

Explaining the Transformation of Ethical Vegans: Is Mezirow's Theory Adequate?

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Abstract: This paper explores the adequacy of Mezirow's transformation theory to describe the transformational learning of ethical vegans. A critical reading of the participants' narratives revealed that a temporal understanding of power is needed. Transformation theory failed to account for the power of normative ideologies to undermine the emancipatory learning and praxis of ethical vegans over time.

Normative Ideologies and Transformation Theory

How do adults learn to make major changes in their lives? This question has intrigued adult education researchers for over twenty years, since Mezirow (1978a, 1978b) first introduced his ideas about transformational learning. In spite of the number of published articles and debates regarding transformational learning (Clark & Wilson, 1991; Collard & Law, 1989; Inglis, 1997; Mezirow, 1990, 1991a, 1991b, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1996; Newman, 1994; Pietrykowski, 1996; Taylor, 1993, 1997; Tennant, 1993), Mezirow's transformation theory remains the only theory of learned major lifestyle change within adult education. As Taylor (1997) noted, however, few empirical studies on Mezirow's transformation theory have been published; and in dissertations completed using Mezirow's theory, there has been little theoretical critique.

Mezirow (1991a, 1992, 1995) claimed that his theory is an abstract, generic, individualized process of adult learning that is comprised of critical reflection, rational discourse, and emancipatory praxis. Transformational, emancipatory learning is optimized within the ideal conditions of discourse, that is, communication free of distortion and manipulation. Following Habermas, Mezirow recognized that discourse is susceptible to systematic manipulation and distortion (Mezirow, 1995). Because these distortions and manipulations are inevitable, however, transformation theory assumes they can be overcome through critical reflection, discourse, and emancipatory praxis. Critics have argued that transformation theory does not practically account for the power of systematic knowledge and cultural ideologies to distort communication (Hart, 1985; Pietrykowski, 1996) and therefore constrain or inhibit adult learning.

Cultural ideologies are self-perpetuating and do so in the interests of those with power (Hart, 1985). Thus, systematic communication and action are structured through inequality and injustice. Even when power is "thematized," it remains a formidable barrier to adult learning (Hart, 1985). Critics, therefore, have argued for the importance of power in understanding such learning (Hart, 1985; Inglis, 1997; Newman, 1994; Pietrykowski, 1996). In spite of these calls, transformation theory has retained its psychological emphasis, and research has yet to empirically show how power might be practically integrated into the theory (Inglis, 1997).

The overarching purpose of this research was to determine whether Mezirow's transformation theory explains the process of learning to become an ethical vegan. The specific purposes of this analysis were to 1) explore the role of power in transformational learning, and 2) assess whether transformation theory's treatment of power is adequate to explain the transformational experience of ethical vegans. Ethical vegans are individuals who have given up the consumption and use of all animal products and by-products, including meat, dairy, eggs, wool, and leather, for ethical reasons (Vegetarians, in contrast, may consume animal by-products such as leather, eggs, and dairy products). Vegans' primary ethical objections are to the oppression of and cruelty to non-human animals associated with animal agriculture and related industries. The vegan movement, like the feminist movement, represents efforts to expose and resist systematic structures of power by "thematizing" them (Adams, 1990; Hart, 1985). In this context, power is defined by human supremacy over non-human animals, and is sustained by the normative ideology represented by speciesism. Speciesism is a systematic prejudice in favor of one's own species and against other species (Singer, 1990). Adams (1990) described how communication and interaction support speciesist values: "Behind every meat meal is an absence, the death of the animal whose place the meat takes. With the word 'meat' the truth about this death is absent. Thus, in expressing their concern about eating animals, vegetarians cannot ignore the issue of language. In this they are not unlike feminists who find that issues of language imbricate women's oppression" (1990, p. 63).

Hart (1985) argued that if "the acquisition of a practical consciousness that is capable of rationally addressing moral-practical questions is accepted as a major educational objective, consciousness raising groups and collectives can be considered genuine adult educational situations" (p. 121). Thus, the consciousness raising and collectives of vegans should also be considered adult education. For people who have grown up consuming the typical American diet, unconsciously accepting the norms of language and action that oppress animals, becoming vegan represents a major personal change. This change, in accordance with Mezirow's definition of a transformational experience, "call[s] into question deeply held personal values, and threaten[s] our very sense of self" (Mezirow, 1991a, p. 168). Mezirow (1996) noted that a transformational learning experience requires the learner to make a reflective and informed decision to act. If Mezirow's theory is valid for a variety of transformational learning experiences, it should explain how people learn to become and remain ethical vegans.

Research Design

The phenomenological framework of this study sought to understand "the structure and essence" of the experience of learning to become an ethical vegan (Patton, 1990, p. 69). The underlying tenant of phenomenology is that individuals can only know what they experience. The aim of phenomenology is to "determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). The researcher also employed heuristic methodology (Moustakas, 1990), taking advantage of her own vegan experience. The goal was to uncover what mattered, from the vegans' perspective, as they discovered the ideology of veganism and adopted it as a "generalized norm" (Hart, 1985, p. 126) in place of their speciesist ideology. The research involved in-depth unstructured interviews with twelve ethical vegans. All these individuals were Caucasian, middle class, and had been vegan for at least one year. Purposeful sampling techniques, including intensity, snowball, and

opportunistic sampling, were used. An initial sample was identified at a national animal rights march, based on the acknowledged relationship between understanding animal rights theory and veganism (Adams, 1990; Stepaniak, 1998). The data were analyzed using a holistic analysis, followed by a constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Powerful Lifeworld Challenges Emerge in Transformational Learning

A learning process generic to these vegans emerged from the holistic analysis. This process was revealed through the first person account of experience, usually chronological, exposing such phases as initial personal identity, the repression of potentially transforming information, the catalytic event (Courtenay, Merriam, and Reeves, 1998), the decision to become vegan, consciousness raising (Hart, 1985), praxis, and the transformed ideology.

The constant comparative analysis elucidated this process as one shaped by systematic structures of power. The relative strength and influence of these structures of power emerged in participants' narratives across two dimensions, described below. The oppression of non-human animals, systematically reinforced across these dimensions through communicative and activity norms, served as the vortex for participant reflection, discourse, and a regulated praxis.

The oppression of non-human animals was introduced by written or spoken word, and by visual images. It was embraced "...through the more quiet moment of nagging doubt, courageously given into, or through the emotional turmoil of disorienting dilemmas..." (Hart, 1985, p. 122). Whether sudden or gradual, it was, however, a point of ideological clarity for the vegan-to-be. Prior to becoming vegan, every participant had been a meat eater, had assumed the normative speciesist ideology. Lisa, who had never heard of veganism nor consciously considered a vegan ideology prior to this moment, reacted to a video on animal cruelty. Her comments are representative of the way in which a discovered truth about animal cruelty was embraced:

I watched the video. It was like they say, the curtain was pulled back. The truth was made known. It's just when I learned the real truth of the matter, and how [non-human animals] are treated, I didn't want to partake in it. I didn't want to contribute in any way to what I knew now to be the real truth out there. I know the cruelty that exists.

Just as women in the 1960's became aware of society's "maleness" (Hart, 1985), these vegans-to-be discovered society's humanness -- its self-perpetuating but largely unconscious ideology that keeps the interests of non-human animals subjugated. The participants found themselves struggling against powerful institutional and personal challenges to their newly discovered ideology.

Institutional power was manifested in the pervasiveness of animal cruelty within government, industry, and education. Power was operationalized through misinformation, selective information, or lack of information (Forester, 1989). Sean's words illustrate how institutions obfuscate information and may constrain transformational learning and praxis:

Reading the [product] labels drives me nuts. It was technically a gradual step to veganism because, although I took all of the dairy out of my fridge, I didn't know that monodiglycerides were bad for about a month....I think a lot of vegans don't realize what those big words on the backs of food are.

Participants observed that information was manipulated by research institutions, educational institutions, and in the marketplace. Maire noted how advertisements show "all these smiling cows." Roger and Cary pointed out how cows are shown grazing in green pastures, rather than in the factory farms that is their reality.

Welton (1995) noted that institutions either enable or inhibit learning, calling those that are not democratic communities of learning "miseducative" (p. 134). Such miseducative institutions distort communications, such as the food animal industry does with its labeling and advertising. Drew, a former Army Ranger, observed how his fellow Rangers acquired their allegiance to meat eating, and their reaction to his conversion to veganism:

It was just that animal consumption had been ground in their minds since they were born. Their parents ate meat. They taught them to eat meat. Just as my parents ate meat and taught me to eat meat. That's all they ever knew. They would watch the McDonald's commercials, and the milk commercials, and that's all they knew....They would say stuff like I wasn't a man anymore because I didn't partake in eating animal flesh.

Franz, a university professor, provided this (possibly unintentional) metaphor for how the speciesist ideology is transmitted and sustained: "What you get fed as a child you think is right."

Ideological power intensified within the personal dimension. Family and friends often constrained or initially inhibited the vegans' adoption of a non-speciesist ideology. Lanny "broke down and bowed to [my family's] pressure" when they threatened not to eat the holiday dinner at his house unless he served meat. Lena, a design artist, lost a friend of 20 years, who made fun of her and taunted her with descriptions of eating lamb chops. Roger, whose mother disagreed with his veganism, said, "Every time I go and visit my mother it's like, "I'd like to give you something to eat, but we've got butter in everything." Through subtle, sometimes cunning, and often overt objections by close others, the personal lives of these vegans were often tumultuous as they first began to adopt a vegan perspective.

Successful at becoming vegan, the participants overcame these challenges and emerged with an intact transformed ideology, albeit at a personal price. The sustained power of the normative ideology, however, brought subtle changes in the vegans' praxis over time. No longer shocked by the cruelty, and now worn down by institutional and personal challenges to their veganism, their praxis became less outspoken. Many stopped talking about their vegan ideology to non-vegans. This change was explained by the vegans as putting their nonviolence into action, or as the need to adopt some kind of normal existence. A critical reading of their narratives, however, reveals the unconscious power of the normative ideology to regulate to conformity. The power of this ideology to unprehensively modify a praxis of resistance presents evidence for the powerful and constraining effects of the dominant ideology over time.

The vegans' communication, within the context of speciesist institutions and individual others, became less outspoken, more conforming. Maire, for example, stopped trying to "convert people....and a lot of my changing the way I would approach people was from being slapped down." Cary had previously been an activist. Now, he says, "It's changed. I used to be unafraid of anybody...You know now it's a matter of tact and people have their own views and they're entitled to their views." The vegans came to believe that they could be most effective in promoting veganism by silencing their own voices, discussing veganism only when invited, muting what they believed to be the truth, and living by example. Thus, they learned to avoid confrontations with the dominant culture, in spite of their continued discourse among themselves and their commitment to remain vegan. Sometimes, they even compromised their veganism. Franz said he would never eat meat, even as a guest, but "if they make a lasagna which contains cheese, or something that contains a moderate amount of eggs, for example, I probably will eat it, to not cause a stir and just be respectful." Without exception, the vegans became more content with and more committed to their vegan ideology, but less apt to share that ideology with non-vegans, except in non-confrontational or invited situations.

The Limits of Transformation Theory

The purposes of this analysis were 1) to explore the role of power in transformational learning, and 2) assess whether transformation theory's treatment of power is adequate to explain the transformational learning of ethical vegans. The analysis uncovered the pervasive strength of the normative speciesist ideology, manifested in the lifeworld through institutional and personal dimensions. Moreover, the unprehesiveness of this systematic ideology was revealed by a critical reading of its influence over time. Unconsciously but relentlessly, it shaped the praxis of individuals who became entrapped by it, even as they resisted it. These individuals undoubtedly transformed their speciesist meaning perspective. But is such transformation emancipatory, as Mezirow suggests? Does it extend to the social world, or is it ultimately intrapersonal?

Transformation theory recognizes the need to confront normative ideologies through "critical reflection, rational discourse, and collective participatory action" (Mezirow, 1995, p. 68). But how, when normative ideologies are so deeply entrenched as shown by this study, can this occur? Inglis (1997) suggested that we need a better understanding of power. He parceled power into two types -- empowerment and emancipation. Empowerment is the capacity to operate within the existing ideology, and emancipation is resistance and challenge to such ideology. The vegans in this study were empowered to substantially transform their personal ideology, but their cultural emancipation was never fully realized. From sustained but often unconscious acts of systematic power against their vegan ideology, these participants succumbed to the normative ideology, acting "in a way which precisely prevents...thematization" (Hart, 1985, p. 126), or exposure and discourse about the status of non-human animals. The vegans' self-silencing suggests that power must be continually analyzed and challenged by the learner if true emancipatory learning is to occur. Transformative learning otherwise runs the risk of becoming a mechanism for self control (Inglis, 1997), evident in the gradual social conformance of these vegans even as their personal commitment increased.

Transformation theory, in spite of its considerable contributions to understanding adult learning, does not adequately address the effect of power on the transformative learning and emancipatory

praxis of ethical vegans. Power may be ameliorated by critical reflection, rational discourse, and collective participatory action as suggested by Mezirow, but such activities must be sustained over time in the face of formidable odds. Transformation theory failed to account for the enormity and temporal demands of this task for these ethical vegans. It is not enough to recognize the need to confront power. Understanding how power operates and resisting its subtle regulation must also become the transforming learner's continuing challenge.

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