REFLECTIONS ON MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

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Introduction

This paper explores a pedagogical dilemma: how can both transformative learning and the development of the sociological imagination be achieved in the Sociology classroom? The exploration of these questions is the culmination of a three year long research project. While the project did not begin with this topic, three years of working with students has led us to begin to connect the development of the sociological imagination with the development and measurement of transformative learning.

Attitude Change and Sociological Imagination

C. Wright Mills introduced the concept of Sociological Imagination in 1959. It involves seeing the individual in context and thinking critically about social issues. It includes considering factors beyond the control of individuals that might shape their life chances or choice. It means going beyond commonsense knowledge and thinking about a familiar world in unfamiliar ways. Sociology faculty frequently list the development of sociological thinking or the sociological imagination as a high priority when asked what their learning goals are for their students, especially in introductory Sociology courses (Persell et al, 2007; Persell, 2010). Like other educators, Sociologists often have faith in the transformative nature of their educational efforts (Westerman, 2008; Westerman and Huey, 2012; see also Stamp, 2001). Encouraging students to develop a sociological imagination is viewed as a central factor in this potential transformation. The assumption is often made that exposing students to the discussion of social issues and the modelling of the application of the sociological imagination will have a transformative effect on students and will lead to positive attitude change, particularly in relation to students' views regarding marginalized groups within society. In order to explore whether or not such transformations occur, we set out in 2012 to compare the impact of a first year sociology course on students' perceptions of groups that tend to be socially marginalized. The study was a quasi-experimental design that tested the impact of diversity-infused course content on student attitudes by systematically measuring and comparing attitude changes toward minority groups. Data collection occurred in the first and last weeks of classes at both institutions. Both institutions' semesters lasted 15 weeks. Courses were chosen on

the basis of the first year status of the course. The *Intolerant Schema Measure* (*ISM*) (Aosved, Long, & Voller, 2009) was used to collect data on student attitudes towards minority groups and demographic data were collected in order to analyse whether differences in age, gender, etc. have an impact on attitude change in either or both institutions. One group of students was in a structurally diverse institution and the other was in a structurally nondiverse institution. Diversity is defined as variance and a range in characteristics including race, social class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, religion, etc. within a particular group, population, or setting (Hussey et al., 2010). A structurally diverse institution is deemed to represent such variety.

The data provided in this phase of the project did not support the notion that major attitude change is likely to occur over a single course (Westerman and Wagner, 2013). No significant changes were identified in either condition from the start to the end of the semester, although the diverse group did see a non-significant decrease in overall ISM scores, indicating a slight level of influence of the sociological perspective. Bengston and Hazzard (1990) argue that many sociologists assume that students have "faulty" common sense ideas about social issues that must be replaced by a sociological perspective. However, their research indicates that students' "common sense" knowledge is less at odds with sociological ideas than many believe. Their survey of 120 freshman students revealed that students had a tendency to agree with sociological perspectives before participating in an introductory course. Their data indicates that the Sociology students did not develop their sociological knowledge any more than students in another introductory humanities course. The authors argue that a traditional survey course may not be the best format for introductory Sociology because it appears to be the least effective way to build on students' latent potential to develop their sociological imagination. Our research demonstrates that attitudes regarding social issues were only minimally affected by participation in a traditional first-year sociology course.

The subscale scores from our research are potentially more edifying. The ISM is made up of subscales that measure racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and ageism. Although very little change was observed in overall ISM scores, the subscale score results showed some interesting (although small) changes. While there were no significant changes in the ISM subscale scores in the diverse group from the beginning to the end of the term, the scores on three of the subscales increased in the non-diverse group over the course of the term, indicating a rise in intolerance. The work of authors such as Lake and Rittschof (2010) demonstrates that some students exhibit resistance and show signs of becoming more deeply entrenched in their intolerant attitudes when exposed to diversity-infused content. This assertion was somewhat supported by our findings. Dandaneau (2009) argues that Mills concept of sociological imagination is not always pleasant or easy to deal with. It means examining the world as it really is, with all its faults and inequalities. It does not paint a pretty picture of society; it does not construct a fairy tale. It embraces and provides an approach to critical analysis of the social world. It presents a particular challenge to students in this regard, and my therefore generate resistance. Writers such as bell hooks argue that a certain amount of resistance on the part of students may be desirable because it indicates that something is really happening – that the students are engaging with ideas that challenge their taken-for-granted views

of how the world works. Developing a sociological imagination may be more difficult for some students or generate a higher level of discomfort or resistance. However, as bell hooks argues in "Teaching to Transgress", a certain level of resistance may be desirable because it is an indication that we are getting students to challenge deeply held and previously unquestioned beliefs. The development of a sociological imagination is "messy" but this messiness can be deeply transformative.

Focus groups held with members of a cohort of students in the second phase our research revealed that debating controversial issues with their peers, both inside and outside of the classroom, was "messy" but was also a key element in their learning. Participants generally agreed that a significant impact of participating in their program was becoming more open minded, as well as considering the opinions of others and why they are held. Considering the opinions of others is part of the maturation process and contributes to transformative learning. The participants noted the importance of interactions with other members of their cohort in their development of self -confidence and critical thinking about social problems, because many different and controversial topics were discussed with peers with various opinions. This form of instruction should be undertaken carefully and thoughtfully, as directly challenging student's beliefs under the wrong circumstances could cause students to disengage from the course. Lake and Rittschof (2012) suggest that consistent attitude change and increased empathy for others among students result from a) direct challenges to misinformation about groups through b) the use of personal narratives in a c) non-threatening classroom environment. As Brock notes, "in looking back over a semester, learners can be surprised that life lessons have been learned. Sharing these with classmates can cement this change and stimulate others to see the world in a new way" (2010, p. 137).
Encouraging students to share their perspectives on controversial topics in a safe environment can help them to appreciate different perspectives. Discussing beliefs and belief change with peers can encourage critical reflection. These types of experiences could be a step towards the resocialization that is necessary for the development of a sociological imagination. They are also parts of the process of transformative learning.

The data collected in phases one and two of the project led us to consider the impact of students' long term participation in programs and how resocialization and development of a sociological imagination can occur. It was at this point in the process that we began to contemplate the connections between the process of transformative learning and the development of a sociological imagination.

Connecting Sociological Imagination and Transformative Learning

The historical understanding of transformative learning has been significantly influenced by Thomas Kuhn (1962), Paulo Friere (1970), Roger Gould (1978), Habermas (1984) – all of whose work became building blocks for the work of Jack Mezirow (1991) when he described Transformation Theory.

As defined by Mezirow (1997) transformative learning is "the process of effecting change in a frame of reference…when circumstances permit, transformative learners move

toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience" (p. 5). The process of transformative learning is not communicated by the teacher and absorbed by the student: it is an active process in which the student encounters a situation that challenges him/her and causes him/her to become dissatisfied with his/her value system and then critically reflect upon it. Interactions that challenge previously held ideas and beliefs were associated with an increase in openness to diversity and challenge. Mezirow argues that transformative learning is central to adult education as it aids the individual in becoming an autonomous thinker (1997).

Mezirow (1991) identified a conflict between theories of adult learning and the provision in terms of teaching for those learners. He believed that there was a lack of communication between the educators and those who provide the teaching and training, and that there was not always a shared language around 'adult learning'. Mezirow urged educators to support those learners to think about themselves and their world. This '*perspective transformation'* (Mezirow, 1985) which echoes Friere's (1992) '*conscientization',* was underpinned by Brookfield (1986) through his vision of *critical reflectivity* (pp. 213). This was further supported by Drago-Severson (2004: 19) who noted that: "Learning as development is an essential feature of transformational learning, because such learning can contribute to the development of the self through reconfiguring the individual's way of knowing".

Drago-Severson's research identified that those who experience this transformational change also demonstrate a more multifaceted way of knowing their world. It is commonly acknowledged that individuals come to these new understandings because the rules by which their meaning is constructed, is itself transformed (Taylor, Marienau and Fiddler, 2000).

Mezirow's (1990) view that '*to make meaning means to make sense of experience'* (p. 1) was drawn from his observations of his wife's return to learning as an adult. Habermas (1984, 1987) described a process where people observe and reflect on their own and others' ways of making and synthesising meaning – an influence acknowledged by Mezirow (1985) in his observations of dialogue, inquiry and responding to new ideas.

In the development of adult learners into autonomous thinkers, Cranton (1994) suggests that transformed perspectives create autonomous learners who become increasingly '*free from coercion, constraints, and distortion'* (p.60) in the development of '*meaning perspective'* (Mezirow, 1990. p xvi)

"From the educator's perspective, transformative learning is when a learner is struck by a new concept or way of thinking and then follows through to make a life change" (Brock, 2010: 123). Mezirow (1997) postulated 10 steps that learners go through that lead to a new way of viewing the world, the first and arguably most important of which is exposure to a disorienting dilemma (1978). A disorienting dilemma is an experience that challenges the learner's expectations and therefore leads to a change in perspective about some aspect of the world. Brock's (2010) research supports the notion that the most prevalent

precursor step to transformative learning is a disorienting dilemma. Challenging misinformation about marginalized groups is central to the content of Sociology courses. Helping students move beyond individualistic explanations to a more fulsome understanding of social context can introduce many disorienting dilemmas (i.e. poor people aren't lazy they are underpaid/underemployed).

The disorienting dilemma can set a student on a path to critical reflection and new patterns of thinking and acting. Therefore, transformative learning represents a particular type of resocialization. The development of a sociological imagination also involves resocialization (Kedebe, 2009). With these issues in mind, we set out to explore transformative learning in one cohort of students. Participants were given Kathleen King's (2009) Learning Activities Survey in order to measure transformative learning. While the number of participants in this phase was small (11) and therefore provided only exploratory information, several interesting themes arose. Respondents noted the importance of new experiences in causing them to question their previous views of the world. Respondents indicated that interactions with and support from their classmates was important to their learning over their program, as well as support from their instructors. In terms of other precursor steps to transformative learning, becoming uncomfortable with traditional social expectations and realizing that others also questioned their beliefs were important to our respondents.

Eckstein et al (1995) argue that while academic sociologists emphasize the sociological imagination as the central concept and skill that they want to see students take away from an introductory course, articulating the concept clearly and teaching the students to apply it are challenging issues. Their research with 70 undergraduate students revealed that students had learned about a "sociological voice" but did not necessarily know how to apply it. While the instructors were sure they were clearly teaching the sociological imagination, "what might seem substantively clear to sociologists might not have been clear to the students; they seemed to face many common struggles in their quest to figure out 'how sociologists think'." (1995: 361). Bidwell (1995:401) points out, the sociological imagination is a "form of consciousness…it is a *cognitive ability* rather than a simple vocabulary term" (emphasis mine). And yet, most sociologists tend to encourage students to master the jargon/language of sociology in an introductory survey course rather than teaching them to apply the sociological imagination to social issues.

Kedebe argues that "the sociological imagination, as a creative act, is best internalized when it is practiced" (2009: 354). Our goal, then, is to consider how to go beyond defining and modelling the Sociological imagination in the classroom (the transfer of information), and moving towards methods in the classroom that might help students to develop the Sociological imagination as a cognitive ability and to be able to take what they learned and apply it in contexts outside the classroom, in their daily lives (the assimilation of information). This type of learning may be more likely to present disorienting dilemmas to students, thereby encouraging transformative learning. All of the respondents in phase 3 of our own research project indicated that discussions and assignments were important in challenging their worldviews and effecting change in their perspectives. Bengston and Hazzard (1990) argue that a traditional survey course may not be the best format for

introductory Sociology because it appears to be the least effective way to build on students' latent potential to develop their sociological imagination. Although changing the format of the traditional survey course entirely may not be possible given the parameters and expectations of the traditional university system, introducing activities that encourage transformative learning through the introduction of disorienting dilemmas and the application of the sociological imagination can provide an opportunity for deeper learning. A number of authors suggest activities for classrooms that encourage students to cultivate and internalize aspects of the sociological imagination. As we do not have the space here to include all possible suggested activities, we outline two below as exemplars.

Kaufman (1997) encourages students to describe everyday objects in ways that illustrate layers of connection to the local and global social forces that create and influence the object. Exercises such as this acknowledge that students may be more in tune with sociological ideas and more prepared to develop a sociological imagination than their professors believe they are. Bengston and Hazzard (1990) argue that many sociologists assume that students have "faulty" common sense ideas about social issues that must be replaced by a sociological perspective. However, their research indicates that students' "common sense" knowledge is less at odds with sociological ideas than many believe. Kaufman's (1997) research reports that students can provide sociological analyses even though they do not yet understand the concept of sociological imagination. The exercise allows students to discover what sociologists do and that they can do it too. This exercise accesses students' common sense understanding that comes from their lived experience and links it to sociological analysis. "As a result, students are comfortable and eager about 'doing' sociology, thus fostering what hooks (1994) calls an 'engaged and transformative pedagogy'. (1997: 12).

Simpson and Elias (2011) developed a role-playing game that students participate in throughout the entire semester that includes graded assignments. Stratification in society is a central theme of the game. Students create characters through a combination of chance and demographic information (rolling dice to assign characteristics based on statistical information). By creating characters and then adopting their roles in exercises throughout the semester, the students "experience the troubles or benefits that their characters derive through their relationship with the social structure" (44), thereby connecting Mills' concepts of personal troubles and public issues – concepts that are central to the development of the sociological imagination. "In effect, they experience a participatory virtual ethnographic study of their own culture" (44).

Such exercises attempt to encourage an understanding of the sociological imagination that goes beyond simple definition of the term. But how will we know if students have acquired and internalized the perspective such that it alters their worldview? A number of authors have argued that measuring whether students have developed a working sociological imagination is difficult. Most studies simply ask students if they understand and/or can define the concept For example, McKinney (2005) asks senior students for a definition of the sociological imagination and reports the 11 of 21 can provide "acceptable explanations and/or examples using fairly generous standards" (374). However, as Hoop (2009) argues "we cannot assume that because students understand sociological

concepts from examples relevant to their lives that our students are developing their sociological imaginations" (53). We propose that one way to measure the development of the sociological imagination is to measure the level and type of transformative learning reported by students. Experiences that encourage the development and application of the sociological imagination can arguably be paths to disorienting dilemmas and to transformative learning. Therefore, we argue that the use of measures of transformative learning can also be useful in understanding whether students have internalized the resocialization that the sociological imagination requires. Rather than asking students to define/identify their level of sociological imagination, employing a tool such as King's (2009) Learning Activities survey (developed to measure levels of transformative learning) may give us better insight into transformations that could be indicative of the development of a sociological imagination.

This does, however, return us to the question of whether or not transformative learning can occur over the course of one class. Further research on the outcomes of using exercises such as those described above will reveal whether or not the exercises have the desired effect: that is, do they produce experiences encourage the application of the sociological imagination and the experience of transformative learning?

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the development of a sociological imagination is one of the most important accomplishments according to professors within the discipline, ways to cultivate it and measure it require further development. We propose that going beyond defining the concept and modelling its application is necessary to encourage students to develop their Sociological Imagination. We argue that developing a sociological imagination is a form of transformative learning that can be encouraged through challenging students previously held notions about the world – making the familiar seem unfamiliar and challenging individualistic explanations with social context. Providing classroom experiences that generate such dilemmas can support deep rooted changes in perspective for students. These changes could then be measured using instruments that examine transformative learning.

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