

Transformative learning (TL) at the intersections of the psychosocial: comparing an Islamist and the good TL group; Paper to the International Transformative Learning Conference, Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, USA, October, 2016

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Abstract: This paper explores more collective, group as well as intimate dimensions of transformative learning, drawing on auto/biographical narrative as well as historical research and using interdisciplinary psychosocial analysis. It is suggested that some groups, a Jihadi one, for instance, offers transformative possibilities and self-recognition for individuals, but at the eventual price of closure to the other in intersectional space. In the final resort, this evokes alienation from self as well as the other. The good group, on the other hand, grounded in cultures of equality, respect, openness, trust, and dialogue, encourages engagement with otherness, on which transformative experience and democratic health ultimately depend. The case study of what were called tutorial classes, in workers' education in the last century, in the United Kingdom, is an example of the good, open and transformational group, but one that also struggled with the seductions of fundamentalism, total truths and imaginative closure.

In this paper, I focus on the nature and values of transformative learning (TL), and what facilitates or inhibits profounder forms of learning, by reference to specific groups. These groups are or were situated in intersectional space between different cultures and people, between old and new ways of interpreting experience, and between the interplay of the global and the local. My interest is in the processes nurturing innovation, play and risk in groups, especially in relation to the other and otherness – what I term psychosocial openness; or, at times of disruption and change, the factors that disrupt learning and encourage retreat and closure. The historical example of the good transformative group is workers' education at the beginning of the last century in the United Kingdom; the closed group in today's world is an Islamist one.

Starting points: distress in the city

The paper, in interrogating such issues, draws on contemporary as well as historic narratives from a distressed post-industrial city in the United Kingdom, where some have turned to racist or Islamist groups (West, 2016). Historically, the city was a location for 'an experiment in democratic education', a place of transformative learning for many ordinary people in workers' education at the beginning of the last century (Rose, 2010). Encounters then with the other and otherness, including in the symbolic order, became, over time, a source of both personal and collective transformation. By way of contrast, it is suggested, fundamentalist groups can transform aspects of lives, but at the cost of profounder educational change. Such groups do offer forms of recognition, and individuals may feel 'seen', understood, and find roles, meaning and legitimacy in the world. There can even be 'divine' purpose given to fractured lives. But the process is impregnated with misrecognition of the other and self.

I was troubled by the rise of racism and fundamentalism in the city of my birth, Stoke-on-Trent, in the English Midlands. In 2008/9 the racist British National Party (BNP) was strengthening in the city and a mosque was pipe-bombed. It seemed that racists would form the majority on the Municipal Council by 2010 (West, 2016). There were frequent incidents of racial violence and outbursts of Islamophobia. The economic base of the city had unravelled and its politics were in chronic crisis with low levels of engagement in voting. The traditional economic base of the city – coal mining, iron and steel production and pottery - had either disappeared or drastically declined. Long-term structural unemployment was endemic (West, 2016). The financial crisis, from 2008 onwards, and consequent austerity, including cuts in local government funding, added to feelings of distress.

Recognition and the power to illuminate

I undertook auto/biographical narrative research, some of it longitudinal, with over 50 people in the city, from different ethnic groups, to chronicle the stories they told about a troubled place. It was important, in interpreting the narratives, to connect larger historical forces (such as deindustrialisation) with the meso or intermediate levels of human experience in institutions and groups as well as at the micro, intimate relational level. I sought to illuminate how and why xenophobia flourishes and to think seriously about its antidotes. On a predominantly white working class estate in the city – the place where I was born - there is a pattern of narratives of lost worlds and feelings of abandonment and disrespect by authority. In contrast stories are told of the BNP listening to local people and offering forceful as well as sensitive representation of the kind that other parties failed to provide. In Muslim

communities there were stories of Islamophobia, and of anxieties about pockets of Islamism among young people.

There were particular theoretical friends – Dewey, Winnicott and Honneth – who helped me make sense of the stories. Using Dewey reminded me of our need to engage with the other precisely because of the limitations, despite our best efforts, of what we can ever know. The other, in short, has an actual importance for the quality of our own psychological and symbolic life; diversity matters in the groups of which we are a part, whether scientific or community-based, for the quality of our thinking and actions; and for the cultivation of what we can call democratic subjectivity – or the cosmopolitan psyche – as a prerequisite for wider human well-being (West, 2016).

Such subjects may be more or less agentic and political in quite a basic sense: the nurturing of children – or adults for that matter – is a political as well as an emotional act. It is about cultivating relationships in which individuals feel legitimate and able to question the taken-for-granted without experiencing paralyzing anxiety. This can involve finding space for imaginative play, in Winnicott's language: for the playfulness of ideas and the imagination; or, at an opposite end of a spectrum, the space becomes one of defensiveness and narrative closure with one truth and nothing but that truth. Such individuals easily don false mantles, needing to please or appease powerful others for fear of displeasure or abandonment. The intimately personal is deeply political and potentially democratic in these terms. Axel Honneth (2009) refers to Freud's anthropological idea of how we are born prematurely in comparison with other mammals and depend absolutely on the other for survival and well-being; and on feelings of being loved as a basis for human flourishing (Honneth, 2009; Winnicott, 1971). The love on offer, however, may not be good enough, and survival can come at the price of self-annihilation, if the other, for instance, has constantly to be appeased. Honneth adds the sociocultural into these more intimate dynamics of self-recognition. This includes the role of groups in providing self-respect, in enabling people to feel accepted and that they belong, with rights and responsibilities. Self-esteem, Honneth's third category of self-recognition, is nurtured when individuals feel recognized as making important contributions to a group's well-being, which provides a potential to better recognize others in building social solidarities (Honneth, 2007; 2009). But this analysis is not enough: we need to make more explicit the normative dimensions of profounder educational experience at the intersections of self and otherness.

Islamism in the city: recognition and 'transformative learning'

People of South Asian origin settled in Stoke from the 1960s onwards. They mainly came from Pakistan and Bangladesh, and now make up about 50 per cent of the city's ethnic minority population. In 2011 they numbered just over 9000 (West, 2016), at a time when the city's white population had been in decline. In one district in the north of the city, over 30 per cent of its residents are from ethnic minority communities (West, 2016). Some people of South Asian origin talked in the research about disrespect and everyday experiences of Islamophobia: targeted at taxi drivers, for instance, told too frequently to 'fuck off home' by white clients. This sense of everyday disrespect was amplified by stories of actual physical violence as an Asian man was killed and others injured while mosques were violated. Such a reality can produce insecurity, vulnerability and defensiveness – paranoia even – and reinforces the tendency for people to congregate among their own, away from intersections.

Culturally, as occupational structures have fractured, relationships between the generations suffer too, as male initiation rituals between fathers and sons, in the workplace, are lost. Narratives of the ‘Christian’ neglect of white Muslims in the Bosnian conflict, in contrast to the ‘Christian’ (that is Russian Orthodox) support for the ‘Christian’ Serbs, fill some of this economic and intergenerational vacuum. In the 1990s actions by the West, standing back as Muslims were slaughtered, as at Srebrenica, were essentially seen as anti-Islamic rather than racist, given that the Muslims were white. Certain young people inwardly digested stories of Muslim humiliation, collective trauma and ‘Christian’ hostility, and the need to fight back. This was then fuelled by the toxicity of Islamophobia.

A community leader, who I call Aasif, (the names used are pseudonyms) talked about some of the above:

... you had groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir taking advantage of the situation in Bosnia ... with what’s happening with the Muslims ... arms not being allowed to get to the Muslims to defend themselves where Russia is providing the Christian Serbs; it was a them-against-us kind of debate with groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir ... talking about the male Muslim section of Muslim community at that time; the youth, low education achievement, low aspiration ... no job opportunity... perfect audience... you can recruit easy ... It’s nothing to do with the colour of your skin; this is not racism; this is a target on the Muslim community because these Muslims are white ... I can remember some of these Hizb ut-Tahrir members who in the early ’90s, pulling the youth away from the parents as well ...

From this perspective, Bosnia was a trauma in which scales fell from eyes: it led to increased politicization and provided a mythic rationale for fundamentalism. A group like Hizb ut-Tahrir (or Liberation Party) – التحرير حزب, in the Arabic – could exploit such feelings. Hizb ut-Tahrir is an international pan-Islamic political organization commonly associated with the goal of all Muslim countries unifying into one Islamic caliphate, ruled by sharia law. Hizb ut-Tahrir was founded in 1952 as part of a movement to create a new elite among Muslim youth. The writings of the group’s founder, Shaikh Taqi al-Dine al-Nabahani, lay down detailed descriptions for a restored caliphate (West, 2016).

Raafe

I want to use narrative material from individuals close to particular jihadists to paint a portrait of someone I call Raafe. Raafe in Arabic means companion and he was radicalized, ‘transformed’ in the words of a number of people and sought to radicalize others. Raafe, I was told, was an individual ‘who had a very troubled upbringing’. He along with other ‘radicalizers’, as they were called, targeted young people. Particular mosques provided space for his work, apparently without the elders or imams knowing.

Another community leader, Aatif, told me about the weaknesses of mosque management and how this was exploited by Raafe and others.

... Raafe didn’t have a very good relationship with his father ended up in crime ... was sent down to prison ... Came out of prison and he was within a few weeks...transformed into somebody who was a practising Muslim now to hear him ... later on when we realized he was part of Hizb ut-Tahrir, but at that point to see somebody change so dramatically was wow, he made a real positive change ... your

parents who came in the early '60s ... came when they were young ... so very little ... religious... education ... so they didn't have...opportunity to question the imams and learn something; so they couldn't pass that religious knowledge on to the youth, to their children; so the parents relied upon the mosques to offer that ... so that's where the communication barrier helped groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir. We can offer you Islamic information in your language ...

Radicalization transformed the lives of particular individuals, providing meaning, purpose and self-recognition. Raafé's own transformation seems to have depended on feeling understood, listened to and respected – recognised in short – by radical groups in prison. This could be interpreted as a form of 'transformative learning' but of an ultimately perverse and anti-developmental kind. The pedagogy of radicalization seems to work by emotional, imaginative appeals to the past constructed in the light of the present. It involves stories and appeals to action, rather than textual hermeneutics. Narratives of twelfth-century victories supported a call for similar jihad now, requiring toughness and heroism. Jihad, or struggle, becomes constructed as a heavy responsibility that requires brutality to demoralise a more powerful opponent. The victory of the Muslim armies, led by the King of Jerusalem, Guy of Lusignan, against the Crusaders in the twelfth century's Battle of Hattin, is interpreted as the outcome of a long process of small-scale, hard hitting attacks in various locations. Past struggles get reinterpreted in the light of the present in the struggle against the new crusaders of the West and its client states. Heroism and martyrdom are called for in what is a very different pedagogical process from rational, textual analysis of the Qur'an. Muslim clerics may speak in the language of theory, the jihadi groups act through stories and doing. But this can provide meaning and purpose in lives (Hassan and Weiss, 2015). But debate, dialogue, enquiry and self- as well as knowledge of the other get stifled.

An experiment in democratic education

Mezirow (2000: 8-9) thought the ideal speech community was characterised by communicative rather than instrumental learning, as in the good university seminar. Instrumental learning sought to control and manipulate the environment or other people as in task related problem solving activities designed to improve performance. Communicative learning, on the other hand, has to do with learning what others might mean when they communicate with us. It can involve feelings, intentions, values and moral issues. The tutorial classes, I suggest, represent a good model of communicative learning that provided the means for both individual and collective transformation. They offer us a profound case study of transformative learning in its more collectivist as well as intersectional dimensions.

Workers education, in the form of tutorial classes, once thrived in the city. The first ever university tutorial class took place there in 1908, when 30 or so worker students met each Friday evening over a period of years with their tutor, R.H. Tawney, a subsequently distinguished economic historian, representing the University of Oxford. The classes were free from prescribed curricula, and its members could explore issues in their working lives from the perspectives of history, politics, economics and literature. Fortnightly essays were required, and the standard of some of these was high, although by no means all. There were no formal examinations or qualifications due to a desire to eliminate competition and vocationalism from the classroom (Rose, 2010). The Marxist Social Democratic Federation made up the nucleus of students who were potters, miners, clerks, shop assistants and school

teachers. Many students were from non-conformist religious backgrounds, from families, in short, that encouraged them to think for themselves.

Tawney himself thought the tutorial class ‘movement’ and the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) a successful ‘experiment in democratic education’, which had a profound, transformational influence on individuals and in the development of British social democracy.

Jonathan Rose (2010) has drawn on diverse forms of life writing illuminating the importance of relationship and recognition in workers’ education: between tutors and students, and among students. But also in relation to the symbolic world, in challenging bigotry and fascism, for instance, and for cultivating agency and the possibility of transformation at individual and collective levels. Such education offered working-class people avenues into leadership roles in local and national politics, and served to radicalize and motivate them in personal as well as political ways.

Space for dialogue and recognition

The classes themselves created space to question and challenge racism and other forms of bigotry in transformational ways. In one telling account, Nancy Dobrin, born in 1914, writes that the study of literature had revolutionary consequences. She grew up in a home where learning was not valued, where there was either ‘a row or an order’. She read little but later joined a WEA class, read avidly although admitted that she went to the class partly in search of a man. Nancy became a writer herself. She described working for a German Jew during the Second World War, wondering what on earth he was doing there and why couldn’t people like him go home. Later, in another class, she met her future husband, a German Jewish refugee who described himself as a Christian Communist. This was a relationship forged in the spaces of workers’ education, where literature – from Lawrence, Tolstoy and James Joyce – enabled her to question her own bigotry. Such experiences shaped her relationships with her children and family, and impelled her to question aspects of their schooling. Agency can take many forms: in the everyday, in families and on the wider democratic stage (Dobrin, 1980).

But dogmatism existed in the intersections of the tutorial classes too, rooted no doubt in human fragility. It is interesting that the worker students frequently admired tutors like Tawney, who remained steadfast as well as respectful even when harangued by a fundamentalist student. We can think of fundamentalism, like its variant Islamism, as ordinary – when we feel out of our depth we may grab at things that seem to offer narrative certainty, an answer to everything. Leftist fundamentalists sometimes from the Social Democratic Federation and later the Communist Party, though not exclusively so, would quote from texts like *Das Capital* with religious fervour. The other students admired how Tawney remained respectful in the face of agitation. One recalled a particular Marxist – the SDF could dominate the first tutorial classes – challenging point after point and referring to classic Marxist texts. Tawney took it in his stride but insisted that there were other points of view. The student accused the tutor of hopping around from twig to twig, like a bird, and a sense of bad temper pervaded the room. Tawney insisted that everyone, including his challenger, take tea together afterwards and tell stories, read poetry and sing songs. This enabled the group to re-establish some shared humanity and fraternity (Rose, 2010: 266).

There is a wider re-evaluation of Tawney's contribution to theorizing the role and practice of inclusive, transformative university education in building a more effective political democracy and social solidarities (Holford, 2015; Goldman, 2013). Tawney emphasized the moral and spiritual in human betterment, which could be embodied in the tutorial classes in ways inspiring ideas of fellowship and service. The aim of the tutorial classes was to make university education available to all people in their own localities: very different to today's assumptions about the purpose of higher education for individual social mobility. Holford suggests that Tawney offers a localist critique of the current emphasis on developing global skills and mobility. Communities should not be privileged or discounted because of their wealth or poverty and universities can be active agents in communities via, for instance, adult education. Moreover, Tawney represents a more constructivist view of knowledge: the classes were classes, not lectures, and ideas were explored and developed in discussion (Holford, 2015).

Conclusion

The research helps refine Honneth's concept of recognition in thinking about processes of transformative learning and to illuminate the role of the group in intersectionality, in encounters with the other. But recognition can lead to destructive ends, while the idea of transformative learning requires a clearly identified normative framing. John Dewey (1969) observed that the good citizen, and, in effect, processes of transformative learning require democratic association so as to realize what we might be: we find ourselves by participating in family life, the economy and various artistic, cultural and political activities, in which there is free give and take. This fosters feelings of being understood and creating meaning and purpose in the company of others. Dewey suggests that good and intelligent solutions for society as a whole stem from open, inclusive and democratic types of association. In scientific research, for instance, the more scientists can freely introduce their own hypotheses, beliefs and intuitions, the better the eventual outcome. Dewey applied this idea to social learning as a whole: intelligent solutions are the result of the degree to which all those involved in groups participate fully without constraint and with equal rights. It is only when openly publicly debating issues, in inclusive ways, that societies or educational groups truly thrive (Honneth, 2007: 218–39).

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