of Adult Education Quarterly is the property of American Association for Adult & Continuing Education and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.