

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING: INSIGHTS INTO WOMEN SEMINARIANS' DECISIONS TO PURSUE ORDINATION

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were (1) to discover and investigate the factors that influence women seminarians to alter their programs in order to pursue ordination, (2) to explore the connections between the emergent factors and Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation, (3) to critique the theory on the basis of the emergent factors, (4) to explore the connections between the emergent factors and other strands of thought regarding transformative learning: consciousness-raising, development, and extra-rational/spiritual, and (5) to explore the impact of gender and traditional gender roles as a factor. Twenty-four women participated in this qualitative study. The data are presented through the stories of three composite women—Ella, Lily, and Sadie (pseudonyms). Telling the stories through composites made it possible to view the data through the lens of the four strands of thought regarding transformative learning and the impact of gender. The women had experiences related to the four strands of transformative learning to various degrees. All were impacted by gender. The study suggests four conclusions: (1) a new model for understanding the women's decisions, (2) the importance of gender to the women's decisions, (3) the importance of context and (4) power to the women's decisions.

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand and explore the dimensions arising from the study as experienced and told by the women. The study had three additional purposes: (1) to explore the connections between the emergent factors and dimensions and Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991), (2) to critique the theory on the basis of the emergent factors, and (3) to explore the connections between the emergent factors and Dirkx's (1998) three remaining strands of thought regarding transformative learning. These strands are: (1) Freire's emphasis on consciousness-raising, (2) Daloz's contention that transformation is the result of development, and (3) Dirkx's concept of integrating the emotional/spiritual dimensions into daily experiences. These strands were of particular interest because they offer ways of viewing different aspects of transformative learning. Viewing the data through these strands offers some suggestions pertinent to the study: (1) Issues of power are conditions of learning, and by learning to reflect upon such conditions it is possible to change how we are impacted by them. (2) Mentors and persons of power and authority can be important to the development of adults. (3) The spiritual/extra-rational aspect of learning was a very important part of the women's educational experience. Recognition of the spiritual aspects of learning needs to be integrated into the learning experience if we are to view the learners as whole persons. The strands provide ways of seeing the learner as a more complete person than does perspective transformation alone. As the data-gathering phase of the study progressed, it became evident that each of the women involved had been significantly impacted by the traditional female/male roles that the culture imprinted upon her and which were manifested in her career decisions. Thus, a further purpose of the study became the exploration of how the impact of gender roles became evident. While the study promised new knowledge of value to the areas of gender issues in religion and adult education and possible insights that adult education may provide for addressing gender issues in religion, the literature search revealed a scarcity of research on the focus of the study. Following is a brief discussion of the methodology and findings and a presentation of the study's conclusions and implications for adult education.

Methodology

Qualitative research strategies were used to illuminate the topic. The research questions that guided the study were: (1) What about the culture of women seminarians at the Methodist

Theological School in Ohio (MTSO) supported a decision to change career paths? (2) What experiences/factors shaped/affected the career paths of women seminarians who committed to careers as parish pastors after initially enrolling in non-ordination tracks? (3) What occurred during the seminary experience to prompt the women to change their program of study? (4) How did these women perceive the construct, "ordained minister," before and after their seminary experience? (5) What did the women believe to be the role of gender in their decisions?

These questions were well suited to investigation using the research strategies of ethnography and grounded theory. The research methods suggested by these strategies are participant observation, interviewing, and field notes. Twenty-four women, MTSO graduates and current students, participated in the study. Each agreed to an interview in a venue of her choice—her home, her office, or some other convenient location.

Data analysis was accomplished by coding the data into definable elements. This was accomplished through the use of a coding guide based upon the research questions. These elements were assembled into a realist tale to tell the story of why women, who enter seminary with no intention of becoming ordained, decide to pursue ordination. The data were also viewed through the lens of transformative learning models, Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation, and traditional female roles. The data were presented through the stories of three composite women—Ella, Lily, and Sadie (pseudonyms). Telling the stories through composites made it possible to view the data through the lens of transformative learning theory and limited the distortion of focus on individual differences and personality. As the women related their experiences, their stories confirmed the ideas that comprise the four strands. However, there was a two-way connection because ideas of the strands provide frameworks for understanding the decisions made by the women.

The composites (Ella, Lily, and Sadie) were selective. That is the women's experiences located them in groups representative of themes pertinent to the study. Ella's story related the experiences of nine women who most typified the phases of Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation. Ella transformed her worldview essentially via the process described by the theory of perspective transformation. Lily's story told of transformational experiences of the remaining 15 women. This story was representative of the other strands of transformative learning. Lily experienced consciousness-raising, learning as development, and the realization and validation of her own spirituality. Sadie's story presented the impact of gender and traditional female roles and expectations upon all 24 women.

Findings

The data support the following findings with regard to the research questions. The first question asked how the culture of women seminarians at MTSO supported a decision to change career paths. The women found the seminary a place of acceptance and encouragement. They were able to meet and form meaningful relationships with other women struggling with like issues of call, family, and ministry. Additionally, the women reported an atmosphere that encouraged them to explore and test the various opportunities for ministry available through a seminary degree. They were encouraged to examine their spirituality and to test the boundaries of their calls. The seminary was accepting of the results of their individual development and did not punish them for changing degree direction. The second question centered on the experiences or factors that impacted their career paths. Through their educational experiences, the women came to understand and accept their own strengths and how they might best utilize them for ministry. Faculty, mentors, friends, or others advised them that ordained ministry was the path that offered the most flexibility and received the most respect. They learned that administering the sacraments required ordination. It can be said that many feminist theologians, especially white women, can be located in three categories with regard to their position on the institution of the church. The positions can be loosely described as (1) those who believe women can never be truly part of organized, mainstream religion (Women can more effectively bring about change by

operating from the fringes of the institutional church.), (2) those who desire to remain part of organized mainstream religion and work for change from within the system, and (3) those who propose at least occasional breaks from traditional mainstream liturgical practices and participation in liturgies designed by and for women. The seminarians who were interested in changing the church from within came to believe that ordination provides the best vehicle for advocating change.

Question three asked what occurred during the seminary experience to prompt the women to change their program of study. In addition to the experiences mentioned above, there were some direct incidents. Some of the women received financial assistance; some of the women were directly encouraged by mentors or family to pursue ordination; each of the women grew to believe God was calling her in a particular direction. The fourth question asked how the seminary experience impacted the women’s perception of the construct “ordained minister.” For some the change was significant; where the image of an ordained minister had always been masculine, the women came to see themselves and other women as appropriate in this role. For some it was a matter of making the image more inclusive not only of women but also of such characteristics as sensitivity, understanding, and vulnerability.

Question five concerned the role of gender in the decision. Gender played a powerful role. Throughout the interview process, I was aware of the impact of gender upon the women’s lives; it appeared in the choices they made ranging from where they lived to the career decisions to the timing of entering the seminary. Whether or not it was directly articulated, each interview revealed that gender impacted all the career decisions the women made. Decisions regarding whether or not to enroll in classes, how many classes to take, whether or not ordination was appropriate, the acceptability of itinerancy, and others considerations were filtered through gender consciousness.

Conclusions

A literature review suggested an understanding of the women’s decisions based upon the four strands of transformative learning; it suggests that, by viewing the women’s decisions through the lens of the four strands of transformative learning, it would be possible to understand the factors that influenced these decisions. The literature further suggests that one of these strands, the theory of perspective transformation, may be flawed in one or more of several considerations, conditions that undermine the power of the theory. See Figure 1.

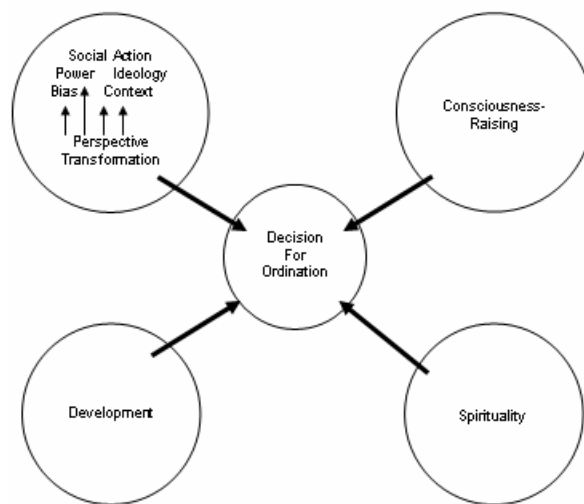


Figure 1: Literature-based Model

The data suggest the following conclusions:

- The model (Figure 1) for understanding the women's decisions to pursue ordination arising from the literature consisted of the four strands of transformative learning: the theory of transformative learning, learning as consciousness-raising, learning as development, and the spiritual dimension of learning. The data imply that the four strands do indeed offer insight into the women's decisions, but they may not present a complete picture. The data suggest that gender played a significant role in the women's decision-making and that the positions of power and context in the model should be reconsidered. The data also suggest that certain of the criticisms of perspective transformation may be applicable to the concepts of learning as consciousness-raising and learning as development. Finally, the data imply that, given the presence of learning as consciousness-raising, perspective transformation's apparent lack of a statement regarding social action may not be significant. Thus, a new model arises from the data.
- The role of gender in the women's decision-making seemed to be powerful and should be considered as we try to understand their actions.
- The context of the seminary apparently played a role in the women-decision-making.
- Situations of power appear to have existed in all aspects of the educational experiences related by the women, and power should be included in attempts to understand their actions.

A New Model. A model (Figure 2) based upon the data provides a vehicle for a discussion of the conclusions. The data-based model claims that, in addition to the four strands of transformative learning, the factors of context, power, and perhaps most importantly gender need to be considered. It also suggests that the transformative learning strands of perspective transformation, consciousness-raising, and development may contain certain flaws that might weaken their usefulness in helping us understand the phenomenon being investigated.

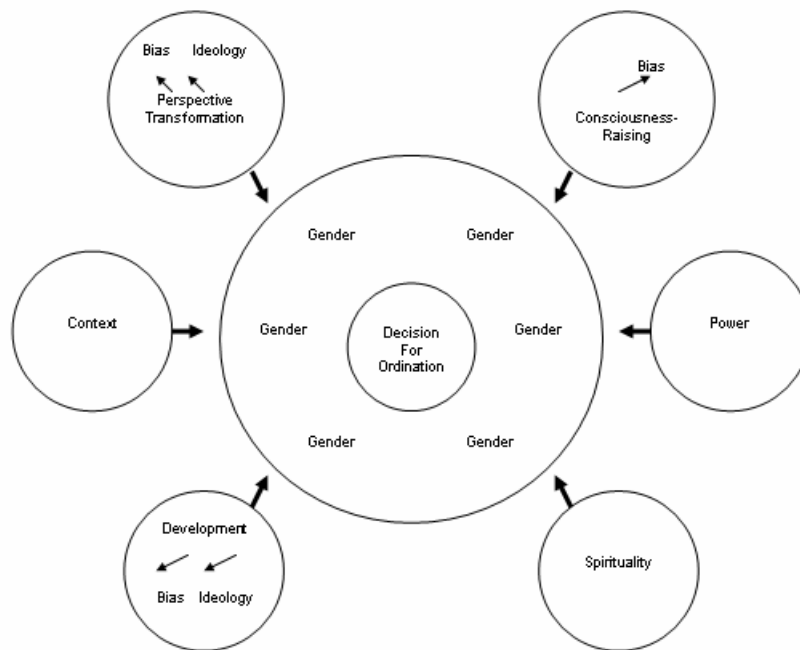


Figure 2: Data-based Model

The data reveal that, while the literature-based model provides some insight into the ways in which the women were able to transform their worldviews, it may fall short of providing a complete picture. The literature-based model failed to account for the impact of gender. The literature-based model also suggests that power and context may not be as important to the women's decision as the data appear to imply. Finally, the literature-based model does not

recognize potential flaws of bias and ideology in learning as consciousness-raising and in learning as development. Let us compare the two models.

Central to the data-based model, but absent from the literature-based model, is the importance of gender in the women's decisions. Regardless of age, previous experience, or marital status each of the women involved in the study was dramatically impacted by two traditional roles assigned to females—wife and mother. Sadie's story offers compelling evidence of this. Sadie put her family first. She entered the seminary only at a time in her life when those who depended upon her would not be inconvenienced. Every aspect of ministry was viewed through the lens of how it might affect those she loved. Her transformative learning was intertwined with traditional role expectations. As Sadie experienced transformation during her seminary experience, she came to see herself and her role in God's ministry through new eyes. She began to understand various aspects of her life-experiences that had influenced her decision-making, and she established new ways of understanding how she made decisions. However, she was not able to fully grasp the fact that her culturally constructed roles of wife and mother were part of the foundation upon which she made all her decisions. Sadie questioned neither the validity of gender roles as a proposition of decision-making nor the right of the culture to imprint these roles upon her.

Perspective transformation claims to explain adult development. By ignoring the impact of gender on the development of women, Mezirow introduces what may be a serious deficiency to the strands of transformative learning. It represents a gender blindness that seems pervasive and deceiving. Such gender blindness may be pervasive because gender impacts a woman's life in so many ways; it may be deceiving because the theory of perspective transformation arose from a study of women returning to college. One might properly assume that a study conducted on women would naturally include the all-important role of gender. But consider, the study was conducted in the late 1970's. At this time in history, most educational studies and theories arising from such studies were based on the experiences of men, and men's issues of gender are probably quite different from women's. There was a scarcity of research done on women and women's decision-making regarding careers. It was assumed that white, middle-class men presented the appropriate basis upon which to structure all research. A more surprising puzzle is the question of why the issue of gender does not appear in the most recent literature on transformative learning theory. It is mentioned only incidentally in a discussion of power issues in discourse (Belenky and Stanton, 2000).

The study's conclusion that the importance of the impact of gender on women's decisions is not recognized in the literature based-model is affirmed by recent literature on women's learning. This inattention to gender has led to the assumption that dominant learning theories are universally relevant and applicable. Brooks (2000) asserts that the relatively few studies focusing on women's transformative learning suggest that women do not necessarily experience transformative learning in the way suggested by the theories. According to Hayes (2000), a major limitation of many studies on women's learning is the scarcity of an investigation into the influence of gender. Figure 2 is a model arising from the data. It suggests that looking at the data through the lenses of gender, context, power, and the four strands of transformative learning provides insight into the women's decisions to pursue ordination. The conclusions of the study are significant because they help us gain a better understanding of factors involved in the women's decisions.

The data and conclusions arising from the study provide new insight into transformative learning. Revisiting the theory of perspective transformation through the lens of the study affirms that the theory is a powerful and useful tool, but it is flawed due to its inattention to gender, power, and context. Such a view also affirms the theory's limitation inherent in Mezirow's uncritical acceptance of Habermasian thought. A general conceptual implication for the field of adult education is that the theory offers one vehicle through which to study and understand adult learning and development. It may not provide guidance for understanding the development of all adults, especially women and other marginalized groups. Some specific implications for adult education follow.

Implications for Adult Education. The conclusions arising from the study present several challenges to adult education and educators, especially in the context of the seminary. Adult educators need to have a better understanding of the impact of gender upon adult decision-making. More research about this important subject is needed.

Faculty members need to be educated regarding adult education methods with special attention to the role played by gender in decision-making and techniques to assist women in coping with this phenomenon. Support groups could be established around issues of gender. Adult educators need to have a better understanding of power and how it may be at play in the classroom. They must develop techniques to reduce the impact of power.

The composition of the faculty and administration of the seminary should reflect that of the student body with regard to gender and race. Since women are the traditional caretakers of the children, seminaries should provide on site childcare. Since the words and images used to talk about God are indicative of women's inclusion in or exclusion from the liturgical practices of the church, more emphasis needs to be put on promoting and understanding gender inclusive language.

The importance of the context of the seminary was illuminated in the study. Adult educators need to be aware of the context not only within which they function but also within which their students live and work. The theory of perspective transformation needs to be revisited so the importance of context, power, and the extra-rational aspects of transformation can be explored. A likewise reconsideration of transformation as development needs to occur, and the gender bias of consciousness-raising needs to be addressed.

Perhaps the most important finding of the study is the profound impact that gender had on the timing and acceptance of the realized call to ministry. If we, adult educators, are truly to assist women in their developmental journey, we must understand the significance of gender to women's learning and decision-making.

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