**Learning and identity (de)construction: the case of refugees**

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**Introduction**

This paper considers the learning and identity processes involved as refugees make the transition to life in the UK. It draws on empirical research conducted between 2005 and 2010 at the University of Sussex on the South coast of England. The research combined a longitudinal study with a life history approach to explore refugee narratives both before and after migration. In total fourteen refugees of mixed nationality were interviewed over a four year period. Participants were recruited from a University of Sussex course which was designed specifically to support refugees who wished to access higher education (Morrice 2009). Initial interviews usually took place within a year of arrival in the UK and were conducted every six to nine months thereafter. Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically in line with the conventions of life history research (Plummer 2001; Yow 2005). The broad aim of the research was to explore the learning and identity processes which accompany transition, and secondly to understand how individual biography shapes and informs the strategies adopted by refugees in the UK (Morrice 2011).

**Learning and migration**

For refugees the movement across social spaces are moments of intense learning as they have to modify the structure and the meaning of their lives as adults and adapt to the new social world. Uprooted from former communities, culture, work and language they are stripped of aspects of their previous identity. The process of migration disrupts the inherited frames of reference and the accumulated biographical repertoire of knowledge and understanding as they are forced to learn new behaviours, understand new rules and to adapt to new values and another type of social organisation. Becoming a refugee is therefore a source of deep learning as they confront unexpected changes in their life plans and the need to reshape their lives and reconstruct their identities.

Taylor (1994) points to the lack of research which brings a learning perspective to bear on the adaptive processes which immigrants undergo as they make the transition to living in a new cultural context. He suggests that Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning provides a useful model for understanding the development of intercultural competence and identifies three dimensions which link the two sets of literature. Mezirow defines transformative learning as:

…the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action…(Mezirow 2000: 8).

A central proposition is that when an individual’s ‘frame of reference’ or ‘meaning perspective’ is discordant with their experience, a ‘disorientating dilemma occurs’, individuals begin to critically reflect on and question the validity of their inherited meaning perspective, and transformation of perspective can occur. Taylor (1994) describes this as the precondition to change dimension and links it to the notion of ‘culture shock’ in the intercultural competency literature. He suggests that Mezirow’s (1994) ten stages of perspective transformation are analogous to the movement from lower to higher levels of cultural competency. Finally Taylor highlights the similarities in outcomes with the intercultural competency literature emphasising higher levels of integration and adaptation and transformative learning theory’s emphasis on the emergence of a ‘superior perspective’ (Mezirow 1990: 14). This notion of individual development is encapsulated in Mezirow’s final two phases of learning which are ‘[b]uilding competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships… [and] a reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by ones new perspective’ (Mezirow 1994: 224). A key supposition about the learning that occurs as immigrants make the transition to life in a new cultural context is that there will be positive change as they become better adapted to the environment. Mezirow’s work has been used in other studies with immigrants. For example, Magro (2007) draws on his work to explore the experiences of adult learners from war affected countries now living in Canada. King (1999) describes transformations in learner’s understanding of culture and self in her study with ethnically and culturally mixed groups of English as Second Language (ESL) students in North America.

In a recent article Newman (2012) has questioned whether transformative learning is indeed fundamentally different in kind from other learning, or whether it is merely an aspect of adult learning. Concluding that ‘any learning effectively done involves reassessment and growth’ (2012: 40), he argues that we should abandon the term transformative learning and replace it with the term ‘good learning’. My concern here is not whether transformative learning differs in degree or kind from other forms of learning, it is to highlight the assumption underpinning transformative learning, and shared more broadly in conceptualisations of learning, that learning invariably has positive outcomes. Implicit in all of these understandings of learning is the sense that learning is about change for the better, and that somehow it is always a good thing.

The need to recognize that transformative learning may not always have positive outcomes for the individual was highlighted by Taylor (2007) in his review of the empirical literature on transformative learning. He pointed to the need to broaden the definitional outcomes of perspective transformation to include the potential for a more negative impact on identity and conceptions of self. His review also drew attention to the lack of research into the socio-cultural factors which shape the transformative experience. Instead much of the empirical research has focused on the individual, while tending to ignore contextual factors such as previous life experiences and the social space in which individuals are living and learning. Related to this is the paucity of studies which have explored perspective transformation from informal learning and non-formal educational settings; most studies have been located in formal education settings (Taylor 2007).

**Policy and public discourses: an underbelly of learning**

Policy over the last ten years has imposed increasingly severe restrictions on those who come to the UK seeking asylum. Asylum seekers are not eligible for welfare services and are excluded from the labour market (Home Office 1999; Home Office 2000). Those who do not have independent means, or family and friends who can support them, are dispersed to hostels around the country while their claim is processed (Home Office 2009). Asylum seekers are excluded from English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes and other publicly funded education programmes (LSC 2006). The net result of these policies is to promote the perception of those seeking asylum as a burden on an overly generous welfare system, rather than as an asset or potential resource.

Excluded from economic, educational and other positive identity resources many asylum seekers learn how to break the law to enter informal and semi-legal employment while waiting for their claim to be settled (Morrice 2011). Patricia, a teacher from Zimbabwe arrived in the UK on her own and with very little money. Rather than be dispersed she became what I have called a circumstantial law breaker, working illegally to support herself and to send regular economic remittances back to her family.

Yes it was illegal…I'm not sure whether they didn't know that this was illegal because obviously they didn't even see my passport, but they still gave me a job…I didn't even have a bank account, I was using this lady, who I used to live with, I was using her bank account. She gave me her card, so I was using her card at the ATM…Not even anybody back home can ever imagine me or anyone doing that. … There's no way you can actually make anyone understand what you went through. There's no way. The lies that you tell, the anxiety…

For asylum seekers either being dispersed to a hostel and being dependent on state benefits, or working illegally, make it virtually impossible to maintain a sense of dignity and self respect.

Once asylum seekers receive a positive decision on their application from the UK Border Agency and gain refugee status, they can work legally and the process of integration can begin. However, unemployment rates for refugees are estimated at 36% (Bloch 2002). It is even more difficult for refugees to find employment commensurate with the skills and qualifications that they bring with them (Houghton and Morrice 2008). Among participants in the study were teachers, engineers, a human rights worker, a judge, a university lecturer, nutritionalist and business man. They arrived with expectations of re-establishing professional identities and securing employment in the same or similar professions. The sense of loss of social status and financial independence was acute as each of the participants was obliged to find work in the low skilled and often casual labour market. This included working in care homes, as maintenance workers, delivering fast food, working in catering and cleaning, as security guards and traffic wardens.

Accustomed to earning a living to support themselves and family members, being unemployed and dependent on state benefits was a source of shame for participants in the research. Abel had worked as a judge in Ethiopia and had been applying unsuccessfully for what he described as ‘simple jobs’ – stacking shelves in supermarkets, labouring etc. He described his frustration at the loss of respect he felt at not being able to secure a job

You know in our culture you lose your self-respect, even within your family, once you end up just getting benefits. It is a big difference here. There I just lived in my own home and I just live on my own earnings, here I am just living as a beggar. That’s what I’m learning here.

After almost two years Abel did eventually get a job as a traffic warden and achieve the financial independence he sought. It was a far cry from his previous job in Ethiopia and the respect and social status which had accompanied that role.

I didn’t want to stay on the benefits, that’s the best thing about the job. That’s why I’m doing it. Someone has to do it, although I resent it, having to do it. The public resent it, but still it is a job to do…

Accepting lower status employment often involved retraining in a new career. Zainab came to the UK with a PhD in chemical engineering from the University of Baghdad in Iraq, where she had been a lecturer and researcher. Like many refugees she had accepted that her human capital was not recognised and that she would have to find alternative career opportunities in the UK.

You know, it’s a big change for us...I have an experience for more than 20 years from design and chemical engineer, also my husband, but now we are looking for jobs and we, what we say, we suffered a lot to find jobs equivalent to what we have in the past…I’m doing teacher training now. I will teach maths in schools. I have no choice; it’s the only job I can do. My experience is in research; research and design, that’s my dream ... It’s a big, big loss. But I say the good thing is my husband and my son is safe now...

Alongside these policy discourses are powerful public and social discourses, fuelled by an often hostile media. Research into public attitudes around asylum conducted by the Independent Asylum Commission (Hobson et al. 2008) found that only 18% of people in their survey viewed the term 'asylum' positively. Their research found that the majority of respondents held negative views about those who come to the UK seeking asylum, including that they were here to: ‘steal jobs and scrounge on welfare’, that they received ‘preferential treatment in the allocation of housing and public services’ and were ‘a threat to British culture’ (Hobson et al. 2008: 14). These views support Zetter’s contention that the asylum seeker label transforms an identity into a politicised image; it is not a neutral way of describing the world, but has the covert intention to ‘… convey an image of marginality, dishonesty, a threat, unwelcomed…’ (2007: 184).

The identity of asylum seeker / refugee, and the associated pejorative meanings is all powerful; it decentres other identities, defining a person above and beyond other forms of identity. These negative stereotypes and meanings are assimilated and learned informally from the media, from encounters with others and their expectations and assumptions. For the majority of participants in the research the identity of both asylum seeker and refugee was an identity associated with vulnerability and shame. When asked if there was anything which had surprised him about life in the UK Yoseph from Ethiopia replied:

Yeah; the asylum process….people don’t like asylum seekers. They don’t like you if they know you’re an asylum seeker. People generally think that asylum seekers should be poor, dirty and illiterate.

The difference in entitlements and security makes the status of refugee greatly preferable. Yet being a refugee was still an identity to be kept hidden. Savalan’s response to being asked about the identity of refugee was typical:

I think it was a big worry if people asked me ‘what are you doing here?’ What can I say because, like I am a refugee but I have got respect for myself, I don’t want to be down in front of people… So I prefer not telling them why I am here and what for… They never say this refugee did something good. Everything what they say about refugees is bad.

**Conclusions**

The research highlights how for refugees there is a deep underbelly of learning which is around ongoing processes of identity formation which cannot be understood in terms of positive transformative outcomes. Through social activity and interaction, refugees constructed meaning and learned the social identity of refugee. Learning involved epistemological processes – changing how the world was perceived and how they made sense of the world. It also raised fundamental ontological issues about who and what they could be in the world. Participants became painfully aware that to be an asylum seeker or a refugee was morally problematic and a source of stigma. They were concerned about refugee identity in terms of what it said about their worth and value and struggled to be seen as respectable and to generate distance from representations of themselves as pathological.

The learning outlined here does not lead to positive outcomes, rather it is concerned with having to unlearn and let go of much of who and what they were. It involved learning to live with loss of professional identity, and the social status and respect which accompanied their pre-migration identity. This process is more about identity deconstruction and involves learning who and what they are not. In conclusion, the research suggests the need for an enlarged concept of learning which acknowledges that perspective transformation can involve profound ontological and epistemological processes and can have negative outcomes. The case study of refugees highlights the significance of the socio-cultural context in which learning occurs and the need for learning theories to recognize the potential dis-benefits and negative outcomes of learning on identity and conceptions of self.

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