

Culturally Sensitive Transformational Learning: Incorporating the Afrocentric Paradigm and African Feminism

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Abstract

Informed by the Afrocentric learning paradigm, this conceptual piece argues that Mezirow's version of the theory of transformative learning is useful, but it would be more so if applied to be culturally sensitive. Using Botswana cultural learning values as an example, the article demonstrates how the theory can be made culturally sensitive to an African learning context. African values identified to inform a collective process of transformational learning are that (a) there is no absolute knowledge because of the communal involvement in knowledge construction and knowledge acquisition, (b) spiritual obligation that is influenced by the metaphysical world means that the knowledge context is complex, (c) knowledge is communal because social change depends on collective responsibility, and (d) gender roles/expectations are critical for processing knowledge. In conclusion, the article argues that the continued marginalization of diverse cultural contexts denies new insight into the positive development of a useful critical theory such as transformational learning.

Keywords

culturally sensitive, voice, collective transformation, ubuntu/humanness in humanity

As I utter the words *Motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe*, which means "I am because we are," my heart melts because this proverb reminds me of my identity as understood

from the perspective of African people. Furthermore, as an African woman, the proverb also emphasizes that although being a member of the collective, my reality of marginalization has been pushed further to the periphery due to the gendered contexts defined by the legacy of colonialism.

Although transformational learning as articulated by Mezirow (2000) has features that are relevant to cultural values of learning in adulthood, it is demonstrated in this article that for the most part, the development of the theory is situated in one (i.e., Western) cultural context, thus marginalizing other global cultural contexts. Although the notion of transformation through learning is critical to understand the phenomena we need culturally appropriate lenses. The major question therefore is, "How can we make transformational learning culturally sensitive?" In an attempt to respond to this question, it is argued in this conceptual piece that combining transformational learning with the Afrocentric paradigm is one way in which transformative learning theory can be more culturally sensitive. As the literature on Indigenous ways of Knowing would attest, there are other cultural frameworks that could inform transformative learning such as those for Asians, Latinos, Aborigines, and so on (Merriam & Associates, 2007). The next section gives a critical analysis of transformational learning as explained by Mezirow (1991, 2000) in an effort to identify grey areas that need attention if this theory is to be culturally sensitive.

Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory

An attempt to produce a formal theory of adult learning around the idea of transformational learning was first done by Freire in the 1970s. Jack Mezirow's version of transformational learning theory was introduced in 1978. In comparing learning in childhood and learning in adulthood, Mezirow (1991) emphasizes that learning is an acculturating process that is formative and socializing whereas adult education can be transformative and move "the individual towards a more inclusive, differentiated, permeable and integrated meaning perspective, the validity of which has been established through rational discourse" (p. 7). These qualities of mind have been recognized as desirable for people who study, work, or live cross-culturally (Nagata, 2005).

According to Mezirow (1991), transformative theory emphasizes "meaning making" using two concepts, namely, *meaning schemes* and *meaning perspectives*. In his words,

Meaning schemes are the specific beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reflections articulated by an interpretation . . . meaning schemes serve as specific habits of expectations. Meaning perspectives are groups of related meaning schemes which act as perceptual and conceptual codes to form, limit, and distort how we think, believe and feel and how, what, when and why we learn. They have cognitive, affective, and cognitive dimensions. These habits of expectation filter both perception and comprehension. (pp. 34-35)

Mezirow (2000) identifies three types of meaning perspectives as epistemic, socio-linguistic, and psychological. He argues that through critical reflection, meaning schemes and these three meaning perspectives shape how adults understand their experiences, especially those brought about by a “disorienting dilemma” or significant personal crisis. Critical reflection is perceived as essential in transformational learning for examining assumptions about the production of both technical knowledge and practical knowledge. However, Mezirow (2000) states that “each domain has its own purpose, method of problem solving, and way of validating statements” (p. 97).

Transformational learning theory results in perspective transformation, which Mezirow (1991) explains as

the process of becoming aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectations to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (p. 167)

Although most adults in different cultural settings such as those in the Botswana context may not be familiar with the term *perspective transformation*, nevertheless, their life is characterized by encounters that changed their perspectives. For example, in addition to traumatic experiences, African people have a history of transformational learning as a result of social change periods of colonialism, imperialism, and most recently going through global capitalism (Konate, 2007). Observations about the relationship between traditional African values systems and learning have concluded that such values embrace a collective rather than an individual concept of responsibility (Avoseh, 2001).

Although Mezirow’s transformational learning theory has continued to influence adult education teaching and research, over the years a variety of critical responses has continued to emerge (Cranton, 2000; Dirkx, 2000; Lennox, 2005; Taylor, 2007, 1998). A major criticism of this adult learning theory, which is upheld in this article, is that Mezirow’s description of transformational learning primarily addresses the individual’s capacity to use critical reflection and other rational processes to engage in making meaning. In cultural contexts where transformation as a way of knowing is determined by context and other factors such as gender, power, ethnicity, and class, this emphasis ignores culturally accepted collective learning experiences (Johnson-Barley & Alfred, 2006). For example, in Botswana there is an interconnected relationship between the individual, community, and other forces such as nature and ancestral spirits.

In his recent review of the literature on transformational learning, Taylor (2007) observes that the role of relationships in transformational learning is another area that needs to be addressed in transformational learning research. In the Botswana cultural context, where we believe that *motho ke motho ka batho ba bagwe* (i.e., there is no self without the collective), it makes sense to look at the role of support from other individuals,

family, community, and overall cultural values in the process of transformational learning. In fact, the literature on transformative leadership in this African context (Preece, 2003) has observed that leadership is a group process because leadership in this context is concerned with fostering change. In agreement, Brady and Hammett (1999) argue that there is a shift from leadership that derives authority from a privileged identity to a collaborative style that values change and connectedness.

Another area of critique has been on the definitional issues of the concept transformation (Lennox, 2005; Nagata, 2005; O'Sullivan, Morrell, & O'Connor, 2002) arguing that the definition "has to balance emphasis on the rational, cognitive, and objective with the extra-rational, intuitive, imaginative and subjective" (Nagata, 2005, p. 46). For example, in Africa this would mean emphasizing the need to harness traditional education practices such as folklore, riddles and poems, drama, dialogic discussions along with the inherent community values of responsibility and obligation of local leaders.

This section has acknowledged that transformational learning is a major theory of adult education that can help us consider ways in which marginalized cultural knowledge construction systems can be tapped to stimulate personal change by learning new ways of making meaning. An aspect of Mezirow's transformational learning theory that is relevant to the proposed culture-sensitive transformation is what he calls the "sociolinguistic" meaning perspective. According to Mezirow (1991), sociolinguistic perspectives "are understood as habits of expectation assimilated primarily from one's culture and language" (p. 56). His theory also recognizes the important role of both culture and context and the fact that there is the element of negotiated understanding that is connected or integral to other human's activities. In his words, "Culture can encourage or discourage transformative thought" (p. 3). Based on this contribution, it is argued that regardless of the theory's bias to individual rationality in particular, transformational theory that is informed by both the Afrocentric paradigm and the African feminist analysis can be culturally sensitive.

Although there is an ongoing conversation and disagreement on what the word culture means, for this article Hofstede's (1997) definition of culture as "the system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation" (p. 7) is adopted. However, it is important to note that as a country Botswana has several ethnic groups with both common and unique shared values and customs. The Botswana culture referred to in this article is shared understandings or meanings among citizens. For example, Botswana cultural factors reflect common threads emanating from traditional cultures represented by Indigenous Botswana ethnic groups. It is believed that if the process of learning is an essential characteristic of culture, then culture consists of systems of meanings as well as negotiated agreements and processes of negotiation. Understood in this way, culture should be critical for the meaning making described in transformational learning theory because meaning systems involve relationships that are not necessarily essential and universal. For example, different human societies will inevitably agree on different relationships and meanings of words and things. The next section discusses the Afrocentric

paradigm arguments about learning and shows how elements of this perspective can strengthen transformational learning theory.

The Afrocentric Learning Paradigm

It has been observed by African scholars (Chilisa, 2005; Mkabela, 2005; Ntseane, 2006) that one of the colonial legacies that African scholars have to deal with is that African countries' current education systems have limited or no adequate reference to the indigenous education that Africans already had prior to colonial invasion. For example, Mkabela (2005) has argued that many researchers who made real attempts to study African culture have "tended to see culture in terms of the colonizer's percept and to assess educational needs in terms of the colonizer's agenda" (p. 178). In agreement, one would add that even adult education research in Africa has not adequately accessed and highlighted the ancestral opinions that have influenced African thinking since time immemorial.

Traditionally in Botswana, knowledge is produced and communally owned as attested by the proverb *Kgosi ke thothobolo e lathelwa matlakala*, meaning that "a leader is an information or data knowledge dumping site and thus has to be a good listener and analyst." In a traditional adult education context, this proverb sends a message to a training facilitator that a learning activity is a collective knowledge production platform, hence he/she should be open minded and listen to all voices. Furthermore, an open space system of communication is encouraged in Botswana through the proverb *mmua lebe o bua la gagwe*, or "every voice must be heard," and conclusions of these open systems of communication are achieved by consensus. In Botswana, the *Kgotla* or Tribal parliament deliberation processes are a good example of the fact that knowledge production is communally owned. Once knowledge is communally produced, it is then disseminated to the rest of the community by indigenous intellectuals through songs, plays, poems, dance, theatre, and storytelling. Culturally based knowledge construction and knowledge acquisition systems such as this have been marginalized in learning paradigms as well as in adult education theory and practice. With the realization of this anomaly, discussions around the Afrocentric paradigm were started by Asante in the late 1970s, who argued for a need to place African values and ideas at the center of African epistemology. The question to address therefore is what is the Afrocentric paradigm and why is it relevant to transformative learning theorizing?

The Afrocentric paradigm as explained by Asante (1995, 1987) deals with the question of African identity from the perspective of African people who have been marginalized and dislocated by colonialism. He explains Afrocentricity as follows:

To say that we are decentered . . . we have lost our own cultural footing and become other than our cultural and political origins, dislocated and disoriented. We are essentially insane, that is living an absurdity from which we will never be able to free our minds until we return to the source. Afrocentricity as a theory of change intends to re-locate the African person as a subject. . . . As a

pan-African idea, Afrocentricity becomes the key to the proper education of children and the essence of an African cultural revival and, indeed, survival. (Asante, 1995, p. 1)

In agreement, Mazama (2001) asserts that

as a philosophy, Afrocentricism is opposed to radical individualism as expressed in the postmodern school. According to Mazama, in the process Afrocentricism also means viewing the European voice as just one among the many and not necessarily the wisest one. (p. 388)

As a research method, Afrocentricity has been described as the only paradigm that not only gives African researchers a means to analyze correctly the situation, but it also proposes an alternative in the form of a conscious reconnection to one's African core cultural values, especially "a profound sense of spirituality and collective existence" (Mazama, 2001, p. 394). For example, as an African I believe that my life, my learning, and my death are connected to my relationship with my people (*Batswana*), natural forces such as my ancestral spirits, and my cultural beliefs such as the responsibility of uplifting one another, and *Botho* meaning respect for humanity. My totem (*animal*) that remains sacred to me and my family also defines my being. My connectedness to the earth and all its inhabitants as well as ancestral spirits (*Badimo*) is important according to the Afrocentric paradigm, for it defines and influences learning in this culture. So as a Motswana of a certain ethnic group, I know and believe that without these relationships I do not exist or there is no self or individual. This is essential because as Asante (1987) reminds us Africans the Afrocentric idea is about being systematically self-consciousness of the need to assume fully one's place in the world.

According to Schiele (1996), African researchers are not supposed to be objective and remain distant from the person who needs assistance, but rather researchers have to work toward a close and reciprocal relationship based on the recognition of the ultimate interconnectedness of all life forms. This is perceived as critical because social problems may very well be cultural problems, hence the need to research, analyze, and interpret data on African experiences from the African perspective. If research in this context is to present and preserve the diverse intellectual and philosophical traditions of African cultures, the methodology has to be right. Given that methodologies and methods derive from and are informed by theoretical paradigms, the Afrocentric epistemology is no exception. The literature (Asante, 1987) has consistently agreed on the following African values to inform the process:

- *The collective worldview:* Given that Afrocentricity is opposed to theories that "dislocate" Africans in the periphery of human thought and experience, the Afrocentric method, therefore, emphasis a shift from dominant research and learning methods to ways that are responsive to an African worldview which is collective and one in which the community itself will influence and

shape the method. It is believed that a people's view determines what constitute a problem and how to solve it.

- *Spirituality*: The essence of life and therefore of being human is spiritual because the spirit is the ultimate oneness with nature and the fundamental interconnectedness of all things. So Afrocentric methods as well as generated knowledge must reflect the primacy of spirituality, the relationship between the physical and the spiritual, as well as the interconnectedness with all things.
- *Shared orientation*: From an Afrocentric perspective, knowledge can never be produced for the sake of it but always for the sake of liberation. As Mazama (2001) argues, "A paradigm must activate our consciousness to be of any use to us" (p. 392). Participants in Ntseane's qualitative study on women's transformational learning described the outcome of their transformative learning as the realization of *segakolodi* meaning "intuitive guide" or *pelo ya bobedi* meaning "second heart," whose role was to remind individuals of their purpose on earth, which in their context was to be useful or to give back to the community. Since the ultimate aim of Afrocentricity is people's liberation, the Afrocentric methodology is supposed to generate knowledge that will free and empower people. Whereas Kershaw (1992) emphasizes this point by insisting that Afrocentric scholars must produce emancipatory knowledge, Mazama (2001) argues for the production of "knowledge that opens the heart" (p. 399).

In relating the Afrocentric paradigm described above to transformational learning and transformational education, it can be demonstrated that this theory can be used to identify African cultural values that can be incorporated with transformative learning to make it more culturally sensitive. The term *cultural sensitive* is used here to mean acknowledging and being accommodative of other ways of knowing, value systems, and their understanding of reality. It is believed that for transformational learning to be realized, the individual consciously or subconsciously falls back on his or her specific cultural values to make sense of reality. For example, my Botswana cultural values of *botho*, that is, respect for humanness in humanity, indigenous methods, and frameworks of understanding, are critical for my human existence and experiences. According to Khan (2007), cultural sensitivity is "the ability to correctly understand, respect and successfully deal with the people of other cultures" (p. 3). In agreement, Adams (1995) observed that sensitivity requires that cultural awareness must be supplemented with cultural knowledge. It is believed that to be culturally sensitive, people need to be aware not only of a different culture but also of their own attitudes as well as how they are being experienced by those they interact with. Furthermore, an extra effort should be made to understand any specific cultural issues that are being experienced by people of the different culture.

In the same way as African voices have been silenced since the colonial era, so have the women's voices. It is within the Afrocentric paradigm that African women have

formulated a unique feminism that pertains to the specificity of African women. African feminist ideas are also presented to demonstrate their relevance to critical learning perspectives such as transformational theory in this article.

The African Feminist Perspective

Although African Feminism is part of the Afrocentric paradigm, it is treated differently here in an effort to highlight its unique contribution both to the later but particularly to the general discourse of gender inequality. Chilisa and Preece (2005) define feminism as “the exposure of gender inequalities and gender-oppressive behavior” (p. 211). Informed by the African women’s stance of the need to challenge the oppression of women without alienating African men and not rejecting African culture, African feminism is defined by Mekgwe (2008) as

a discourse that takes care to delineate those concerns peculiar to the African situation. It also questions features of traditional African values without denigrating them, understanding that these might be viewed differently to the different classes of women. (p. 167)

In agreement, African feminists would stress that one of the strong differences mentioned in Mekgwe’s definition is to recognize men as partners in the struggle against gender oppression rather than as enemy. This point is emphasized by Yaa Asantewaa Reed (2001), thus, “In recognition that we are all trapped in a patriarchal system, but it is the way in which we deal with those gender issues that makes us different” (p. 169). In an African culture, the gender equality struggle emphasizes the necessary complementarity rather than the conflict that exists between African men and women. As Mazama (2007) states, “What makes a man is a woman: likewise what makes a woman is a man” (p. 401). Although one acknowledges that statement can be critiqued for containing heterosexist connotations, it should be understood to emphasize the need for balance between roles of men and women’s experiences rather than just mandatory coupling. Thus, appreciating and understanding this connection is at the root of any theory dealing with African women within the Afrocentric paradigm.

Another distinguishing attribute of the African feminist position is the epistemological methodology and methods that African female writers use in their writings. In particular, they tend to use proverbs and folk tales. For example, in an effort to highlight the complexities, dangers, and possibilities of understanding feminist struggles in the past colonial Africa, Dube (1999) draws on the Setswana myth about a hen scratching the ground for a lost needle, meaning that for African women the struggle for gender equality is complex, and thus, it needs thoroughly thought negotiation processes not only with the male gender but also with the female gendered context. In another incidence, Yaa Asantewaa-Reed (2001) refers to the proverb “it takes a village to raise a child” to demonstrate that men and women together come from a communal past where responsibilities are collective. In fact, this approach to feminism has been

acknowledged by Black feminists who share much in common with Africans the importance of community and shared roles (Collins, 2000; Johnson-Barley & Alfred, 2006). For example, in writing about African American women's collective voice experiences, Collins states that "the voice that I know is both individual and collective, personal and political reflecting the intersection of my unique biography within a the larger meaning of my historical times" (p. vi).

Furthermore, in the area of research, there is evidence of the promotion of African feminist research approaches such as drama for emancipatory and participatory data collection as well as role play, which have been singled out as the processes through which "women can construct and reconstruct scenarios that demonstrate their social circumstances" (Chilisa, 2005, p. 221).

Finally, African feminist literature (Konate, 2007; Ntseane, 2004) has also shown that another unique feature of African feminism is that African women's struggles have influenced how women organize themselves for economic empowerment, informal education, and training as well as political representation. African feminists are committed to "giving voice" to African women because as Konate (2007) argues, recent empirical research reveals that African women's historically collective experiences have been obscured by American feminist theory and women's studies.

This section presented the theoretical framework for Transformational Theory that is culturally sensitive to learners multiple realities. While acknowledging the limitations of Mezirow's transformational theory as biased to individualistic, rational, and the absence of cultural considerations, it has been argued in this section that the theory can be developed to maximize its relevance to adult education practice in diverse cultural contexts. The Afrocentric paradigm and the African Feminist cultural lenses have been used as examples to demonstrate that the process of transformational learning theory can be developed to be culturally sensitive to different contexts. The Afrocentric paradigm privileges collective creation of knowledge whereas African feminism emphasizes the importance of challenging the oppression of women without alienating African men as well as questioning features of tradition without rejecting the African culture. It is believed that adult education practice derived from critical reflection theory such as transformational learning can benefit from the African values of learning. Williamson (1998) reminds us that if learning is about developing the adult's critical thinking ability, then this learning is nevertheless context specific: "people interpret their experience in the light of knowledge and frameworks of understanding available to them in their society" (p. 24).

Botswana Learning Context

Botswana is a country in southern Africa with a population of 1.7 million. Since its independence in 1966, Botswana has experienced remarkable economic growth, transformation, and social development. For example, although at independence Botswana was listed as one of the poor countries in the World, today it is the third largest natural diamond producer in the world and has one of the highest gross domestic product per

capita in Africa. However, despite its economic success, the country has numerous challenges including an increase of poverty, social inequalities, and the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Marked inequalities of wealth have resulted with about 50% of Botswana living below the poverty line and women forming the majority of the poorest (Chilisa, 2005; Elexander, Lesetedi, Pilane, Mukaamambo, & Masilo-Rakgaasa, 2005). The next section identifies Botswana cultural factors likely to inform a culturally sensitive transformational learning theory for adult education.

African Values Relevant for a Culturally Sensitive Transformative Learning

Based on limited research on culture and transformational learning, for example, the Preece (2003) study on transformational learning and leadership in Botswana and Merriam and the Ntseane (2008) study on how culture shapes the process, it is suggested that transformative learning could be a collective process. The following are the African values critical for a culturally sensitive transformative learning process in the Botswana cultural context.

Community participation. This is the idea that there is no absolute knowledge because a specific group or the community can construct knowledge together. Communal involvement ensures an emphasis on awareness of others, thus promoting cooperation and a sharing orientation. An example in Botswana illustrates this from an African worldview: the collection of data and interpretation demonstrated by the *Dingaka* (i.e., traditional doctors, *Badimo* or ancestral spirits, experts, or Biblical-oriented spiritual healers) practices. Since the *Dingaka*, who fall under the category of traditional doctors, use a set of bones (as many as 60), Dube (2000) observed that these bones symbolize divine power, evil power, foreign spirits (good or bad), elderly men and women, young and old, homesteads, family life or death, and ethnic groups that include *Makgoa* (White people) to construct a story about the consulting client's life. The pieces represent experiences and networks as well as relationships of the people and the environment. In constructing a story, the diviner consults the patterns of the divine set as the client throws them to the ground. The diviner asks the client to confirm the interpretation of the set as a true story about his/her troubled part of a life. In the case of ancestral spiritual healers, the diviner claims to have the ability/powers to hear the sick person's ancestral spirit voices, whereas for the Biblically oriented spiritual healers, the Bible is used to direct the spiritual healer to an appropriate verse in the Bible. According to Dube (2000), in the process neither the set nor the diviner has exclusive knowledge. The client is invited to talk freely about his/her life and to reject the constructed story if it does not tally with his/her life experiences.

This example of "community participation or involvement" in collective critical reflection can be related to transformative learning that is culturally sensitive because when more than one person engages in knowledge construction, no interpretation occurs in the absence of any one. Furthermore, in the situation of the diviner described, Dube

(2000) rightfully observed, “Context is complex, expansive and infinite since there is no claim to an identified descriptive context” (p. 85). In the above situation, what is brought to the consciousness of both the diviner and the client through symbolic representations of the surroundings is context for the transformative learning experience. Another African value that can inform transformational learning is “spirituality.”

Spirituality. Spirituality in this African context (Merriam & Ntseane, 2008; Preece, 2003) can be understood as participation that is influenced by the metaphysical world. It results in a sense of obligation to the community and is translated in spiritual obligation to one’s ancestors and a physical obligation to take care of extended family. Although missionaries of different denominations (including the London Missionary Society, German Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Dutch Reform, and Wesleyans) converted the young and the old into different faiths during the colonial period, the culture of the people, especially their meta-physical world, has to a large extent remained unchanged. For instance, what it means to be humanness in Botswana is influenced by a connectedness to the earth (*Lefatshe*) and all its inhabitants, including animals, birds, plants, and the spirits (*Badimo*). This connectedness is embraced, relived, and celebrated through taboos and totems. For instance, my totem is *Kgabo* (Monkey), an animal that remains sacred to me and my relatives. In this way, I remain connected to the monkeys and care about their preservation. As Tournas (1996) rightly observed, “Batswana see the human and the physical world as one.” He further postulates that “separating Batswana from the environment and from their traditional conception of God can deprive them of their source of knowledge as a people” (p. 43). Related to this is Chilisa and Preece’s (2005) observation that “most African worldviews emphasize belongingness, connectedness, community participation and people centeredness” (p. 45). Therefore, the concept of spirituality promotes interdependence and partnership, personal integrity and commitment to service. Given that commitment to the family includes obligation to the living and the dead, spirituality is identified as a sense of interconnectedness to something greater than the self. An example defining spirituality and the metaphysical world is found in the case of Dira (pseudonym), one of the participants in the Merriam and Ntseane (2008) transformational learning study and how culture shapes the process.

Dira is 35-year-old successful businessman. Dira is called home to attend a *Phekolo* (ancestral spiritual healing ceremony) for a family member. Usually in this healing ceremony, *Badimo* (ancestral spirits) of the extended family of this sick person selects one person to speak through with the message about the fate of the sick person. Dira is the one chosen. The voice says, “Young man—the spirits of the elders are happy with you and they might call you some day to be with them, but right now this one who is sick will be healed (meaning either he will die or be cured).” Five years later Dira becomes very sick and neither modern nor traditional doctors can heal him. He visits a biblical spiritual healer who told Dira, “Actually you are not sick, the *Badimo* want to use you to heal other people.” Dira resists saying he was too happy as a successful businessman. However, a few years later he became deathly ill and this time he says

the spirits did whisper in my ear that, you have to be one of us on earth, otherwise we take you. You have six months to decide. When you do decide to accept this calling, go to a spiritual healer so-and-so at such and such a place because he has instructions on how to train you.

Dira says that if he did not listen to “the command of the spirits” he would be dead or his family “might be cursed to the grave.” He gave up his business, has begun work with a healer and his health problem has disappeared.

Dira’s case demonstrates two unique features of spirituality in this African context. First, it shows spirituality in terms of connectedness with ancestral spirits power but also spirituality in terms of an ultimate authority, which is equal to God. It could be argued that Dira accepted his transformational learning as destiny defined by God as his purpose on earth and ancestral spirits voices were there as an intuitive guide to this purpose. Afrocentric knowledge is validated through a combination of historical understanding and intuition for as Harris (as cited in Mazama, 2001) says “knowledge is rational and supra-rational—one must remember always that knowing with one’s heart is superior to all and priceless” (p. 399).

Collective empowerment. Although the transformation learning process may start with an individual’s disorienting dilemma, to successfully go through transformational learning, however, the individual needs the support and sometimes validation of the new perspective from other individuals, family, group, ancestral spirits, community, or the culture. For example, the transformative individual must engage with the myths, stories, and proverbs that bind them and others as a people. Furthermore, from the position of awareness, the individual who went through his or her own transformative learning must be a catalyst for change but the change process itself has to be a collective one. The individual is expected to engage further with his or her group or community/society as mutual learner in the process of change and development by being a community intellectual or educator.

In a context characterized by the marginalization of local knowledge systems, knowledge acquired through transformation is important for social change. In Botswana, national development agendas have embraced concepts such as *Ubuntu* and *Botho* (meaning humanness in humanity), which stress the need for respect, cooperation, participation, sharing, and collective identity because societal change depends on collective responsibility. Given that the African learning context is about the need for social change, it is not surprising that collective creation of knowledge and development is privileged over individual or personal transformational learning. As explained in the earlier section, from an Afrocentric perspective, knowledge can never be produced for the sake of itself, but it is produced for the sake of the African people’s liberation. As Mazama (2001) argues, “A paradigm must activate our consciousness to be of any use to us” (p. 392). Even though Mezirow describes transformational learning as an individual experience, it is contextualized by that individual’s interpretation and meaning making of his or her environment.

Gender roles. Although things are slowly changing, in African societies, gender roles are defined with men being traditional leaders, breadwinners, and household heads. Women are expected to get married and be good mothers not only to their children but also to the community and society as well as be good wives to their spouse and take good care of the extended family and community. Gender in the Botswana culture is characterized by roles and expectations, community responsibility, and the use of culture for empowerment. For example, women's key role is that of "motherhood," which extends beyond taking care of one's nuclear family to the extended family as well as the society. Proverbs and common sayings are in place to endorse this expectation such as *mosadi ke thari ya sechaba*, meaning "a woman is the pouch that carries the nation," and *Mmagwana o tshwara thipa ka fa bogaleng*, meaning "the real mother is the one who will hold the knife on the side of the blade." This proverb emphasizes the need for women to realize that good motherhood is critical for the survival of the family and the nation.

Women in Botswana also have a community responsibility. Again, there are cultural sayings to attest to this. The national anthem in particular acknowledges this. One verse states that *emang basadi a re tshwaraganeng go direla Lefatshe la rona*, meaning "women stand up and together with men let us collectively develop our nation." It continues to say *ka kutlwano le kagirano, e bopagantswe mmogo*, meaning "through our unity and harmony, we will remain at peace as one." Furthermore, a good rainy year is described as *ngwaga o monamagadi*, meaning "a feminine year," again symbolizing the relationship between motherhood and nature. It is therefore not surprising that women's labor dominates in subsistence farming in the agricultural sector. Although on the surface these proverbs used here seem to romanticize the value of women (e.g., mothers who hold the blade side, pouch of the nation, and feminine symbolizing prosperity), from a gendered perspective, they are not without the usual subtle and hegemonic sexism. For these proverbs also illustrate the hardships, exposure to danger, exploitation, and marginalization of the female gender. A unique gendered cultural experience such as this one has to be recognized and understood as it has the potential to influence learning theories and practices at least for this context.

Another characteristic of women's gender-based development in Botswana is the strategy of "collective empowerment." In addition to family chores, women are responsible for most of the arable agricultural production work, especially subsistence agriculture. To accomplish this, Botswana women have a history of engaging in temporary group work. For example, agricultural labor groups called *matsema* were and still are formed by women to help each other weed or harvest their fields in a timely manner. The collective approach to gender-based family and community responsibility has influenced learning and empowerment activities. For instance, in an effort to lobby for gender equality in decision making, female activists have also adopted the collective strategy as evidenced by the Botswana Women's Coalition established in 1993 to prepare collectively for the United Nations world gender conference that was held in Beijing, China, in 1995. According to Elexander et al. (2005), this coalition is

a national network of organizations that address women and gender issues and concerns as their main agenda. It officially registered as a collective, advocating and negotiating for gender equality in 1995. Botswana Caucus for women in Politics is another new structure established to facilitate collective action and advocacy for the promotion of women to positions of power across political party lines.

As can be seen from this African value of learning, women in this culture have realized that in their African gendered patriarchal context, the female voice is likely to be heard if they learn and work as a group rather than individually. Collective approach to women's development and empowerment is relevant for transformational learning because in this cultural context, questioning and rejection of assumptions is mainly about gender-specific roles for diverse situations such as in marriage, in leadership, in religion, to name just a few.

Although specific to Botswana, these cultural learning values appeal to community construction of knowledge as opposed to an individual's construction; thus, they offer alternative ways in which adult educators may work with communities. Furthermore, these African values and many others from other cultural contexts elsewhere can be used to develop transformative learning to theorize and build models of research and learning that are owned by the people. Restoring the dignity and integrity that has been lost and/or violated by the dominance of First World epistemologies since colonial times is an ethical thing for adult education theory and practice. It is hoped that these African values and methodologies can be used to develop transformational learning to be culturally sensitive. Adult education intervention can and should stimulate change while being respectful of traditions, cultural values, and identity of African people. This is critical because as the Afrocentric perspective revealed, African identity should not be lost while transforming endemic problems such as poverty and gender and other civic responsibilities.

Conclusion

This piece has used the cultural learning experience in Botswana to argue that although transformation is an individual experience, it is contextualized by the individual's interpretation and meaning making of his or her environment. Furthermore, the experience of transformational learning in the African culture, which has a gendered context, has shown that people can be transformed collectively, if transformational learning is related to development issues such as gender equality, economic empowerment, political representation, and so on. A transformational learning theory that is culturally sensitive is perceived as relevant to adult education because the concept of "adult learning" as articulated by the United Nations conferences, including the Firth International Conference (CONFINTEA V) in 1997, is a broad one embracing formal, nonformal, and informal learning processes in all areas of peoples lives. This emphasis of adult education is relevant to African contexts, where learning of adults takes place across their various social roles in the home, community, and the workplace as well as in informal educational and training institutions.

Finally, this article used relevant arguments from both the Afrocentric knowledge paradigm and the African Feminist analysis thought to argue that transformational learning theory has to be developed to be culture sensitive. It is believed that for transformational education and theorizing to be holistic in a globalizing world, it must also account for particular African contexts. However, more research is needed on how culture shapes the process of transformative learning in diverse African and other contexts. The continued marginalization of gender and its diverse cultural contexts denies new insights into the positive development of a useful critical theory in adult education such as Mezirow's contribution to transformational learning theory.

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Bio

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