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Critical Reflection: John Dewey's Relational View of Transformative Learning

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Abstract

How does critical reflection happen? And what circumstances influence the forms critical reflection takes and the issues it comes to address? Recent contributions suggest that we should pay greater attention to the ways social conditions and other factors affect what people reflect upon and how. Examining John Dewey's perspective on the relationship between practical engagement, objects of knowledge, and democracy, this article develops a relational perspective. Dewey significantly affected how Jack Mezirow theorized transformative learning. But Mezirow's theory is less attentive to the roles played by particular contextual features, such as structural circumstances, ideas and theories, and individuals'understanding and responses to diverse ways of viewing things and thinking. Rereading Dewey, this article suggests that these subtle features, or subtle "frames of reference," help construct reflection. Consequently, to deepen critical reflection, these subtle features need to become accessible to people as additional objects of knowledge on which they may reflect.

Keywords

John Dewey, critical reflection, transformative education, democracy, university, higher education

Critical reflection is a central concept in transformative learning theory (see Mezirow, 1991; 1998a). However, as several scholars have observed, the conditions that make

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desired outcomes possible and what specifically might trigger change have not been central questions for the field. Recent contributions argue that in order to better understand learning experiences and their outcomes, we need to pay more attention to social conditions and other factors that affect them (Fleming, 2018; Fleming et al., 2019; Taylor & Snyder, 2012; Taylor & Cranton, 2013; Mälkki, 2010; 2019; Murray, 2013). That these aspects have remained marginal may be partly due to the way that Jack Mezirow's influential articulation of transformative learning relied on rationalistic theories, in particular the work of Jürgen Habermas, to provide a philosophical foundation for the idea of critical reflection (Fleming, 2018). However, as the field has progressed, explanations in terms of conditions and mechanisms have become more central concerns (Taylor & Cranton, 2013).

Recent works have suggested that we may gain new insights about the conditions for critical reflection by re-examining some of the theories that helped inspire the field's founding (e.g. Fleming, 2018; Fleming et al., 2019; Raikou & Karalis, 2020). Along those lines, this article re-examines parts of the work of John Dewey, a theorist widely recognized to have influenced Mezirow's thinking. Like Dewey, Mezirow (1991, 1998a) understood critical reflection as a process of gaining a deeper understanding of the conditions shaping one's thinking and acting. However, I argue that Mezirow paid less attention to how the process of critical reflection is itself influenced by contextual factors. Dewey's work offers a theoretical perspective that helps us turn attention to various factors that may help explain variations in experiences of transformative learning. It also allows us to see the significance of taking a critical-reflective look at the particular forms that critical reflection takes depending on contextual factors. In this way, Dewey's view offers not only a conceptual understanding of conditions for transformative learning but also a more thoroughly reflective perspective.

I begin by discussing the limitations of Mezirow's perspective. In section two, I discuss how Dewey's work offers what sociologists call a *relational* view of critical reflection, in which social action in the classroom is situated in a context shaped by various social conditions. In Dewey's relational view, I suggest, reflection upon reflection has a central place in processes that bring together specific learning content, practical engagement and democratic values. Objects of knowledge are always present in learning processes, but they are present only so far as people engage with them practically by enacting or challenging them. In the third section, I discuss three types of objects of knowledge—structural/institutional, ideas or theories, and individual-level patterns and capacities of interpreting and responding to experiences of reflective learning. Each of these types of objects may vary in ways that shape different processes of transformative learning. I illustrate this argument, in section four, by discussing how these types of objects of knowledge affect learning and shape reflection in the context of higher education.

Critical Reflection in Transformative Learning Theory

A diverse set of theoretical perspectives have informed and shaped the field of transformative learning (see Fleming et al., 2019). It includes thinkers, like Freire, specifically focused on pedagogic practices (Pietrykowski, 1996; Finnegan, 2016), and contemporary figures in critical theory, such as Honneth (Fleming, 2018). As is widely recognized, Mezirow articulated his perspective on transformative education by drawing, in particular, on Habermas' critical theory as well as the works of Dewey (Fleming, 2018; Fleming et al., 2019; Raikou, 2018). Most importantly, Habermas and Dewey influenced Mezirow's understanding of the role critical reflection plays in transformative learning.

Recent contributions have suggested that transformative learning theory may develop further by engaging more deeply with these sources of influence for Mezirow's thought. For example, Fleming (2018, p. 212) argues that Mezirow's engagement with Habermas' critical theory was "selective" and left transformative theory "open to the charge of ignoring what is called the social dimension of learning" (Fleming, 2018, p. 121). Dewey's influence on Mezirow is similarly well-documented (Fleming, 2018, p. 121; Raikou, 2018; Raikou & Karalis, 2020). Raikou and Karalis (2020) find that Mezirow drew extensively on Dewey's work as he developed the concepts *frame of reference* and *habits of mind*, central components of Mezirow's understanding of critical reflection. However, in contrast to Dewey, Mezirow gave particular emphasis to the importance of *habits of mind*. In so doing, he fruitfully extended Dewey's theory into a realm that was not Dewey's main interest. On the other hand, Mezirow did not build further on other parts of Dewey's understanding of critical reflection. Several scholars have noted that Dewey's work, too, has unrealized potential in the field of transformative learning (Nohl, 2009; Wong, 2007). My aim in this paper is to explore some of that potential by discussing how Dewey brought together learning content, practical engagement and democratic values into a relational theory of education.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to draw out all the connections between Mezirow's thinking and the works of other theorists. I want to focus, rather, on one significant aspect of how Mezirow did not follow Dewey. My argument is, in brief, that while making it a central part of his theory that people reflect critically on the circumstances that have shaped their assumptions about the world, his idea of transformative learning did not give as much critical attention to the conditions that form processes of reflection and re-learning. In other words, Mezirow's focus on subjective experiences of the world allowed him to formulate a theory with significant potential for social critique, in that it turns attention to how social structures and discourses affect the ways people *see* the world and their role in it. However, this focus also allowed the field of transformative learning to downplay questions about how such transformative practices, too, are shaped by social, political, economic and cultural conditions—conditions that could, similarly, warrant critical attention.

At several points, Mezirow articulates the critical importance of transformative learning by contrasting it to other kinds of learning. The former, he suggests, is

reflective where the latter is shaped by various conditions that remain in the background. It is by learning to reflect on these conditions that we become able to act upon them and change the world. At one point he writes "if we had to make a choice between changing the world and helping learners to transform their assumptions about their world so that they could change it, I would unhesitatingly choose the latter" (p. 71). Note, first, that for Mezirow "changing the world" is dependent on "changing people's perspectives"—people need to change their perspective *so* that they can change the world. Second, it is easy to read this statement as suggesting that for Mezirow the converse is not necessarily true, that is, changing the world may not be necessary to change people's perspectives. The relation between these two things would in this case be asymmetrical.

What would this imply about Mezirow's view of how critical reflection happens? While it seems reasonable that change happens as people come to see the world differently, it appears less plausible that people come to see the world differently independently of how the world evolves and affects people. This is probably not what Mezirow intends to suggest. After all, what would be the need for transformative learning practices if such change of perspectives could happen under any conditions? Still, Mezirow's ambiguous statement is indicative of how underdeveloped his theory is with regard to how specific conditions affect the experiences and consequences of transformative learning. To paraphrase Fleming (2018, p. 21, quoted above), it is for this reason that Mezirow's theory becomes open to the charge of downplaying the social conditions of transformative learning.

At stake is whether Mezirow's theory can incorporate the recognition of this second-order type of reflection, that is, reflection *upon* how people's perspectives change in transformative learning. Consider by way of illustration how feminist thought has developed in various parts of the western world. From a transformative learning perspective, feminism empowers people by enabling them to reflect on patriarchal structures and gendered assumptions. Mezirow would emphasize how such collective reflection may transform people's perspectives, which helps them engage in collective projects of social change. However, in addition, contemporary feminism has also developed in significant ways through critical reflection that takes feminism itself as its object of critique. In other words, the feminist project involves critical reflection upon feminist practices of critical reflection. Such "meta-reflection" (see Holdo, 2020a) takes shape, for example, through intersectional critique that initially developed through the reflections of women of color and aimed to highlight how white feminism overlooked differences in experiences of patriarchy among women (Carbado et al., 2013). Thus, feminist intersectional critique pointed out that mainstream forms of feminist reflection were shaped by structures of domination within feminism itself. It is this kind of reflection upon reflection that goes missing if we fail to apply a critical perspective on our modes of reflection.

Mezirow did not explicitly elaborate an idea of how such reflection upon reflection happens. Nor did he unambiguously acknowledge that transformative perspective

change, too, is shaped by conditions that might warrant such reflection. Consider Mezirow's response to a critic:

> I have tried repeatedly to explain that our received frames of reference are composed of assimilated cultural codes, social norms, ideologies, and language games. These frames of reference are the way the culture shapes the way we learn. We are embedded in these sets of assumptions and expectations. Transformative learning is about emancipating ourselves from these taken-for-granted assumptions about social being. It involves bringing the sources, nature, and consequences of this received wisdom into critical awareness so that appropriate action–including social action – can be taken (Mezirow, 1998b, p. 70).

We can note several important things in this response. First, Mezirow distinguishes between, on the one hand, "the way we learn" ordinarily, which is "embedded in these sets of assumptions and expectations," and, on the other hand, "transformative learning," which is the way we emancipate ourselves "from these taken-for-granted assumptions." This could be taken to suggest that transformative learning is emancipatory because it is *not* embedded in sets of assumptions and expectations the way that ordinary learning is. It is this view that Mezirow would need to reject to allow for the possibility of reflection upon reflection. A different interpretation would be that Mezirow means that we can use various tools to bring such assumptions and expectations into critical awareness. Whatever Mezirow meant, this is the more fruitful view. It allows us to further elaborate Mezirow's theory to encompass a more thoroughly reflective understanding of transformative learning by asking such critical questions as: what is the role of "received wisdom" within the process of reflective critically upon such wisdom? In other words, transformative learning, too, can—for those who never get tired of critical reflection–become an object of investigation, through which we examine its sources, nature, and consequences. This mode of reflection becomes possible only if we acknowledge that however we conceptualize transformative learning it can never be a final stage of "critical awareness" that is capable of making its own sources, nature and consequences fully transparent.

Mezirow's way of separating reflective transformative learning and unreflective learning makes him vulnerable to the charge of idealizing the former. In this regard, the critique of Mezirow is similar to that which has often targeted Habermas' theory of communicative action, which strongly influenced Mezirow's theory (see e.g. Fraser, 1990). In its abstract formulation, Habermas' "ideal speech situation" arises spontaneously and thus independently of social, institutional and political conditions that shape other communication.[1] Critics have suggested that this makes it hard to understand how such communication can occur at all (e.g. Bourdieu, 1991; Fraser, 1990). Clearly, social relations and conditions shape all communication, even communication that may appear open, free and inclusive (Bourdieu, 1991; Young, 2001). Habermas, too, of course, acknowledges this but has not been able to show how his theory helps account for the resources and conditions that make something like communicative action possible in concrete social settings (Holdo, 2015, 2019). Like Habermas,

Mezirow, too, forcefully rejected the criticism that his theory was not sufficiently sociological (Mezirow, 1997). However, he paid more attention to the conditions under which people acquired unhelpful and oppressive habits of mind than to the conditions shaping transformative processes (for a discussion of the critique, see Gambrell, 2016, 2018; see also Taylor & Snyder, 2012).

Several recent contributions to transformative learning theory have in different ways discussed this apparent weakness in Mezirow's work (see also Fleming, 2018). One aspect of this critique is how the lack of attention to context makes the theory insufficiently reflective. In his critique, Murray (2013) notes that transformative learning theory prescribes a process that does not include a critical assessment of the classroom as such, that is, the transformative learning process and its conditions. By not engaging with wider structures of which this process is part, "the transformative approach lends itself more to adhering to responsibilities and conformity rather than encouraging critical activism" (Murray, 2013, p. 17). In other words, the experience of reflection is incomplete because it does not turn reflection onto itself: how is our current mode reflecting informed and shaped by culture, institutions, structures and cognitive factors? What resources—intellectual, cultural, etc.—are we using? Does our mode of reflection differ from the reflections of differently situated actors?

Another aspect of this critique is that lack of attention to context may hinder progress in research and theory development. Mälkki (2010) finds in an earlier overview of studies of transformative learning that conceptual connections between "the cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of reflection are left unconsidered. Consequently, no theory has been offered for explicating and analyzing the prerequisites and challenges to reflection" (2010, p. 43). While this research field has progressed considerably since Mezirow's most influential works, similar critiques have been reiterated recently of transformative learning theory (see Wang et al., 2019; Gambrell, 2018).[2] Taylor and Cranston (2013) argue that more attention to the "dialectical nature of experience and context" (p. 37) should be a crucial part of moving forward in the field of transformative learning, in which they claim, "researchers seem to be stuck on a treadmill, repeating the same research over and over again, and making less than satisfactory theoretical progress" (p. 34; see also Taylor & Snyder, 2012).

Dewey's Relational View

Dewey's influence on the field of transformative learning, and in particular the understanding of critical reflection, is well-documented (Raikou, 2018; Raikou & Karalis, 2020; Fleming, 2018, p. 121). Reflective learning, Dewey stressed, facilitates deeper understanding, but also personal growth and increased capacity to act in the world and contribute to collective emancipation. Central to his view of education is the idea of learning "democracy as a way of life," that is, democracy understand as "broader than a special political form, a method of conducting government, of making laws and carrying on governmental administration by means of popular suffrage and elected officers" (Dewey, 1984; 1987, p. 217). Democracy is that, too, Dewey admitted, but it

was "broader and deeper" than that: "The key-note of democracy as a way of life may be expressed, it seems to me, as the necessity for the participation of every mature human being in formation of the values that regulate the living of men together" (ibid.) Learning democracy as a way of life necessitated, Dewey claimed, a different understanding of the process of learning and the relationship between its parts: the content learned (the "objects of knowledge"), people's practical understanding and engagement, and the democratic values expressed in uncoercive interactions. (see also Bowers, 2005).

Dewey's understanding of the learning process and the relationship between its three parts is, I want to suggest, helpful in that it brings to the fore the ways that learning experiences are shaped by interactions between contextual factors and human action. Following Emirbayer, I see Dewey's theory as *relational* in the sense that the ways that the parts of learning experiences are linked become central in the analysis. What is distinct about relational theories is that they see "relations between terms or units as preeminently dynamic in nature, as unfolding, ongoing processes rather than as static ties among inert substances," writes Emirbayer (1997, p. 289). Dewey saw learning as a process where objects of knowledge come to make sense through practical engagement mediated by contextual features of that experience.

In contrast to traditional views of learning, Dewey does not begin with the content of the learning process—the "objects of knowledge." He begins with practical engagement. For Dewey, inquiry and learning begin with problems. "The object of knowledge is eventual," he states, in the sense that "it is the outcome of directed experimental operations, instead of something in sufficient existence before the act of knowing" (Dewey, 1984, pp. 136–137). Because knowledge is the outcome of practical engagement with problems, it never becomes fixed but continues to be part of a person's experience and reflection.

Second, Dewey's idea of objects of knowledge follows from the practical understanding of inquiry. On the one hand, knowledge is not simply whatever a person takes it to be. As Thayer remarks, Dewey "was not espousing a version of subjective idealism according to which thinking brings its objects into existence" (Thayer, 1990, p. 444). Things exist for Dewey in the sense that we apprehend them rather than making them up. On the other hand, Dewey is not primarily concerned with the existence of knowable objects but with the nature of knowledge and learning. To learn, suggests Bourdieu (1998, p. 32), is to construct as one discovers. This appears to be what Dewey has in mind when he says that objects of knowledge are not in "sufficient" existence on their own. Knowledge about such objects will be incomplete unless engaged with by practically oriented learners. As a collective, people gain the deepest understanding of problems by exploring how explanations resonate and hold true for a multitude of experiences. Such collective reasoning would also, he suggested, help explore the assumptions and biases with which different participants engage with a problem, thereby making learning reflective (Dewey, 2004).

Finally, democratic values are one type of knowledge that Dewey imagines being gained through collective experimentation. Defining democracy as "a mode of

associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey, 2004, p. 83), Dewey sees education both as the discovery of, and training in, the practice of democratic deliberation and as the process of constructing a democratic society. Thus, it is not enough to learn *about* democracy. People also need to learn to practice democracy. Thus, learning democracy requires learning particular objects of knowledge—the concepts and theories of democracy—by engaging with them in practice.

Part of what is original and significant in Dewey's view of reflective learning is how he brings the objects of learning into a relationship of mutual dependence with acts of learning. This "relational" approach (Emirbayer, 1997) suggests that learning democracy as a way of life means, on the one hand, that people of various backgrounds come together to explore the meaning and significance of democracy and, on the other hand, that they construct and maintain democratic practices and ideas that could support, and be supported by, dynamic democratic institutions.[3] Dewey's view may be articulated in Mezirow's terms as people effecting change in "frames of reference that define their worlds" would say (1997, p. 5), but it has another component too, to which Mezirow pays less attention: the "frames of reference," which correspond to what Dewey calls "objects of knowledge," exist for Dewey, although not completely or "sufficiently," in an external reality, which means that it takes more than perspective change to change the world. We may recognize a similar thought by Mezirow, when he states that reflective learning is about gaining a deeper sense of how to engage in the world (re-orientation). In fact, Mezirow, too, appears to apply relational thinking, in particular, when he articulates the idea of facing a "disorienting dilemma," where one experiences an imbalance between one's existing frames of reference and new challenges, often in connection to a change in life circumstances (Mezirow, 1991). Raikou and Karalis (2020) offer a more extensive comparison between Dewey's understanding of critical reflection and that of Mezirow, highlighting ways in which Mezirow's work significantly extended Dewey's theory in several regards. It is clear that the learning process depends on the confrontation with a world that can be viewed differently and therefore perspective change becomes central in Mezirow's theory. However, what is not relational in Mezirow's thinking is how he understands the process of transformative learning itself. It appears, as several scholars have noted, that Mezirow sees transformation as an unambiguously positive development, from having an irrational or unhelpful view of the world to developing one that is more rational and helpful to change one's course of action and deal with problems (Taylor & Cranton, 2013, p. 39). Again, while context clearly shapes those pre-existing perspectives that are in need of change, Mezirow treats the learning process as context-independent. By contrast, Dewey's relational view brings attention to how learning and re-learning need to be situated: they are processes shaped by social contexts as well as individual dilemmas. In other words, the active engagement with democratic values that Dewey imagines goes beyond "frames of reference." While the latter includes collective and cultural "habits of mind," they are still treated as part of a subjective outlook, not as *objects* of knowledge, in Dewey's terms. This difference between Dewey's and Mezirow's thinking may seem negligible since both could agree that social change depends on

engagement with concepts, norms and ideas that enable and constrain people's interactions with others. However, by calling attention to this relationship of mutual dependence, or co-production, between educational practices and democracy, Dewey avoids the risk of reducing the transformative potential of education to a concern with subjective mindsets. He insists that an integrated, inclusive democratic society requires forms of education that are participatory and deliberative because these forms can transform people's perspectives and thereby keep the democratic imaginary alive through continuous engagement (see also Finnegan, 2016, p. 55).

Three Types of Objects of Knowledge and Reflection

A crucial part of Dewey's view is the idea that contextual factors shaping learning processes can themselves be brought into focus and become objects of knowledge with which people may engage practically. Several types of factors discussed in recent research on transformative learning can be engaged as objects of knowledge in Dewey's terms. First, structural and institutional conditions influencing learners' reflection can be addressed and engaged with. Some of those conditions may be obstructive—for example,. power relations, incentives to agree and adapt to expectations, and privilege. Hayward (2017) argues, for example, that part of why critical reflection is difficult is that people are incentivized to be unreflective in order to avoid taking responsibility for structural injustices. Such "motivated ignorance," her argument suggests, plays a crucial part in keeping structural change off political agendas and public discourse. Conversely, however, structural conditions may also facilitate critical reflection. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) found that structural conditions facilitated the establishment of norms of reciprocity and trust that allowed actors in professional fields to engage in reflective deliberation (see Holdo, 2015, 2016). Social structures may create incentives for people to reconsider assumptions through collective reflection. Understanding such conditions is one important aspect of developing explanatory theories. Moreover, Dewey's relational view suggests that these structural conditions—obstructive and facilitative—of transformative learning can become objects of knowledge that learners reflect on to understand the possibilities and limits of their own mode of critical reflection.

Second, practitioners of transformative learning employ various kinds of intellectual tools, from particular concepts to general theories, to stimulate reflection. For Dewey, the concept of democracy played a crucial part in reflective activities. In similar ways, theories of justice and equality may encourage people to question patterns of social interaction and prioritization. Conversely, theories of domination, racism, colonialism, and patriarchy may help encourage engagements with forms of social critique. Ideas, theories and concepts are intellectual objects of knowledge that shape processes of reflection in ways similar to structural and institutional conditions. A relational understanding suggests that critical reflection occurs in the interaction between such intellectual objects of knowledge and people's personal engagement. For explanatory theories, such objects of knowledge are significant contextual factors to explore.

Moreover, intellectual objects of knowledge, much like structural conditions, may obstruct and facilitate critical reflection and are therefore also important to address through acts of reflection.

Finally, Dewey's relational theory is relevant to recent discussions about the nature of the cognitive action involved in reflective learning. A number of theorists have argued for a broader view than suggested by Mezirow's articulation of critical reflection (Dix, 2016; Mezirow, 1991; Mälkki, 2010; 2019). Dix, for example, argues that "Mezirow unduly restricts the scope of his definition and model of transformative learning by bringing to them unrealistically narrow conceptions of intelligence, rationality, thought, and reflective judgment" (Dix, 2016), p. 140). For example, Mälkki (2010, 2012, 2019) has highlighted the role that emotions play in critical reflection. One important aspect of this is how emotions may constrain critical reflection by guiding one's learning away from discomfort to one's comfort zones. Moreover, the emotions of others, as one begins to question the assumptions one shares with them, may also be a significant part of the social conditions for one's reflective learning. Conversely, emotions are often crucial triggers of critical reflection (Mälkki, 2012). The wider relevance of these findings is that aspects such as these provide external conditions that shape processes of reflection. More research is thus needed to understand how, more precisely, emotions can enable rather than hinder emancipatory transformative learning.

Similarly, a relational view of other individual qualities—for example, rationality or intelligence—may help explore further dimensions of reflective capacity, such as how our own perceptions of rationality and intelligence can become objects of reflection. Landemore (2013) argues in a slightly different context that cognitive *diversity*—differences in ways of seeing and interpreting the world—can be an important trigger of kinds of collective reflection required to solve common problems. Thus, in various ways, cognitive capacities beyond rationality and intelligence, as traditionally understood, affect processes of critical reflection. For explanatory theories of transformative learning, it is important that such variables help understand how critical reflection happens and the specific shapes it takes and outcomes it generates. As other objects of knowledge, such as structural or institutional conditions and intellectual sources, they become, at the same time, conditions and objects of critical reflection: they affect the process but are also the target of the process.[4]

Illustration: Reflection Upon Reflection in Higher Education

We can see the difference that a relational perspective can make more clearly by examining a concrete setting for critical reflection and potentially transformative learning. Higher education is one setting that has gained increased attention in recent contributions to the literature (Moore, 2005). While universities and departments vary greatly with regard to how and to what extent they involve students in critical reflection, the central questions raised from Dewey's relational perspective are the same. As I will discuss, the relational perspective raises questions concerned with explanations for

transformative learning, especially critical reflection, and the specific forms it may take in higher education. It also raises questions for meta-reflection, in the sense that we may critically examine how the ways students engage in critical reflection are limited by the features of this process discussed above: structural and institutional conditions, intellectual sources, and individual abilities and dispositions.

From the perspective of explaining transformative learning and the particular shapes of such experience, these three features can be treated as independent variables. As Taylor and Cranton (2013) note, mainstream approaches of social science have had limited influence on scholarship on transformative learning. Treating conditions for critical reflection as potentially explanatory factors help move beyond current practices of case-study research and less systematic comparisons to more traditional, "positivistic" forms of comparative research, thereby increasing the field's methodological pluralism. More specifically, examining the explanatory power of different features of transformative learning helps explore the significance of context (Mälkki, 2010; Fleming, 2018). First, how do structural conditions and institutions affect practices of critical reflection? Can, on the one hand, transformative learning be obstructed by an environment that incentivizes unreflecting action? Can critical reflection, on the other hand, itself be incentivized by institutions of higher education? Moreover, how do specific forms of incentives shape practices of reflective learning? For example, does the level of social inclusion in an institution of higher education—in turn affected by sources of financing and regulations of admission—affect people's willingness to question structural inequalities and privilege? Does an institution's relations to powerful organizations and groups affect its possibilities of engaging students in critical reflection about a society's structures of power, and if so, how?

Similar questions may be asked about various settings for adult learning, and systematic comparisons can be made to understand how contextual factors shape processes of transformative learning through differences in structures and incentives. Likewise, particular intellectual resources, such as ideas and concepts, shape those frames of reference that are involved in processes of transformative learning. As Taylor (1989) has shown, for example, practices of reflection and critique in Western societies have been shaped in significant ways by particular historical constructions of selfhood, community and society. Forms of reflection differ, as well, between different national contexts due to political legacies and philosophies (such as liberalism, social democracy, and conservativism) that have shaped ways of explaining and justifying social practices, hierarchies and forms of inclusion and exclusion. In higher education, these aspects of intellectual contexts may affect the objects of critical reflection—racism, gender inequality, intolerance, conformism, and economic inequality. Moreover, especially in higher education, critical reflection may be stimulated by particular works in philosophy and social criticism, by, for example, such authors as Judith Butler, Pierre Bourdieu, Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, and, perhaps, John Dewey. These works, too, become frames of reference that affect and help explain variations in processes of transformative learning.

Finally, transformative learning processes are also affected by biographical, biological and mental factors. Universities may face particular challenges for critical reflection in that their systems of admission, grading, and rewarding excellence usually serve to confirm pre-existing assumptions about superior abilities, status and entitlement, rather than encouraging students to question them (Naidoo *, 2004). Here, previous research indicates paths of inquiry that a Deweyan relational view may help push further. Previous contributions highlight, on the one hand, how context-specific our conceptualizations of individual ability are and, on the other hand, how different individual abilities, traits and patterns of interpretation generate different forms of critical reflection (Landemore, 2013; Dix, 2016). Universities are crucial cases to further explore the implications of these arguments. Do biases in how individual ability is detected and measured lead to certain (low-diversity) constellations of cognitive patterns and thereby systematically constrain people's ways of engaging in critical reflection? May failures to challenge students to move beyond their comfort zones reinforce assumptions that could have become objects of critical reflection? Could, conversely, too much discomfort obstruct critical reflection by leading them to reject questioning and stay within their comfort zones?

A relational view thus turns our attention to how individual and collective critical reflection is situated in contexts shaped by institutional/structural, intellectual/ideational and cognitive variables. From the perspective of explanatory theory, these may be crucial factors to consider. Moreover, they are also objects of knowledge that ought to be brought into processes of critical reflection themselves. The relational view considers, in this way, all objects of knowledge to be, in Dewey's terms, insufficient on their own. That is, they are objects whose existence is not independent of our practical engagement with them. They come to exist more fully and come to generate consequences as they are enacted or challenged. Exploring conditions that shape experiences of reflective learning, therefore, serves both to explain learning and its outcomes and to facilitate reflection upon reflection.

Conclusion

Dewey's relational view of reflective learning emphasizes that learning depends on practical engagement. We learn about new objects of knowledge that help us orient and act in the world by interpreting them and making them part of our experience. Objects of knowledge come to exist to people, come to have consequences as they recognize their significance. Dewey sees such practical engagement with objects of knowledge as essential to learning. What is distinct about transformative learning is that it requires that people do not merely reenact objects of knowledge but make them part of their reflective agency by making them objects of critical interrogation.

Mezirow built his theory of transformative learning partly on the idea of critical reflection as an exercise of agency, much like Dewey imagined. However, I have argued that Mezirow saw critical reflection as a process of reflecting on prior, non-reflective (and non-transformative) learning. He did not recognize that processes of critical

reflection, too, are important objects of reflective learning. Dewey's view, by contrast, recognizes the need to examine the circumstances that shape how we practice critical reflection.

On the one hand, this relational understanding allows us to see such circumstances as variables that may help explain variations in people's experiences of transformative learning. On the other hand, it allows us to be reflective also about our modes of reflecting. Here, in the reflection upon reflection, lies the potential of this view to contributing to progress in the field of transformative learning.

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Notes

1. In *Between facts and norms,* Habermas distinguishes between behavior that takes place as the result of external conditions, which means that they are incentivized, and behavior that comes "from within," which may be stimulated but not incentivized by an external environment. He insists that critical reflection emerging from communicative action has to come "from within" to be authentic (Habermas, 1996, p. 359; see also Holdo, 2020b).

2. These critiques echo Hayward's assessment of works by critical educational theorists, that their view of how social, political and economic conditions affected, and often oppressed, students in traditional classrooms simultaneously "encouraged them to avert their critical gaze from institutions and practices that appeared to empower students to act in ways they choose, or in ways that serve their interests" (Hayward, 2000, p. 55). In an exchange with Mezirow, Inglis (1997) expressed a similar critique of transformative learning theory (Inglis, 1997, p. 76). Like Hayward, Inglis suggests that transformative learning theory is based on assumptions that lead theorists away from situating and analyzing the structures and pre-existing habits that shape transformative practices.
3. Dewey's understanding of learning democracy can be contrasted to Habermas' conceptualization of deliberation as a practice of constructing democracy from below. Habermas' focus is on public sphere engagement in civil society rather than education (Habermas, 1996). While Dewey theorizes the relationships between education and democracy, Habermas takes that relationship largely for granted in the sense that the public sphere relies on the existence of the kind of democratic values and orientation that, according to Dewey, must be learned through democratic, experimental forms of education (see Delanty, 1997; see also Englund, 2016). This aspect of Habermas' theory has been subject to extensive debates (see e.g. Fraser, 1990; Benhabib, 1997; Holdo, 2020b).
4. The ways we conceptualize aspects of people's individual capacities may thus themselves become objects of critical reflection. How does a certain understanding of rationality as opposed to emotion shape processes of critical reflection? How does a particular way of conceptualizing critical reflection, in terms of cognitive action and ability, facilitate *and* limit our modes of collective reflection? In general, how do discourses of cognition, emotion, and intelligence affect the social practice of transformative learning? Similar questions arise for scholars who have used the concept of *recognition* to bring attention to the ways that critical reflection itself, and the individual capacities thought necessary to engage in it, are social constructions that depend on people's mutual recognition (Fleming, 2016; West et al., 2013). From a relational perspective, the critical issue is that these constructions are objects of knowledge, whose incompleteness—or "insufficiency" to use Dewey's term—can be revealed and reflected on. In particular, concepts used to classify individual ability often affect people's possibilities of acting and participating because they affect perceptions of competence and authority. We can bring them into practices of transformative learning as objects of knowledge in Dewey's sense and thereby use them to accomplish the second objective of deepening critical reflection.

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