Spirituality as a Sustaining Dimension of the Transformational Learning Process: Surviving Psychological Wife Abuse.

Maureen McCallum
University of Guelph

Abstract: The purpose of this research was to explore the transformational learning process through which women go in naming and disclosing psychological abuse in their intimate relationship. This empirical study documented a spiritual component as a critical part of the transformational learning process of these women.

Introduction
I came to this research with a need to put words to my own experiences. Adult learning and the transformational and developmental theories of Mezirow (1978, 1991) and Kegan (1982, 1994) provided the grounding that allowed me to connect adult learning theories to everyday life situations. However, I had the need to find the “feeling” part of learning that I felt was missing from these theories. This need was satisfied through further research which uncovered the grieving process as outlined by Boyd & Myers (1988). With this knowledge and several years of critical reflection and soul searching, I recognized the transformational learning process through which I had gone personally, as I identified psychological wife abuse as a topic I needed to research. Through this research I was seeking confirmation of my own decisions, personal process and time frames.

The world of women living with psychological abuse is filled with contradiction and ambiguity, the reality of life denying all that we know and believe. It is within this world that we must recognize and name the psychological abuse within our relationship before we can begin to make sense of our experiences. Compounding the difficulties of naming an invisible, often subtle, yet very real oppression, are the multitude of opinions and reactions encountered from family, friends and health professionals. We must also reconcile the confusion over what we believe to be true from our socialization and upbringing and the reality of our abusive relationship. In order to make meaning from our experiences with psychological abuse it is necessary to take a critical look at one of our most treasured relationships while re-visioning and recreating ourselves as women. The healing process dictates that we question ambiguous and contradictory structures that stand in the way of personal and communal development, “leaving behind the old perspective permanently…” (Lauzon, 1997, p.34).

Conceptual Framework
From a humanist and constructivist perspective, this research assumes that humans have an innate ability to reorganize and restructure their experiences and in doing so, gain a new outlook. Although past research (Walker, 1979) has portrayed women living with abuse as victims, Gondolf (1988) proposed a theory of abused women as survivors. He has suggested that
“even in the midst of severe psychological [trauma]…women seek help, adapt and push on” (Gondolf, 1988, p. 20).

From this perspective, transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1978, 1991) provided the conceptual framework through which to study the learning process of women as they created meaning from their experiences with psychological wife abuse. In particular, the healing process of transformative learning as outlined by Boyd & Myers (1988) was thought to most closely demonstrate the intellectual and emotional journey of women as they named and disclosed their psychologically abusive relationship. In the remainder of this paper I will briefly review the methodology of the research, provide an overview of the findings and conclude with implications for adult education.

Methodology

Using a constructivist, feminist methodology, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted. This provided the forum within which nine, self-identified participants were able to reflect on their experiences and describe turning points in their lives. Using an interpretative, biographical process (Denzin, 1989), the experiences of the participants were recorded as stories. The data were then analyzed using a constant comparative method, stories option, (Kirby & McKenna, 1989) which maintained the integrity of the women’s experiences and highlighted content and process.

This research was designed to explore the learning process of women living in psychologically abusive relationships in rural communities. Interviews were conducted in the homes of participants, allowing them the privacy to explore experiences that were meaningful to them personally. I anticipated that the transformational learning models of Mezirow (1978, 1991) and Boyd & Myers (1988) would be sufficient to document the learning process that would result.

Findings

This research supported the thesis that the naming and disclosing of psychological wife abuse follows a two phase intellectual and emotional process of transformational learning, one that closely resembles the process outlined by Mezirow (1978, 1991) and Boyd & Myers (1988). It further identified a strong spiritual component which was a stabilizing force as the participants named their abuse and developed coping strategies. The overarching issue for women living with psychological abuse was survival. For these women the intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth cannot be fully understood in isolation. In Figure 1, I have attempted to demonstrate the interplay of the intellectual and emotional transformation and the sustaining power of their spirituality. However, this graphic does not do justice to the iterative, messy process of transformational learning.

For ease of explanation I will use the story of one of the research participants to illustrate the findings of this study: Kelly was married for 17 years to her abusive partner and lived in a secluded rural hamlet during that time. During the early years Kelly described her relationship as “really great…I was bending over backwards…I thought if I just [did] everything exactly right then [I’d] have a happy marriage”. However, her family constantly teased her that she was
really “under her husband’s thumb”. She resisted their comments, “I didn’t want to hear there were problems…he’s a nice guy, …I [kept] forgetting and forgetting”.

![Figure 1. Demonstrates the intellectual, emotional and spiritual interaction as identified in this research.](image)

During the first ten years Kelly and her husband had four children and built a new house together. However, she remembers that her partner continually threw roadblocks at her as she questioned his commitment to her and their family. Kelly tells us “I couldn’t talk to him… he was very dominating, I started seeing patterns… I’d always have that particular feeling… I would feel so low… when I got really depressed I’d [write]”. Keeping a personal journal allowed Kelly to better understand herself and to recognize abusive patterns in her partner’s behaviour. Even so, her intellectual confidence and sense of self began to erode to the point where she was no longer sure of what was fact and what was fiction. Labeling the relationship as abusive was a turning point for Kelly. She says:

“There was an actual moment, an actual instant… I remember phoning my sister… and I was crying… I couldn’t really tell her why… but she… said to me “you are in an abusive relationship” that’s all she said… you know she could have said that to me the day before and it wouldn’t have meant anything to me… but all of a sudden it was— yes… I had this burden lifted off me…

After naming her relationship as abusive (point ‘A’, figure 1), she “didn’t think it was the end of the relationship, [she] thought, now I know how to help him…I know what I have to do”. As indicated in figure 1, she found new intellectual energy to move forward.

Kelly agreed with most participants that during this time weeks turned into months and then to years. The time frame between the intellectual and emotional naming of the psychological abuse varied with each of the participants. While continuing to seek help for herself and her partner, Kelly’s sister suggested she read “No Visible Wounds”. “I just cried and cried because it was so real…I read some chapters twice…I said this is how it was in my
life… and gave that to him (her partner)… he said the whole thing was a lie, and it was hard… it was really hard”. The emotional recognition of psychological abuse (‘B’ in figure 1) was the most devastating, leading to further emotional decline. However, it was also at this point that she began her search for meaning through her religious beliefs and spirituality. Kelly felt she needed the support of her church and sought out her pastor for advice. He was less than supportive, telling her that it always takes two when there are problems in a marriage.

I believed him, I believed him and thought… I’ve done something wrong… terribly wrong… I just sunk so deep… after he told me that…

Kelly’s emotional health hit bottom (point ‘C’ in figure 1) after this interchange with her pastor. Through journaling and continuing to seek support from those around her, Kelly began to recognize the rigidity displayed by her pastor. She grappled with the contradictions of her traditional religious background and the reality of life with her abusive partner.

Certain doctrines… are set in stone… and some people hold to that but there are a lot of Christians who say… it’s the person that matters more than the doctrines… the people who understand my situation are the people who really seem to understand what God can do in hearts

Kelly maintains that information and the development of a more personal relationship with her God has helped her to cope with the psychological abuse with which she had been living. And, she has been able to separate her early, rigid religious beliefs from her evolving spirituality (process towards D). This has allowed her to move on intellectually and emotionally as well. Kelly is one of the lucky ones. Her spirituality sustained her through the intellectual and emotional turmoil of psychological abuse. As indicated at point ‘E’ of figure 1, the upward line indicates Kelly’s optimism and her emotional healing which was sustained by her ongoing spiritual growth (D). She is able, once again to move on with her life.

Others were not as lucky. After many years Betty, Rita, Barbara and Joanne continue to struggle on a daily basis with depression and emotional trauma. However, they agree that it is their spirituality that sustains them. Joanne concludes “I find it hard not to isolate myself… [yet] I am very optimistic… in my heart… I am an optimist… I believe life can be better, I believe I can make a change… if I only had the strength”.
Conclusions and Implications for Adult Learning

The findings of this research describe a process through which women living with psychological abuse named their relationship as abusive, disclosed the abuse to others, and developed very personal coping strategies to sustain their everyday living. But, more importantly, the woman articulated a sense of movement and growth. Their spirituality moderated their emotional turmoil while the women made intellectual sense of their experiences. Even those who continue to struggle emotionally have identified a spiritual path that has undergirded the painful ups and downs of their personal experiences with abuse. They are not the same women today that they were when they first entered into their abusive relationships. These findings set the stage for further study of spirituality and its relationship to adult transformational learning in this and other contexts. This research further suggests that to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of adult learning, research must be extended out of the classroom to real life settings.

Scott (1997, p. 49) tells us that “[a]t the entrance to the twenty-first century, a door is waiting for us to open as we gather as individuating souls to act in new ways”. This challenges adult educators to continue to develop innovative and supportive learning environments that question ambiguity and contradiction while engaging “[t]he wholeness of learners’ lives—not just their heads…” (Dirkx, 1997, p. 82). By providing learning environments that support opportunities for personal growth and development, the academic community—adult educators and students together—carry new ways of knowing and understanding into their personal lives, their relationships and their communities, opening the door to new ways of being.

Endnotes
Tom Harpur (1996, p. 136) defines spirituality as “the inner life or spirit of each of us as it relates to the unseen world of Spirit or of God. It’s the name we give to the dimension of seeing and living that goes far beyond the material world to deeper truths and eternal values”. He goes on to describe a larger, “cosmic consciousness” that will be necessary for the new millennium. This extends to a very personal spirituality which includes not only a belief in a higher power but the people and universe around us.

These responses can range from support to condemnation to “why don’t you just leave”, usually without consideration for the emotional and very practical aspects of the situation.

Gondolf (1988) research suggests that “battered women increase their help-seeking in the face of increased violence,… Their effort to survive transcends even fearsome danger, depression or guilt, and economic constraints… In this effort to survive, battered women are, in fact, heroically assertive and persistent” (p. 17-18). “An inner strength, yeam for dignity, desire for good, or will to live appears despite one’s… present circumstances…by receiving proper supports, one’s inner strength can be realized, resiliency demonstrated, and a new life made” (Gondolf, 1988, p. 20).

Participants ranged in aged from mid-thirties to over sixty years old at the time of the interviews. Four women had lived in abusive relationships for approximately 6 years, three from 14-17 years and two had lived with abusive partners for over thirty five years. Seven of the women had 2 or 3 children, one had 4 children and one had eight children.

Rural living provided additional challenges in the naming of psychological abuse due to issues of confidentiality, isolation, lack of access to information and specialized services and ideological factors. Women living in rural areas may stay in abusive relationships five to eight years longer then their urban counterparts (McLaughlin & Church (1992). Rural communities tend to be more conservative, resistant to change, stress family privacy and value traditional male/female roles and patriarchal values (McCallum, 1999).

For purposes of confidentiality names of participants have been changed. All quotes are from McCallum, 1999.


Resources


Kirby, Sandra & Kate McKenna (1989) Experience research social change: Methods from the margins. Toronto: Garramond Press

132
The Impact of Globalization on Human Rights: The Challenge for Adult Educators

Derek Mulenga

Abstract: This paper examines the impacts of globalization on human rights and the challenges faced by adult educators. It concludes that globalization has adversely affected human rights, particularly in the South. Adult educators must challenge the discourse of accepting globalization as an inevitable product of development.

This paper examines the impacts of globalization on human rights and the challenges faced by adult educators. The paper has three sections. The first section explains the origins and nature concept of globalization and its impact on peace and stability in diverse societies, particularly in the South. The second section explores the relationship between globalization, development and human rights. The analysis focuses on the impact and implications of a neoliberal, market-driven development paradigm on human rights. The third and final section explores the roles of adult education in promoting and educating human rights in order to create a peaceful society, particularly within the context of resurgence of “democracy” in the South.