

THE TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING NARRATIVES OF PRACTITIONERS WORKING WITH REFUGEES

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Received April 2019; Accepted June 2019

Abstract

Purpose – This paper analyzes the key concepts of transformative learning and narrative in the context of social work with refugees and discusses, how these concepts could be used to explore the experiences of practitioners working with refugees. The conceptual analysis of literature and research studies about the concepts of transformative learning and narrative and the current political and social context led to the development of recommendations for further research and methodological choices for exploring the phenomena of interest.

Methodology – This paper is based on the conceptual analysis. Firstly, it aims to discuss the importance of exploring the transformative experiences of practitioners working with refugees in the current social and political context. It analyses and discusses the concepts of transformative learning and narrative and the conceptual relationships between them and how these concepts could be applied together to get better understanding of complex learning experiences of practitioners working with refugees.

Findings – The experiences of people working with refugees on voluntary or paid basis in various resettlement and integration programs might be diverse and complex. Therefore, it is important to explore such experiences of learning and changes of “self”, which practitioners might experience in their practice. Transformative learning theory is useful for researching such complex, emic experiences of practitioners. The analysis and critical discussion of the concepts of transformative learning and narrative and their application in literature and research studies revealed various interpretations and theories used to explain them. The concept of transformative learning used as change of identity proposed by Illeris (2014) is holistic and not limited to the change of individual consciousness, therefore, it might be useful to explore holistic learning experiences of practitioners. The conceptualization of transformative learning as Third space might also be useful to explain transformative learning in the context of work with culturally diverse people, balancing ‘in-between’ refugees and the state. The narrative analysis could be a suitable methodology for analyzing transformative learning. However, it is important clearly define, what is meant by the concept of narrative and what narrative approach is used. Transformative learning narratives might be captured and analyzed as constructs created in relationships in a specific time and context and the small story approach can be combined with biographical and contextual approaches to explore the transformative learning experiences.

Research limitations/implications – The research is based on the theoretical conceptual analysis and is not presenting any empirical data. The most of selected and analyzed literature sources are from English speaking countries.

Practical implications – The topic is related to a practical problem and social work practice with refugees. The study might be useful for justifying and making practical methodological choices exploring the phenomena of interest.

Originality/Value – There is a lack of studies exploring transformative learning narratives of practitioners working with refugees. The topic is relevant and important in the current political and social context.

Keywords: transformative learning; narrative; work with refugees

Research type: a general review

JEL classification: Z10

Introduction

Transformative learning is a widely researched topic in adult education and there are a lot of studies conducted about transformative learning of refugees. The studies frequently reveal various discourses and attitudes about refugees and integration practices in host countries, but they rarely engage exploring learning and transformation of practitioners, who work directly with refugees. Experiences, which people gain at work can become important part of their personal and professional life (Beckett and Hager, 2002). Experiential learning can also have transformative power (Usher, 2009). Learning is a complex phenomenon and various theories are used to explore and explain it. These theories are based on different ontological and epistemological premises. In this paper I explore various conceptualizations of transformative learning and narrative. I discuss, how these concepts are linked to each other and could be applied to get better understanding of complex learning experiences of practitioners working with refugees.

1. Theoretical background

1. 1. The social and political context of work with refugees

The migration and refugee research studies are very popular in the current social and political context. Researchers explore various aspects of migration and are frequently interested in the complex and diverse experiences of refugees. Social work with refugees is developing into a separate field with its specialized knowledge and expertise. Despite of the popularity of refugee studies, the scope of research studies about the experiences of practitioners, who work directly with refugees is rather limited. The studies frequently focus on various discourses about refugees, integration and inclusion practices but rarely explore the deeper experiences and changes of practitioners, who are engaged in such work. Valtonen (2016) argues that the settlement and integration programs are increasingly important in social work field. Therefore, it is important to understand the processes of learning in practice especially among frontline professionals. People working directly with refugees have the knowledge of insiders and can communicate their unique emic perspectives about their work and can share their experiences about the work expanding academic and practical knowledge about the phenomena.

The questions of refugee inclusion are important in Europe and in the global context. The status of refugee is granted through legal and administrative process and states or UNHCR determine if a person can receive asylum and international protection according to international and national law (UNHCR, 2018). The human rights approach establishes the protection of human rights and is the most powerful contemporary discourse protecting the right of refugees (Valtonen, 2016). 538.000 people received refugee status and settled in Europe (Statistical Office of the

European Communities, 2018). The Geneva Convention and New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants recognize and identify various moral and legal obligations to protect refugees. Despite of that, “in context of refugee crisis national loyalties are back” and the human rights discourse is becoming less influential in Europe (Krastev, 2017, 14). Although most Europeans agree to just and organized resettlement of refugees; some right-wing groups are becoming increasingly resistant and spread negative attitudes about refugees (European Parliament, 2017). The discourses, which are used to speak about refugees are frequently political and stigmatizing people having refugee status (Guilfoyle and Hancock, 2009). “Islamophobia is spread in current resettlement policy and practice” (McCleary and Chaudhry, 2017, 522). Social work can play an important role ‘in defending human rights and in promoting social justice through macro-level advocacy at national and international levels’ (Valtonen, 2016). Therefore, the social work with refugees requires engagement at all levels- a macro level defending human rights, promoting social justice, working at community level with institutions and civil society and solving problems at individual level (Nash et al, 2006).

Integration and advocacy programs for migrants and refugees are frequently part of existing welfare systems in the hosting countries. People working directly with refugees are frequently “bridging” refugees and host communities and local services and invest significant efforts and time helping to solve their short-term and long-term challenges (Valtonen, 2016). Social work in this new field requires “strong community development skills and knowledge, as well as an understanding of how to influence or change social policy” (Nash et al, 2006, 358).

1. 2. The Experiences of People working with Refugees

The conducted research studies about the experiences of people working with refugees reveal about the complexities and challenges of the work. Social workers frequently face the social vulnerabilities of refugees and tensions between their personal and professional identities and discontinuities in their work (Van Robaey et al, 2018). People working with refugees on voluntary or paid basis frequently struggle dealing with unpredictable and constantly changing nature of the work (Van Robaey et al, 2018). They frequently struggle to maintain healthy boundaries and are at risk of experiencing exhaustion and burnout as the result (Guhan and Liebling-Kalifani, 2011). Workers and volunteers have limited knowledge of dealing with disclosures of trauma and its potential impacts on their own wellbeing (Guhan and Liebling-Kalifani, 2011). The research conducted in the UK and Australia revealed that social workers face many challenges and value supervisions and informal support of their colleagues and relevant training. Ethnographic research exploring the identity of volunteers working with refugees revealed that volunteers can gain contradictory identities- they feel responsibility to help refugees but also enjoy the power of such

helping relationship (Mars, 2016). Volunteers sometimes use hegemonic practices, which support existing inequalities (Erickson, 2012). Social workers often face complex situations in which they feel ill equipped to intervene because they lack necessary training and knowledge about the complex issues or problems (Nash et al, 2006). Volunteers working with refugees are at risk of burnout when confronted with complex tasks, lack of interest, criticism and rejection by people they work with (McAllum, 2018). Narratives of refugees about their traumatic experiences might have also psychologically harmful impact on practitioners (Apostolidou, 2016, 277). Social workers sometimes experience “becoming hardened or desensitized to the emotional aspects of their work” (Guhan and Liebling-Kalifani, 2011, 219).

People working with refugees need to have specific knowledge and skills necessary to work with people from diverse ethnic, cultural and racial backgrounds (Valtonen, 2016). Social workers working with refugees can ‘publicly confront anti-Muslim rhetoric, challenge racist and exclusionary policies, and advocate for resettlement policies that support refugees in confronting racism and religious intolerance’, however, such initiatives are rarely applied in practice (McCleary and Chaudhry, 2017, 522). Social workers use the concept of ‘culture’ to explain normality; create a dialogue with clients or explain the difficulties, which emerge in communication with refugees, however, frequently use the concept uncritically (Van Robaeys et al, 2018). Many organizations providing services are ill-prepared for the numbers of refugees and the continuing daily challenges and nature of work (Dubus, 2018). The services are frequently designed to react to stressors and crisis rather than being based on long term planning and vision (Dubus, 2018).

1. 3. Topicality of the research issue

Although there is a growing body of research exploring the nature of social work with refugees and the challenges of people working in the field, however these studies rarely explore the holistic transformative changes, which might occur working on voluntary or paid basis with refugees. “Accepting that one needs to learn, relearn and develop throughout their career is essential for maintaining safe and effective social work practice” (Stone and Harbin, 2016). Stone and Harbin (2016) argue that it is important to recognize not only knowledge and skills, which social workers and volunteers have but also them as persons and explore the transformation of self in the practice. Narrative approaches and stories are frequently used to explore transformative learning. However, there is a lack of studies exploring the conceptual relationships between the concepts of transformative learning and narrative and how these concepts could be used to explore the experiences of practitioners working with refugees. Therefore, the discussion, how these concepts are related to each other and could be applied to explore the transformative experiences of practitioners working with refugees is relevant and important in contemporary social context and

could expand the knowledge about their conceptual relationships. The conceptual analysis of literature and research studies in relation to the concepts of transformative learning and narrative and the current political and social context can lead to the development of recommendations for further research and better methodological choices for exploring the phenomena of interest.

2. Research methodology

This paper is based on the conceptual analysis. It analyses and discusses the concepts of transformative learning and narrative and the conceptual relationships between them and how these concepts could be applied together to get better understanding of complex learning experiences of practitioners working with refugees. The literature review was conducted about the key concepts and the conceptual relationships between these concepts were discussed. The analyzed resources were scientific, published in recognized databases based on research or conceptual evidence and published as articles, monographs or research reports. The keywords for selection were- transformative learning, narratives, social work with refugees, practitioners working with refugees.

The paper discusses, the interrelationship between the concepts of transformative learning and narratives and how these concepts could be applied together to get better understanding of complex learning experiences of practitioners working with refugees.

3. Transformative learning of practitioners working with refugees

Transformative learning is an actively researched topic and the commonly used concept in adult education. There is a big number of studies conducted about transformative learning of refugees. However, there is a lack of research studies exploring the learning of people working with refugees on voluntary or paid basis, who work in various resettlement and integration programs. Such research studies are especially relevant in Lithuanian context with its relatively new integration system and a lack of experience of integrating refugees and where the knowledge about refugees is frequently constructed by public discourses (Žibas, 2013). Transformative learning was conceptualized and developed into the learning theory by Jack Mezirow, who was attempting to create life-long learning theory (Kegan, 2009). Mezirow was inspired by the critical theory authors such as Paolo Freire and Jurgen Habermas and conceptualized learning as the process based on communication and reflection (Mezirow, 2009). Transformative learning theory explores not only what we learn but also how we learn things. Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997, 5) “is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference.” “A frame of reference encompasses cognitive, conative, and emotional components, and is composed of two dimensions: habits of mind and a point of view” (Mezirow, 1997, 5). Our beliefs, values, attitudes and feelings are frequently shaped and expressed by our habits of mind (Mezirow, 1997). For example, ethnocentrism can affect how

people experience the world and it might affect values, attitudes, feelings and actions of practitioners towards refugees. Mezirow argues that such frames of reference could be transformed and calls the process transformative learning. Transformative learning can help to evaluate the assumptions on which our attitudes are based and assess the problematic perspectives of these meanings (Mezirow, 2009). Mezirow constructed the theory using some ideas of critical theory authors such as Paolo Freire and Jurgen Habermas and emphasized learning as a process based on communication and reflection (Mezirow, 2009). The theory of transformative learning has a political objective to influence social change, change discriminatory practices and attitudes by promoting reflection and critical thinking (Mezirow, 2009). This theory seeks not only to change what we know, but also to change the process, how we know things (Kegan, 2009). The theory of transformative learning remains one of the most influential learning theories in the discourse of lifelong learning (Illeris, 2014).

Despite of being one of the most influential theories in adult education, the concept of transformative learning is constantly changing. Various alternative theories of transformative learning present different concepts of the transformative learning process. The original concept proposed by Mezirow is frequently criticized by contemporary researchers. Dirkx (2001) argues that the theory neglects the role of emotions and intuitive learning. O'Sullivan (2012) argues that the concept proposed by Mezirow is too narrow and transformative learning need to be understood as being holistic, broad and encompassing global, ecological and cosmological perspectives. The concept of transformative learning differs in a postmodern context from the original theory of Mezirow (Kegan, 2009). The traditional theory of transformative learning proposed by Mezirow is based on the ideas of social constructivism. Social constructivism is a psychological learning theory that reveals how active individuals learn by constructing meanings in relation to the environment and attaches importance to individual consciousness (Fosnot and Perry, 2005). The change of the concept of transformative learning is influenced by ideas of social constructionism. Boreham, N. and Morgan, C. (2004) present an educational socio-cultural concept of organizational learning in which dialogue is an important medium for organizational learning. This theory denies the concept of an independent individual and reveals that human autonomy at work can only be revealed through relationships and practices with others, which help to create common values, regulate power relationships, and provide cultural tools that affect the learning process (Boreham, N. and Morgan, C, 2004). This socio-cultural concept of learning challenges the ideas of social constructivism, which attaches importance to individual learning. In a postmodern context, a lot of attention is given to local, personal, unstable and diverse experiences of people and the power of discourses (Usher et al, 1997). While the traditional theory of transformative learning provides useful insights into the individual's cognitive learning process, it provides little knowledge about the

meaning of human relationships and language practices, which construct the meanings of transformative learning in everyday life. Personal understandings about the events and transformations can be related to our relationships, contexts and socially constructed experiences.

The concept of transformative learning proposed by Illeris (2014) is more holistic and not limited to the change of individual consciousness. Illeris (2014) criticizes the traditional theory of transformative learning, stating that it is limited to changes in human thinking and that little consideration is given to emotional and social changes in the environment. Illeris (2014) suggests that transformative learning can be understood as change of identity, which is broader than the transformational changes identified by Mezirow. “The concept of identity includes cognitive, emotional, social dimensions and combines the individual and its practical, cultural, social environment” (Illeris, 2014, 14). Thus, this concept allows the integration of ideas of social constructionism into the experience of transformative learning. Human identity is frequently understood as socially constructed. “The self is socially constructed and profoundly embedded in relationships, including multiple and shifting identities and these identities are conflicted in the new context” (Lange, 2015, 639).

Transformative learning could be also conceptualized as Third Space using Bhabba (1994) theory, where ‘Third Space’ is understood as space in which multidimensional and hybrid cultural human identities can be created (Bhabba, 1994). This concept is closely related to human communication and change of identity (Feng, 2009). Third Space is characterized by temporality, contradictions, changes and creativity (Kalscheuer, 2009). It is the space “in between” dominant identities and discourses. Such space might allow people to deconstruct and rebuild dominant identities and create resistance movements (Kalscheuer, 2009). Bhabba (1994) often uses the concept of hybridity in his theory, which means a new form of identity, in which different elements of identification are combined. This conceptualization of transformative learning as Third space might be useful for understanding the change of identity of practitioners, who are in constant and intense contact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Also, people working with refugees are often perceived as being mediators in between refugees and state, therefore, such work could be perceived as Third space, where the creative and unexpected transformations of identities might occur.

4. Narratives of transformative learning

The chapters above revealed that contemporary perceptions of transformative learning based on social constructionism ideas might be useful for exploring diverse and complex experiences of practitioners working with refugees. Nevertheless, the transformative experiences need to be captured for analysis and comparisons. The increasing number of researchers suggest that narrative

analysis could be useful for analyzing transformative learning as “it allows people to convey their personal experience of this type of learning through stories” (Kim and Merriam, 2011). J.F. Lyotard's ideas on small and big stories and J. Bruner's on narrative construction of reality had a great influence on the recognition of narratives in social sciences and education (Bamberg, 2012). However, the concept of narrative can be used in diverse ways and therefore it is important to define, what it is meant by narrative and how it can be useful for exploring transformative learning. “Narrative is now seen as one of the fundamental ways in which humans organize their understanding of the world” (Cortazzi, 2011, 2). People narrate their experiences, make sense of them and share them with others. The understanding of narratives can be diverse and, therefore, it is important clearly define, what is meant by narrative. Narrative can mean “the stories of research participants, interpretative analysis of researcher or narratives constructed by readers” (Riessman, 2008, 17). Narrative can be understood as a factual resource, as a text or can be explored as a phenomenon (Hyvärinen, 2008). Narratives can also be analyzed as social processes or performances in action (Cortazzi, 2011). Narrative research is currently particularly influenced by the ideas of humanism that focus on individual cases and post-structuralism, which pays special attention to the language and discourses that affect people and their stories, and these two different concepts often intertwine in narrative research (Andrews et al, 2013). Some researchers investigate narratives as personal stories and understand identity as a life story (Andrews et al, 2013). Others give a lot of attention to the form of narrative and how it is constructed. Currently, narratives are frequently understood as constructs created in relationships in a specific time and context (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009). Therefore, more attention is given to the places and contexts, where narratives are constructed.

“Stories turn into narratives when they are told and retold. During that process, they become practiced and edited” (Kroth and Cranton, 2014, 14). The small story approaches can be successfully combined with biographical and contextual approaches (Andrews et al, 2013). The concept of narrative is useful for exploring transformative learning as “it moves from past to future, spans the psychological, social, cultural, and historical dimensions in content and form, and includes cognitive, affective, spiritual, and somatic dimensions” (Brooks and Clark, 2001, 1). Using narratives practitioners working with refugees can structure their life stories, which justify who they were, are and want to be in the future. The practitioners constructing their narratives try to construct coherent stories, however “coherence is always a work in progress, always under construction, enabling us to manage constant change and the often-real contradictions with which we must live” (Brooks and Clark, 2001, 2). Brooks and Clark (2001) challenge the individualistic understanding of meaning making and narration as we constantly incorporate various aspects of our past, social relations in our narratives and our narratives are incorporated into narratives of other people.

5. Conclusions

The experiences of people working with refugees on voluntary or paid basis in various resettlement and integration programs might be diverse and complex. Therefore, there is a need to explore the experiences of learning and changes of “self”, which practitioners might experience in their practice. Transformative learning theory might be useful for researching such complex, emic experiences of practitioners. However, the traditional concept of transformative learning might be too narrow to capture socially constructed self in the context of work with refugees. Transformative learning concept based on the ideas of social constructionism might be more suitable for researching, how practitioners change in work with refugees and how they construct their experiences of transformative learning embedded in relationships, multiple and shifting identities and discourses. The concept of transformative learning as change of identity proposed by Illeris (2014) is more holistic and not limited to the change of individual consciousness. The conceptualization of transformative learning as Third space might be also useful in the context of work with culturally diverse people and performing a role ‘in-between’ refugees and state. The narrative analysis method could be useful for analyzing transformative learning. However, it is important clearly define, what is meant by the concept of narrative and what narrative approach is used. In this paper I discussed various conceptualizations of narrative and suggest that transformative learning narratives could be captured and analyzed as constructs created in relationships in a specific time and context. The small story approach could be combined with biographical and contextual approaches to explore the transformative learning experiences, which combine diverse and holistic learning dimensions. Narrative research reveals that “human transformation is always provisional, and that world, selves, and struggles are never complete” (West, 2014, 177).

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