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# **Shift Happens: Transformative Learning in Social Work Education**

Thesis submitted by

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BSW (Hons) *JCU*, M.Ed *UTS*

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in the discipline of Social Work and Human Services

College of Arts, Society and Education

James Cook University

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October 11, 2016

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Peter Jones

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Date

## **Statement of Sources**

### **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

October 11, 2016

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Peter Jones

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Date

## **Statement of the Contribution of Others**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis reports on a research project exploring the utility of Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991, 1997, 2000, 2009, 2012) as an explanatory construct in understanding the experiences of social work students, and as a guide to practice in social work education. Using a critical theory framework and a practitioner action research methodology, 25 final year social work students were interviewed with the aim of exploring their experience of social work education and, in particular, whether or not they had experienced transformative learning as described in Mezirow's theory. The thesis begins by presenting a review of Mezirow's theory, as articulated and developed over four decades, and reviewing a selection of literature which illustrates some of the ways in which transformative learning as an approach has been developed, facilitated and applied over that time. This literature is then linked to the core concerns and features of social work and social work education, with particular attention to critical and emancipatory concerns, in order to identify points of congruence between these and the tenets of transformative learning theory.

The methodology for the research is then outlined and the findings presented. Of the 25 participants, a small but significant minority ( $N=9$ ) reported learning experiences that aligned closely with Mezirow's description of transformative learning. The presence of a disorienting dilemma and the ability and commitment to engage in critical reflection on self and assumptions are shown as key to these students' experiences. The lack of a transformative experience among the balance of participants appears related to the level of pre-existing congruence between students' knowledge, values and exposure to social work, and the content of social work education. Of particular interest are the apparent lack of a structural and critical consciousness in the accounts of transforming students and the lack of evidence for the linking of individual change to wider issues of emancipation and social change.

The discussion of the findings, which follows, highlights the utility of Mezirow's theory in explaining the experiences of both transforming and non-transforming students, and also points to ways in which the experiences of the research

participants may inform practice in social work education. Particular attention is given to the ways in which the use of transformative learning theory in social work education may contribute to a critical approach to social work, and more broadly to progressive social change. Implications of the research are then discussed and a series of recommendations and suggestions for professional bodies and social work educators presented, focused mainly on approaches for facilitating transformative learning that emphasise critical dimensions of learning and practice.

## **Chapter One. Introduction**

The origins of this research are grounded firmly in my experiences as a social work educator, and as an academic with a commitment to exploring and contributing to the scholarship of teaching and learning. There is, for me, also a clear personal, ideological dimension to the project. I came to social work as a person with an explicit social change orientation. Indeed, what attracted me to the profession was the opportunity, as I saw it then, to do paid, professional work that would allow me to express my political and ideological leanings. In other words, I saw social work as a profession with an explicitly articulated commitment to social change that was neatly congruent with my own personal values.

Of course, the realities of social work practice in a time and place where neoliberal and managerialist discourses are dominant turned out to be somewhat different from the rhetoric of the Marxist, critical and structural visions for the profession that I had encountered as an undergraduate student. Nevertheless, a social change orientation remains an essential part of my identity as a social worker and was a dimension of self that I brought with me when I entered social work education.

I came to academia more by accident than design. Taking up a temporary position in a university, as a passionate life-long learner part of me was thrilled to be working in a place that privileged ideas and that was committed to challenging existing conventions and developing new knowledge to inform progressive practice. The temporary position turned into a permanent one and during the subsequent years I have discovered, of course, that the realities of social work education in a time and place where neoliberal and managerialist discourses are dominant also turns out to be somewhat different from the vision I had as a new academic. Despite this ongoing reality check I continue to see social work education as more than simply an instrumental process designed to equip students with the knowledge and skills required for practice. I continue to

see social work education as an explicitly political activity in which educators facilitate the conditions under which students may engage in social and personal analysis and critique, and these processes as normative in the sense that they are directed towards goals of contributing to a more equitable and just society.

In this sense, education, in my opinion, clearly has a transformative function and links the educator directly to social and personal change, both within and through the learner. There are aspects of such an educational process that seem, therefore, to relate quite clearly to concepts such as Freire's 'conscientization' (Freire, 1970) where pedagogical methods are employed in the service of both personal and social emancipation.

As a change-oriented educator, such an understanding of social work education creates a seemingly tidy package. The teacher teaches, the student learns and is changed, and these individual changes are then translated into broader processes of social change through progressive professional practice and activism. While such a description of the process provides a wonderful dose of feel-good factor for an educator like myself, it does pose a number of questions, including: Does such change actually occur in students? What is the nature of such change and how does it happen? Is such change actually translated into action? What role if any, does pedagogy and the actions of the educator play in all of this?

Anecdotally, I was aware of many instances where students had reported to me, either personally or through reflective assignments, placement journals and statements of learning, that they had undergone processes of significant change as a result of their social work education. Of course all learning involves change, but sometimes these descriptions were more epochal in nature, alluding to fundamental shifts in the way students saw themselves and the world around them. Something deeply significant was going on for some students, but not for others.

At the same time that I began paying more attention to these anecdotal accounts of change I was also becoming painfully aware of a glaring gap in my own knowledge base. After several years in social work education I had the sudden and dramatic realisation that, as an educator, I had no idea what I was doing. While I was receiving good evaluations in the subjects I taught and was enjoying my work, I realised that my approach to teaching was based on two things: The application of my social work skills (interpersonal communication, groupwork etc.), and my experience of the ways people had taught me as a student during my own undergraduate years. While on one level this approach seemed to be working, I recognised that my practice as an educator lacked a strong theoretical foundation – the very thing I spent so much time telling social work students was essential for their own future work.

Once this gap was identified it was, for me, intolerable. I began engaging with the scholarship of teaching and learning and enrolled in postgraduate studies in the field of adult learning. This marked a significant change in professional direction for me, and issues of teaching and learning in social work education are now one of my primary practice and research foci. But it also provided an opportunity to encounter and engage with theoretical perspectives that allowed me to think more deeply about, and begin to understand, the experiences of change that had been reported by my students. In particular, it introduced me to the body of educational theory known as transformative learning.

There has been persistent and developing interest in transformative approaches to learning over the last four decades. Much of this interest has been stimulated by the work of the late Jack Mezirow (for example, 1978, 1981, 1990a, 1991, 1997, 2003, 2009, 2012), who developed a theory of learning with a primarily rational-cognitive orientation. Mezirow argued that, through processes of socialisation and acculturation, people construct ‘meaning perspectives’ (1991, p. 4) that act as perceptual filters through which new experiences are mediated. Transformative learning occurs when a new experience leads to critical reflection on the foundations of a person’s frame of reference, revealing its inadequacies or limitations. As a consequence of this critical reflection the

person takes action to create a new, more open, inclusive and flexible, meaning perspective. Mezirow's theory of transformative learning stemmed from research he published in the mid 1970s (Mezirow, 1975, 1978) and was continuously reviewed, revised, developed, critiqued and defended until his death in 2014 (for an informative obituary, see Levine, 2014).

When I first encountered it, Mezirow's theory seemed to me to align with the anecdotal accounts that students had shared with me over the years, in which they spoke about significant shifts in their worldview as a result of educational experiences. The theory also resonated strongly with my own personal experiences of change at several points in my life, but particularly as an undergraduate social work student grappling with issues of gender. While Mezirow himself had not been overly concerned with the social change aspects of such transformation, I was further attracted to this theoretical orientation as I developed an understanding of its foundations and relationship to more explicitly emancipatory perspectives in education.

Mezirow (1991) stated that his theory draws on a wide range of theoretical antecedents, but particular note is made of the work of Freire (1970, 1973) and Habermas (1971, 1984), both of whom emphasised the potential for learning to challenge oppression and contribute to liberatory and emancipatory practices. Through the influence of Habermas, in particular, clear links have been developed between this approach and the wider concerns of critical social theory (see for example, Brookfield, 2005, 2012). As a social worker and educator with a strong social change orientation, Mezirow's theory began to look to me as if it might offer both a technical explanation of the mechanisms of a particular kind of adult learning, and also a way to situate such an understanding within a broader socio-political context and critical social analysis.

Initially, the predominantly cognitive-rationalist orientation of Mezirow's work troubled me somewhat, as my own learning journey has increasingly led me away from such a narrow orientation. Feminism, post-theories, spirituality and a growing awareness of Indigenous ways of knowing have all had an impact on the

way I see the world and the identifiable trend is away from a restrictive positivist/rational viewpoint. It was with some relief that as I read more deeply in the field, I realised that Mezirow himself had shifted from his original conceptualisation, but also, more importantly, that other theorists have challenged the cognitive orientation of Mezirow's work and begun exploring alternative emphases in transformative learning experiences (see Baumgartner, 2012; Tisdell, 2012).

The theory of transformative learning, as articulated by Mezirow, and further developed by many others, seemed therefore to offer both a useful explanatory tool for understanding the experiences of social work students and also a possible guide for an approach to teaching that was unapologetically transformative in its intent. For me as an educator there were many points of congruence between my own personal and professional orientation, the nature and aims of social work education, the tradition of critical and emancipatory social analysis and practice, the experiences of social work students, and this theoretical orientation. Many of these issues are examined in greater detail in the literature review chapters that follow this introduction. It was this multi-dimensional congruence that provided the rationale for pursuing this research project.

## **1.1 Focus and aims**

This project aims to explore the utility and applicability of transformative learning theory for both understanding and shaping the experience of social work education.

In particular, the research seeks to explore the experiences of students engaged in social work education and to document the degree to which their experiences reflect the features of Mezirow's transformative learning theory. Furthermore, it also aims to generate suggestions as to how transformative approaches to learning might be effectively and purposefully incorporated into the practice of social work education. To this end, transformative learning theory will be

explored both for its explanatory power and for its potential to be enacted in the service of social justice and social change oriented education.

The overall goal of this research is to explore the experience of social work education through the lens of transformative learning theory. More specifically, the research aims to:

1. Explore the utility of transformative learning theory as an explanatory construct in developing an understanding of students' experience of social work education
2. Assess the potential for transformative approaches to learning to contribute to social justice and social change oriented social work education
3. Develop practical suggestions regarding the implementation of transformative approaches into social work education.

Methodologically, the research uses critical theory as the overarching theoretical paradigm and employs a qualitative, practitioner action research methodology. The research draws on the existing literature and qualitative in-depth interviews with a sample of final year social work students at a regional Australian university.

## **1.2 Positioning the researcher**

Qualitative approaches to research, and in particular post-positivist and critical approaches, have called into question the notion of the objective, politically neutral and unbiased researcher (Morris, 2006). It is a feature of both critical theory as a research paradigm, and action research as a methodology, that the researcher is not seen as a neutral, detached observer, but rather as an active participant and potential change agent. It is therefore important to identify and position the researcher within the context of the project.

In producing a statement of researcher position, there is a risk of simply presenting a list of labels intended as a shorthand way of communicating the complex and often contradictory dimensions of the human being. Clearly, such a list cannot do justice to all that a person brings to their research or practice. However, even such a limited account does provide some signposts, alerting the reader to the fundamental assumptions and predispositions of the researcher as author.

In this project I am conscious of the fact that I bring a particular ideological and political orientation to the research and, indeed, to how I understand the profession and professional education. It would seem to me both authentic and honest to recognise explicitly that my personal orientation has influenced every stage of the research process. In an attempt to make my position as researcher transparent and explicit I have therefore sought not to exclude my ‘self’ from this thesis but rather to recognise the ways in which it shapes and influences my own processes of ‘making sense’.

In what is sometimes referred to as the “old political paradigm” (Groff, 1997, p. 91), I am clearly ‘of the left’. Influenced by Marxist and neo-Marxist thought as a young man, encountering feminism and critical social theory has allowed me to expand my understanding of the nature of oppression beyond Marxist analysis while still retaining a sense of the importance of the Enlightenment project. While rejecting the most extreme relativistic tendencies of deconstructive postmodernism, I accept that postmodern and post-structuralist thought have influenced the way in which I see the world and the importance I ascribe to recognising multiple truths and ways of being. A critical postmodernism, in which the central pillars of the critical, progressive modernist agenda are informed by insights from postmodernism, seems to me to offer a valuable way for making sense of the world and working towards change.

I adopt an unashamedly normative position in believing that there is a better world that can be worked towards and that such a world will be characterised by the fuller manifestation of social and ecological justice, in all their forms. Based

on a critical analysis of social relations, I believe that action should be directed towards producing change that leads us towards greater expressions of such justice. In this respect I am an advocate of 'prefiguring', attempting to manifest now the types of social relations that would characterise a more just, sustainable and egalitarian society of the future.

I understand education as an explicitly political activity that serves either to sustain the status quo or to critique and challenge it. Learning, for me, is a social constructivist process whereby we create meaning from the experiences that we have in our lives. This construction takes place within a sociopolitical context that often exerts a powerful and hegemonically distorting influence. Critical reflection and dialogue seem to me to be key aspects of the process of 'meaning-making' and offer the potential for the generation of personally and socially emancipatory knowledge.

I am committed to a reflexive approach to my practice as a social worker and educator. Such a position serves to make me keenly aware, at times, of the limitations of my own worldview and open to insights from new and sometimes unexpected quarters. As a white, middle-aged, middle class, male academic, I am conscious of occupying a position of privilege and I am keenly aware of the ways in which this privileged position operates to limit and distort my own worldview. I am under no illusion that I am not still subject to their distorting effects. I am conscious and grateful, however, of the ways in which feminism, postmodernism, Indigenous ways of knowing, and dimensions of spirituality have all challenged my existing assumptions and led to new, more inclusive ways of understanding the world.

The nature of this project means that, as a researcher, I can claim both insider and outsider status. In talking with social work students about their experiences I am an outsider. I am no longer an undergraduate student, sitting in classrooms with them, experiencing what they are experiencing. However, I was once an undergraduate social work student and indeed had experiences that reflect exactly the dynamic under consideration in this research. So there is some

commonality of experience that is noteworthy here. Perhaps more significantly, I am often in those classrooms with those same students, but now in my role as educator. The transformative learning that I am interested in exploring involves students but also directly involves educators and sometimes a number of other stakeholders. In this sense I am involved, through my practice, in the experience that is explored in this project.

The reality of my own 'being-in-the-world' is however more complex than such a simple statement of audience implies. It includes the political and institutional realities within which both my practice and the research are situated. For example, I am conscious of the fact that my motivations for completing a PhD are not purely to extend the boundaries of knowledge but relate also to baser concerns of job security, promotion and opportunities to pursue academic interests in the future – all of which hinge to some degree on possession of this qualification. I am also acutely conscious of the ways in which the realities of academic workload and pressures in the current neoliberal context, coupled with the personal demands of caring and nurturing activities outside of my paid work, have impacted on the nature, design and implementation of this project. Visions of full-blown collaborative, participative, multi-loop research processes have been steadily 'scaled back' in response to the realities of work and life pressures. What remains is an attempt to explore a significant research question, informed by my own experiences and bounded by the realities of what is possible.

This necessarily brief and inadequate statement should allow the reader to begin to understand the position from which this research project has been approached and conducted. It can be argued that all research is inevitably shaped by the position of the researcher – even that which makes claims to objectivity and political neutrality. In making my position explicit it is my intention to make transparent a dimension of research that is often obscured or hidden from readers. Such a stance is congruent with a critical theory approach to research and with action research methodologies.

### **1.3 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis follows a traditional approach to presenting the research, introducing the topic and researcher, reviewing relevant literature to establish a theoretical foundation for the inquiry, discussing the methodology and methods to be employed, then presenting and discussing the findings. This introductory chapter provides an overview of the genesis of the project, articulates the aims of the research and positions the researcher.

Chapter Two is the first of three chapters in which relevant literature is explored and discussed. The chapter presents a review of transformative learning theory, particularly as articulated by Mezirow and developed over time. Mezirow's conceptualisation of transformative learning can be understood as the theoretical foundation of the thesis and the primary analytic tool used in understanding the experiences of the social work students interviewed for this research.

The second of the literature review chapters, Chapter Three, examines the ways in which Mezirow's ideas have been challenged, developed and implemented by other theorists and practitioners. Literature relating to a number of different directions is presented here, including Jungian, developmental, integral and inclusive approaches. Work which focuses on the process of facilitating transformative learning is then presented, including literature which focuses on specific practices, such as critical reflection, and models and frameworks for facilitative practice. The chapter concludes with the selection of a number of applied accounts of transformative learning that serve as illustrative examples relevant to social work education.

The third of the literature review chapters, Chapter Four, focuses on the nature of social work as a profession, and on social work education as the means by which students are inculcated with the knowledge, skills and values considered essential for professional practice. A number of key themes and pedagogical emphases that are particularly relevant for an exploration of transformative

learning are identified. The chapter concludes by drawing attention to the multi-dimensional congruency between the concerns of progressive social work, social work education and transformative approaches to learning.

Chapter Five presents the methodology and methods used in the study. A justification for the use of a critical theory paradigm is provided ahead of a more detailed discussion of qualitative, practitioner action research as the specific methodology. The particular methods employed in the research are then articulated, including sampling, the collection of data through semi-structured interviews with final year social work students, and data analysis techniques. The chapter concludes with discussion of ethical considerations, limitations and challenges in the project.

The sixth chapter presents the findings of the research, allowing the voices of the social work students to emerge. The findings are grouped thematically, reflecting both emergent themes and the use of Mezirow's transformative learning theory as a sensitising concept or analytic template. These findings then focus on the actual processes of learning and transformation from the students' point of view, sets these against relevant features of Mezirow's theory, and reports on students' perceptions of the teaching approaches and practices that have been influential in both learning and transforming.

The discussion chapter that follows, Chapter 7, is concerned with the explanatory utility of Mezirow's transformative learning theory in understanding the accounts of learning supplied by students. Both deductive and inductive processes of analysis have been used to identify points at which the theory is congruent with students' experiences, as well as points where differences have been identified. Explanations for the nature and quality of transformation are discussed, drawing on conceptions of transformative learning from the literature as well as on grounded understandings emerging from the data. The latter part of the chapter presents a discussion of the findings with a particular focus on the facilitation, or fostering, of transformation. This section is concerned primarily

with transformative learning as seen from the educational practitioners' perspective, informed by the accounts provided by students.

The final chapter, Chapter Eight, summarises the research and identifies a number of implications and recommendations for social work education. Areas for future research are discussed and the thesis is then concluded.

#### **1.4 Conclusion**

Within the social work profession there is a strong and significant tradition of critical, social change oriented theory and practice (see, for example, Pease, Goldingay, Hosken & Nipperess, 2016). For many social work educators, their educational practice can be seen as an important and ongoing dimension of this tradition, particularly where education is understood not merely as a means for producing social workers who may then go on to become involved in progressive practice, but rather is seen as a potentially liberatory and emancipatory activity itself.

The project makes a contribution to the knowledge base of social work education and to the scholarship of teaching and learning through its review of the existing literature on transformative learning, and through an exploration of the nature of transformative learning in social work education and the particular utility of Mezirow's theory in this context. In the tradition of both critical theory and action research, it then seeks to extend this discussion to include creating the potential for change in actual practices, in this case, the pedagogical practices employed in social work education. The normative dimensions of transformative learning theory clearly link such changes to broader agendas of social change and emancipation.

## **Chapter 2. Transformative learning theory: Theoretical articulation and development**

The literature review for this thesis is presented in three chapters. These chapters identify and discuss the body of literature that informs, and provides focus for, the research project. In particular, this includes literature around both the theory and application of transformative learning; the key theoretical antecedents of transformative learning; the foundations, ethos and practices of social work and social work education; and the specific links between the concept of transformative learning and social work education. These links will be presented in support of an argument for the applicability of transformative learning theory in developing an understanding of students' experience of social work education, and as a guide for educational practice within this field.

### **2.1 A note on the methodology of the literature review**

The aim of this literature review is to explore work which demonstrates the links between transformative learning theory and social work education, and which provides a pathway for social work educators into the body of theory and practice around transformative learning. In this sense, the review presented here attempts to do more than simply identify a 'gap' that the research project aims to address. Rather, it aims to provide a full account of Mezirow's articulation of transformative learning theory, as developed and modified over a period of four decades, with the aim of providing the reader with a solid theoretical foundation from which to consider the utility of this theory in social work education. Furthermore, the review aims to capture a clear sense of the ways in which Mezirow's theory has been adapted and developed by others, including those who have critiqued it and identified its shortcomings, and to provide illustrative examples of transformative learning in practice that may be particularly useful or relevant for social work educators. For the interested social work educator, the review should therefore provide an accessible theoretical underpinning, an awareness of the dynamic nature of this theoretical approach, and a range of

suggestions and examples of what transformative learning practice may look like in the classroom.

Transformative learning has generated enormous interest in the decades since Mezirow's initial articulation of the theory. This has resulted in a very large body of literature, far beyond the scope of any single review to address. The literature that appears in this review has therefore been intentionally selected to suit the aims of this research project. The selection process was guided by a set of questions that reflected these broader goals. They included:

- How can the features, and development over time, of Mezirow's transformative learning theory best be described and communicated?
- Of the multiple directions in which other theorists have taken transformative learning theory, which are most closely aligned with concerns in social work education and therefore most likely to be relevant and interesting to social work educators?
- Given the myriad examples of the facilitation and application of transformative learning in the literature, which illustrative examples would best serve the purpose of giving social work educators a sense of both the diversity and applicability of this approach?
- How can the concerns of transformative learning theory and those of social work and social work education be linked in a way that makes a convincing argument for the utility of transformative learning in social work education?

Given that the research adopts a critical theory framework, the literature review has also been concerned to give adequate attention to those aspects of transformative learning (in theory, facilitation and application) that reflect a concern with ideology critique, emancipatory education and social change. This is reflected, for example, in the discussion of Freire and Habermas as antecedents of transformative learning theory, and in the inclusion of examples of transformative learning in practice that share this critical and social change orientation.

While this is not strictly speaking a 'historical review' of literature, given the temporal span of Mezirow's development of transformative learning theory (see Kitchenham, 2008; Kokkos et al., 2015), the review attempts to capture a sense of this developmental arc and refers to Mezirow's writings from across the period of his active involvement in theorising. While his initial articulation of transformative learning theory attracted significant attention in the academic world of adult learning theory, broader interest in Mezirow's work gained significant momentum in the early 1990s and continues to the present. In selecting literature by authors other than Mezirow for inclusion in this review, various works from across this span of time have been included on the basis that they represent a particularly significant contribution to theoretical development; they provide a particularly salient example of the issue under consideration; they illustrate the extension of transformative learning theory and practice into new arenas; and/or the work provides a particularly useful link to the concerns of social work and social work education.

In a practical sense, the review was conducted by examining the body of work published by Mezirow between 1975 and 2012. Systematic searches were then conducted of electronic databases, using a number of key terms in order to identify a pool of possibly relevant literature. Academic journals that have demonstrated particular concerns with transformative learning (for example, *Adult Education Quarterly*, *The Journal of Transformative Education*) were given focused attention in this searching process. The resulting large pool of literature was then further sifted with reference to the limiting questions posed above, and material selected for inclusion in this review. As noted above, the concept of transformative learning has proven to be one of the most generative lines of scholarship in the field of adult learning, creating opportunities for wide ranging discussion and debate about the nature of adult learning and of its relationship to personal and social change (Dirkx, 2006; Kokkos et al., 2015; Marsick & Mezirow, 2002). The aim of this literature review is not, then, to provide a comprehensive account of the entire body of research and scholarship concerned with, or touching on, the concept of transformative learning, but

rather to explore those aspects of the literature which may relate to, or prove useful for, understanding the experience and practice of social work education.

## **2.2 Chapter structure and focus**

This first literature review chapter is concerned with material relating to Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978, 1981, 1990, 1991, 1997, 2003, 2009, 2012). The chapter begins by describing the main features of Mezirow's theory as developed and described between 1975 and 2012. The second section of the chapter considers some of the important theoretical antecedents of transformative learning theory, and in particular the influence of Freire (1970; 1989), Habermas (1971; 1984) and the broader field of critical social theory (Davies & Barnett, 2015). It will be argued that these antecedents are significant not only because they provide a fuller understanding of the critical foundations of transformative learning theory, but because they also provide a theoretical bridge between the concerns of this area of scholarship and some of the theoretical and philosophical tenets of social work practice and education.

While Mezirow has been central to developing theory around the concept of transformative learning, many other writers, educational theorists and practitioners have also explored this concept, developing and extending Mezirow's work, or taking the idea of transformative learning itself in quite different directions. In Chapter Three, the second part of the literature review, the work of some of these writers is explored, with a focus on authors who have developed Jungian, developmental, integral, spiritual, and ecozoic approaches to transformative learning. The final section of the chapter then presents a range of research and scholarship in the field of transformative learning that has drawn on the work of the key theorists but advanced with a more specific focus. This includes work dealing with accounts of transformative learning and the practical facilitation or fostering of transformative learning processes. This literature has, again, been selected from the larger body dealing with issues of transformative

learning, on the basis of its relevance and applicability to social work education and to a critical framework.

Chapter Four, the third and final part of the literature review, examines literature in the field of social work and social work education with a view to describing the general purpose and ethos of the profession and its educative dimension. In particular, the place of critical traditions is considered. Several practice approaches have become widely accepted in social work education, including the centrality of critical reflection in teaching and learning activities, and these approaches are identified and discussed, with connections made to both the theoretical concerns and practice implications of transformative learning theory. Finally, the small body of literature that specifically links the concerns of transformative learning theory with the practice of social work education is examined.

The literature review concludes with an argument, based on the material reviewed, that there are clear congruencies between the concerns of transformative learning and those of social work education, yet little literature that explicitly explores the utility of this relationship. This research project aims to make a contribution in this area.

### **2.3 Transformative learning – Mezirow’s theory of transformation**

The American educational theorist Jack Mezirow has been developing ideas around transformative learning since the mid 1970s (Mezirow, 1975, 1978). Mezirow worked as an educational consultant with the United Nations before taking up a professorial position at Teachers College, Columbia University. Drawing on the experience of his wife, Edee, Mezirow conducted large-scale research studies into the experiences of women returning to study at community colleges. This research was the genesis of transformative learning theory. While certainly not the only influential thinker and writer in this area, he is generally regarded as the primary spokesperson in the field of transformative pedagogy and much of the research and thought which has emerged in this area over the

last 20 years have been influenced in some way by his work (Baumgartner, 2012; Kitchenham, 2008).

For Mezirow, the process of transformation, producing a shift in the way we see and make meaning of the world, is at the heart of adult learning. "Learning may be defined as the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation and action" (Mezirow, 1990a, p. 1). In reviewing previous attempts to develop theories of adult learning, and in particular theories which were able to guide the practice of adult educators, Mezirow noted that many theorists found themselves trapped in particular paradigms, including the psychoanalytic and behaviourist, with little dialogue between these positions and few attempts at synthesis of these competing perspectives. This, he argued, had left a significant gap:

*There is a need for a learning theory that can explain how adult learners make sense or meaning of their experiences, the nature of the structures that influence the way they construe experience, the dynamics involved in modifying meanings, and the way the structures of meaning themselves undergo changes when learners find them to be dysfunctional.* (Mezirow, 1991, p. xii)

Mezirow's transformation theory, and transformative learning theory in general, represents an attempt to account for the development and nature of adult learners' meaning structures, and the processes involved when, through experience and critical reflection, those structures are challenged and changed. Mezirow argues strongly for the practical implications of such a theory, which should, he argues, be able to form the foundation of a range of adult education practices, including goal setting, needs assessment, program development and instruction (1991).

### **2.3.1 Defining transformative learning**

Both Mezirow and others have defined transformative learning in a variety of ways, over time. Mezirow defined it as:

*The process of learning through critical self-reflection, which results in the reformulation of a meaning perspective to allow a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative understanding of one's experience. Learning includes acting on these insights. (Mezirow, 1990a, p. xvi)*

And later as:

*Learning that transforms problematic frames of reference – sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change. Such frames of reference are better than others because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58-59)*

The key elements of such definitions of transformative learning are the existence of meaning structures, which operate to shape the meaning that we extract from our experiences, and the processes by which such meaning structures might be changed, or transformed, in positive and enduring ways.

As Cranton (2002) notes:

*At its core, transformative learning theory is elegantly simple. Through some event, which could be as traumatic as losing a job or as ordinary as an unexpected question, an individual becomes aware of holding a limiting or distorted view. If the individual critically examines this view, opens herself to alternatives, and consequently changes the way she sees things, she has transformed some part of how she makes meaning out of the world. (p. 64)*

### **2.3.2 Meaning structures, meaning perspectives and frames of reference**

Transformative learning theory is grounded in a constructivist interpretation of learning (Merriam & Kim, 2012). According to this perspective, knowledge is not an entity waiting to be discovered and consumed by the learner, but rather is

created by the learner through the interpretation and reinterpretation of experience (Fosnot, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Constructivists do not deny the existence of an external world, but rather argue that what that world means to us is entirely dependent upon our past experiences and our interpretation of these. As Mezirow noted (1991, p. xiii) "...it is not so much what happens to people but how they interpret and explain what happens to them that determines their actions, their hopes, their contentment and emotional well-being, and their performance".

This constructivist paradigm is the basis for Mezirow's articulation of the nature of the meaning structures that form a central feature of his theory. Meaning structures, according to Mezirow, consist of meaning perspectives, sometimes called frames of reference, and their component parts. A meaning perspective, or frame of reference, is:

*... the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions. It involves cognitive, affective and conative dimensions. It selectively shapes and delimits perception, cognition, feelings, and disposition by predisposing our intentions, expectations, and purposes. It provides the context for making meaning within which we choose what and how a sensory experience is to be construed and/or appropriated. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 16)*

Meaning perspectives therefore operate as filters as we move through life and encounter both new and familiar situations, selectively influencing what and how we attend to and make sense of these experiences. These perspectives, according to Mezirow, are built up over time through processes of socialisation and acculturation. They are often unintentionally developed and may be either within or outside of our awareness (Mezirow, 2000, 2012). They are usually acquired in an uncritical manner and may therefore be seen to reflect the dominant social and cultural concerns present in the context in which this acquisition occurs. As Taylor (1998, p. 6-7) notes "These meaning perspectives support us by providing an explanation of the happenings in our daily lives but at the same time they are a reflection of our cultural and psychological

assumptions". In other words, meaning perspectives, uncritically acquired and often reflecting dominant social and psychological dynamics, influence the way we think about and understand experience, and how we act on that constructed meaning (Mezirow, 2012). When a meaning perspective becomes consolidated and entrenched over time, it can be thought of as constituting a personal paradigm, or worldview, which becomes increasing less amenable to change.

The structures of meaning articulated by Mezirow are significant because our sense of self, our values and beliefs, are firmly grounded in these frames of reference. They may therefore be fiercely defended in the face of challenging experiences or opinions that do not correlate with our own worldview (Mezirow, 2012). Yet these meaning perspectives are usually underpinned by sets of unquestioned assumptions about the way the world is. Indeed, fundamental to theories of transformative learning is the notion that meaning perspectives often include distorted views of reality.

Mezirow has identified a number of specific categories of distorted assumptions which, he argues, are often present in meaning perspectives as a result of the process of uncritical, non-reflexive personal and cultural assimilation involved in their construction (Mezirow, 1990b, 1991). These include: epistemic distortions, or distorted assumptions about the reasoning process, which Mezirow described as concerning "the process of reasoning and involve fallacies in the principles of logic and violations in the rules of inference" (1991, p. 119); sociocultural and sociolinguistic distortions, relating to issues of power and social relationships and the way these are delineated by language; and psychic or psychological premise distortions, "ways of feeling and acting that cause us pain because they are inconsistent with our self-concept or sense of how we want to be as adults" (1991, p. 138).

Meaning perspectives, or frames of reference, are thus structures that are built up over time, through processes of assimilation and acculturation. They act as perceptual filters through which our experiences pass, providing criteria for both the construction of meaning based on experience and for action and judgement.

Because of the uncritical and non-reflexive processes by which these structures are acquired, they usually contain distortions and result in a limited, uncritical, and skewed view of reality, and in particular, of the sociocultural context in which they exist. Transformative learning, then, is the process by which such meaning structures are changed in the direction of more open, inclusive and integrative frames of reference.

### 2.3.3 Processes of transformation

According to Mezirow, the transformation of meaning perspectives, or frames of reference, is:

*... the process of becoming critically 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 expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings.*

(Mezirow, 1991, p. 167)

Mezirow argued that such transformations usually occur in response to a disorienting dilemma, an event, or series of events, which become catalysts or triggers prompting critical reflection on our existing perspectives (1990, 2012). Experience then is the foundation for transformation, and the way that new experiences, and particularly significant, disorienting experiences, are dealt with is critical to this process. The transformation of meaning perspectives becomes possible in those situations where an experience which is not congruent with our existing meaning structure leads not to rejection of the meaning of the experience, but rather to critical reflection upon the very bases of our meaning perspective, that is, a critical examination of the previously taken for granted assumptions which help to construct our frame of reference (Mezirow, 1990a, 1991, 2000). However, according to Mezirow, simply reflecting upon or even changing one's meaning perspective is not sufficient for transformative learning to have taken place. Action is also required, in the sense of the enactment of the altered perspective in the social world.

While emphasising that transformation theory is not a ‘stage’ theory, Mezirow argued that a process of perspective transformation, with a number of specific phases, might be discerned, and he noted that perspective transformation often follows some variation of these phases (1991, 2009). These phases are:

- 1. A disorienting dilemma*
- 2. Self-examination*
- 3. A critical assessment of assumptions*
- 4. Recognition of a connection between one’s discontent and the process of transformation*
- 5. Explorations of options for new roles, relationships and actions*
- 6. Planning a course of action*
- 7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans*
- 8. Provisional trying of new roles*
- 9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships*
- 10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective.* (Mezirow, 2009, p. 19)

A learner’s experience, then, is always the starting point for perspective transformation. The experience of a disorienting dilemma can be dramatic and singular, such as the death of a loved one, or can be more subtle and incremental, such as the exposure to new ideas through a course of study, but without such an experience no transformation is possible (Taylor, 1998). Mezirow’s theory gives prominence to two important dynamics as part of the transformative process. Critical reflection and rational discourse are, he argues, central to understanding the conditions that make the critical examination of meaning perspectives, and therefore transformation, possible.

#### **2.3.4 Critical reflection and rational discourse**

Mezirow and most other writers in the field of transformative learning argue that critical reflection is the central process in such learning (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012; Liu, 2015; Mezirow, 2012). Essentially, critical reflection, as

described by Mezirow, refers to the critical examination of existing assumptions and presuppositions. It can be thought of as a process of assessing “*how or why* we have perceived, thought, felt or acted” (Mezirow, 1990a, p. 6). Mezirow has suggested two key types of reflection: First, critical reflection of assumptions, or objective reframing, which involves critically reflecting on the assumptions of others, and, secondly, critical self-reflection of assumptions, or subjective reframing, which involves critical self-reflection on one’s own assumptions and in particular the ways in which one’s world view may be limited and distorted (Mezirow, 2000; Taylor, 1998).

While Mezirow argues that transformative learning can occur as a result of either of these types of reflection, it is the critical self-reflection of assumptions which is more likely to be involved in a perspective transformation:

*... although the transformation of meaning schemes (specific beliefs, attitudes and emotional reactions) through reflection is an everyday occurrence, it does not necessarily involve self-reflection. We often merely correct our interpretations. On the other hand, the transformation of a meaning perspective, which occurs less frequently, is more likely to involve our sense of self and always involves critical reflection upon the distorted premises sustaining our structure of expectation.* (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167)

The second of the key processes of transformative learning relates to the role and importance of rational discourse, or as Mezirow referred to it in later years, critical-dialectical discourse (2003), or reflective discourse (2012). Mezirow’s argument here, building on the work of Habermas (1971, 1984), is that critical reflection on underlying assumptions and presuppositions, such as would lead to perspective transformation, is not a solitary activity but rather takes place, at least in part, through discourse. Discourse here refers to “the process in which we have an active dialogue with others to better understand the meaning of an experience” (Mezirow 2000, p. 14). In particular, Mezirow was concerned with dialogue devoted to assessing contested beliefs, and it is through such discourse that the process of transformation is promoted, developed and enacted. Taylor

notes that “It is within the arena of rational discourse that experience and critical reflection are played out. Discourse becomes the medium for critical reflection to be put into action” (Taylor, 1998, p. 11).

Mezirow recognises that opportunities and conditions for participating in rational discourse cannot be assumed, noting, “Hungry, desperate, homeless, sick, destitute, and intimidated people obviously cannot participate fully and freely in discourse” (2003, p. 60). In order for people to engage in such discourse, Mezirow argued that they must possess two distinct adult learning capacities: the ability to become critically self-reflective, and the capacity for reflective judgement – that is, the ability to engage in discourse that assesses the assumptions that underpin values, beliefs and feelings (2003).

### **2.3.5 Mezirow: Facilitating transformative learning**

A number of writers have focused on practical aspects of facilitating transformative learning, and these will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter. For Mezirow, his primary concern regarding this issue was to identify the conditions and capacities required for such transformations to occur. Given the centrality in his theoretical work of critical reflection and participation in rational discourse, it is hardly surprising that Mezirow’s ideas for facilitating transformation focused on these factors. As he stated:

*Creating the conditions for and the skills of effective adult reasoning and the disposition for transformative learning – including critical reflection and dialectical discourse – is the essence of adult education and defines the role of the adult educator, both as a facilitator of reasoning in a learning situation and a cultural activist fostering the social economic, and political conditions required for a fuller, freer participation in critical reflection and discourse by all adults in a democratic society. (Mezirow, 2003, p. 63)*

Mezirow argued that effective adult education helps learners to move towards positions of greater autonomy, a process that must include a focus on developing the skills and attitudes required for critical reflection. Approaches that may help

learners to move towards these objectives include those that are learner-centred, group-oriented, interactive and participatory (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10). In utilising such techniques, educators are challenging students to begin identifying and questioning the assumptions of others as well as their own. This critical questioning of previously unquestioned or taken for granted assumptions – assumptions which underpin the reasons and arguments of others, and/or our own acquired meaning perspectives - is the key to developing a critically reflective capacity.

The capacity to engage in rational discourse is also recognised as a facilitative factor in the process of transformative learning. Following Habermas (1984), Mezirow identified a number of ideal conditions that should exist in order for adults to participate fully and freely in such discourse. He stated:

*To more freely and fully participate in discourse, participants must have the following:*

- *More accurate and complete information*
- *Freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception*
- *Openness to alternative points of view; empathy and concern about how others think and feel*
- *The ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively*
- *Greater awareness of the context of ideas and, more critically, reflectiveness of assumptions, including their own*
- *An equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse*
- *Willingness to seek understanding and agreement and to accept a resulting best judgment as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence, or arguments are encountered and validated through discourse as yielding a better judgement.* (Mezirow, 2000, p. 13-14)

While recognising these as ideal characteristics, and not necessarily achievable, the role of the adult educator, according to Mezirow, is to attempt to create these conditions.

### **2.3.6 Social change**

Mezirow's conception of the role of the adult educator also relates to the place of social action and social change in his theorising around transformative learning.

For Mezirow, transformative learning is not necessarily linked directly and inevitably to broader social change. Perspective transformation may, for instance, relate to epistemic or psychic distortions, and while transforming these existing presuppositions will entail taking action in the social world, such action may relate more to individual behaviour than direct, collective, social action (Mezirow, 1991). However, and importantly, Mezirow argued that processes of transformative learning help to create the conditions for both individuals and society that are necessary for emancipatory social transformation and engagement in participative, democratic processes (2003). In other words, while some forms of transformative learning may lead individuals to directly connect their learning with emancipatory social action, all perspective transformations, by nature of the shift towards more critical, open and inclusive frameworks, contribute to creating the conditions for fuller participation in democratic citizenship (Mezirow, 2003, 2012).

From a critical perspective, however, the lack of an explicit focus on issues of power and privilege in Mezirow's work does constitute an important critique of the theory. The critical traditions represented by the work of Freire, Habermas and, more broadly, the critical theorists are engaged in ideological critiques that often focus on the social relations of power and privilege. Beyond Mezirow's arguments for the existence of socio-cultural distortions of meaning structures and the ways in which critical reflection might serve to illuminate these (Mezirow 1991), there is little in Mezirow's articulation of transformative learning theory that directly and explicitly addresses issues of power and the existence of privilege. The more 'emancipatory' expressions of transformative learning (see for example, Brookfield, 2005, 2012) come closest to such explorations and a number of writers have attempted to address issues of structural inequality and power differentials using a transformative learning

approach (e.g. Barraclough & McMahon, 2013; Hess et al, 2014; Humphries & St Jane, 2011; Lorenzetti, Azulai & Walsh, 2016).

## 2.4 Selected foundations: Freire, Habermas and critical social theory

In describing the foundations of his theoretical work, Mezirow acknowledged the influence of writers in a wide range of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, neurobiology, religion and education (1991). In assessing the utility of Mezirow's work, and transformative learning theory in general, for social work education, three particular influences are worth considering. These are the work of Freire (for example, 1970, 1973), of Habermas (for example, 1971, 1984, 1987) and, more broadly, the body of work referred to as critical theory (Bronner, 2011; Crossley, 2005; Tyson, 2012). In all three instances, there are clear and direct connections that link these bodies of work to transformative learning theory and which, as will be discussed, also establish clear connections to aspects of social work education.

### 2.4.1 Paulo Freire: Liberation pedagogy

Freire is generally recognised as one of the most significant educational theorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In reviewing the major theoretical approaches to education, Pope & Denicolo (2001) locate Freire within the "humanist approach" (p. 16), describing the significance of his particular contributions to challenging dominant perspectives on knowledge and values, placing an emphasis on interactive dialogue between teachers and learners and his advocacy of experiential forms of learning. Freire's work is underpinned by a social analysis with its roots in Hegelian dialectics, traditional Marxist theory and liberation theology (Mayo, 1999; Morrow & Torres, 2002; Roberts, 2013), viewing society as the site of the exercise of power and dominance, with the 'oppressors' responsible for the ideologically based exploitation of the 'oppressed'.

In particular, Freire saw traditional, mainstream education as one of the methods whereby this oppressive relationship was imposed and ideological domination reproduced. He argued that education can never be a politically neutral activity, and that traditional education that lays claim to such neutrality,

is simply “a convenient alternative to saying that one is siding with the dominant” (Freire, 1985, cited in Mayo, 1999, p. 60). Freire referred to traditional approaches to education as ‘banking education’, an approach that viewed learners as an empty account into which educators would make deposits. Such an approach constituted an alienated, non-reflective mode of learning involving an uncritical consumption of knowledge. “Education... becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat” (Freire, 1970, p. 58).

Freire’s alternative to this banking model of education involves pedagogy with a focus on conscientisation and praxis – a process by which teachers and learners, in dialogue with each other, are able to step back and, through reflection, perceive the realities of their socio-political context. Such reflection creates the opportunity for developing an understanding of the operations of power and exploitation and for taking action against these oppressive realities (Freire, 1970). Central to this process in Freirian thought is the importance of a dialogical, democratic relationship between teacher and student. “Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (p. 81).

While Freire’s work is often associated with a particular method or technique used in developing adult literacy, the importance of his pedagogical theory lies in its broader agenda, referred to by Freire as “education as the practice of freedom” (p. 81). In essence, Freire argued for the educational goal of political literacy, and for the attainment of this goal through processes of conscientisation, involving critical reflection and dialogue (1998). Such learning at the individual level is, in Freire’s view, always related to the socio-cultural context in which it occurs and, through praxis, to the broader goal of social transformation.

Mezirow's work has strong parallels with that of Freire, as well as some significant differences. Mezirow clearly identified Freire as a significant influence on his development of those aspects of transformation theory that are concerned with criticality and social change, writing:

*In the early 1970s, however, I encountered the writings of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich, which unequivocally challenged the validity of my relatively unsophisticated premises concerning adult education for social action and consequently the validity of the roles I had played in programs designed to foster this kind of learning. The critical dimension missing from my work had been my lack of awareness both of the centrality of conscientization in the learning process... and of the importance of entrenched power in the community development process I had attempted to foster.* (Mezirow, 1991, p xvi-xvii)

In discussing the work of Freire, and in particular his notion of culturally conditioned levels of consciousness, Mezirow noted that for Freire, transformation invariably means 'social' transformation. It is the oppressive operation of ideology that acts to limit the consciousness of learners that must be addressed through the combination of critical reflection, dialogue and action. This contrasts with Mezirow's argument that the distorted assumptions that create limited meaning structures may also be of an epistemic or psychological nature, meaning that transformative learning, while an important component of broader social transformation, does not necessarily lead to that point. For Freire and other advocates of critical pedagogy, critical reflection must involve reflection on issues of social power and hegemony (see, for example, Brookfield, 2000, 2012). However, for Mezirow this is only one of the distorting dynamics that may be the focus of both critical reflection of assumptions and critical self-reflection of assumptions (1991). According to Mezirow, Freire's focus is on critical self-reflection of one's assumptions about "a system – economic, cultural, political, educational, communal or other...", but such subjective reframing could also be focused on reflecting on one's assumptions about a narrative, an

organisation or workplace, feelings and interpersonal relations, and/or the ways one learns (Mezirow, 2000, p. 23).

Mezirow noted that the dialogic method of teaching promoted by Freire, whereby the conditions for critical reflection and transformation are created in both the classroom and in the student-teacher relationship, is closely related to what Mezirow sees as the ideal conditions required for free and full critical discourse (Mezirow, 1990b). Similarly, Mezirow echoed Freire's emphasis on the centrality of praxis, arguing, "reflective discourse and its resulting insight alone do not make for transformative learning. Acting upon these emancipatory insights, a praxis, is also necessary" (1990b, p. 354-355), although the extent to which such praxis is always directed towards social change in Mezirow's theory is arguable.

While it is clear from his work that Mezirow has been significantly influenced by the work of Freire, and that important parallels exist between their theoretical approaches, the importance ascribed to Freire's work in relation to transformative learning also emerges in the work of other authors. Authors such as Flinders & Thornton (2013), Mayo (2012), Heaney & Horton (1990) and Pietrykowski (1996) have highlighted the significance of Freire's work for adult education theory in general and Mezirow's transformative learning approaches in particular. van Gorder (2007), as an example, draws on Freirian analysis and practice in his discussion of education as social transformation in situations in which the learners are characterised as the privileged, or the "children of the oppressor" (p. 9), rather than the oppressed. Again, the Freirian practices of critical reflection through conscientisation, dialogue, problematisation and questioning, as part of a transformative educational practice, emerge as key features of such work.

In exploring these connections between critical reflection and transformative action, Brookfield (2000) notes that Freire recognised and emphasised the fact that education, while playing a vital role, cannot by itself be the "lever for the transformation of society" (p. 144). Brookfield argues that this echoes much of

Mezirow's work, which distinguishes between processes of critical reflection and processes of social transformation, and recognises that one does not necessarily lead to the other.

The links between Mezirow and Freire also emerge in accounts of the application of transformative learning theory across a wider range of areas and settings. Schapiro (2003) for example, discusses the development of a post-graduate program in Human and Organisation Development. Schapiro relates the way in which the work of Freire emerged as a particularly helpful and important influence as the program developers became increasingly aware of the need to move away from traditional adult learning approaches and to develop instead a transformative and socially oriented program. Moore (2005) also notes the role of Freire in shaping thought around transformative learning, emphasising the group-oriented aspects of such learning as particularly important in moving to address issues of sustainability. Hart (1990), Lange (2004), Roberts (2005), Storrs & Inderbitzin (2006), Hansman & Wright (2009) and Lawrence (2012), all provide examples of practical approaches to facilitating transformative learning, where the links between Mezirow and Freire emerged as particularly important.

#### **2.4.2 Jurgen Habermas: Communicative action and emancipatory learning**

Habermas has been recognised as one of the most influential thinkers of recent times (Bronner, 2002; Murphy & Fleming, 2010; Scott, 1995; Segre, 2014). His philosophical work (for example, 1971, 1984, 1987) has generated enormous interest and exerted considerable influence since the 1970s, particularly as more of his writing has become available in English translation. Habermas is noted as a contemporary thinker with wide-ranging interests, both philosophical and practical. As Scott (1995) notes, "Habermas...is a theorist with the kind of encyclopaedic and systematic interests that marked the work of the founding generation of sociological theorists. With Habermas, sociology has, once again, been provided with a starting point for consolidation and advance" (p. 228).

Habermas has significantly extended the scope of critical theory, both challenging and building on the work of earlier theorists such as Horkheimer and

Adorno (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1986). In doing so he has extended the applied aspects of his philosophical work, reflecting the position that argues, "... social theory must be critical. A 'critical' social theory not only describes social reality, but also criticises it and attempts to change it. Thus, it is a theory with a practical intent" (Roderick, 1986, p. 7). In this sense, praxis becomes a central concern of critical theory, and of Habermas' work. Theory, according to this perspective, should not merely explain, it should both critique and suggest practical ways of producing change (Davies & Barnett, 2015).

While Habermas' body of philosophical work is complex and a full review beyond the scope of this project, there are two aspects of Habermas' work that can be highlighted as having had a significant impact on Mezirow's development and articulation of transformation theory. The first of these is Habermas' work on epistemology and the sociology of knowledge, highlighting the role of ideology in leading to distortions in communication and understanding (Habermas, 1971).

Habermas argued that human beings are active participants in the social construction of knowledge, and that the production of knowledge, historically, is structured by what he referred to as 'cognitive interests', which he saw as essential aspects of human being. Each of these cognitive interests, with their respective sphere of action or experience, is related to a specific form of knowledge. These are empirical-analytical (instrumental); historical-hermeneutic (communicative); and critical-dialectic (emancipatory) (Habermas, 1971). In other words, Habermas identifies three areas where interests generate types of knowledge:

... instrumental knowledge *linked to science and oriented towards reliability, prediction, and causal analysis*, practical knowledge *linked to communication, understanding, and interpretation*, and emancipatory knowledge *linked to criticism, self-reflection, liberation, and utopian visions*. (Calhoun et al., 2007, p. 358-359)

It is emancipatory knowledge, according to Habermas, which, through the operation of social critique and reflexive awareness, will enable people to perceive their world in an undistorted fashion (Habermas, 1971).

The second area of Habermas' work to exert a particular influence on the development of transformative learning theories has been his work in the area of communicative action (see in particular, Habermas, 1984; 1987a). This work constitutes a wider analysis of society and the nature of social change, bringing together his epistemological work with an attempt to develop a way forward for the project of the Enlightenment. Habermas argues that there is an underlying and accepted truth or validity which underpins intersubjective communication and which makes possible rational consensus (Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff & Virk, 2007). Actions with an orientation towards producing or reaching such a shared understanding could be thought of as communicative action (Habermas, 1984; Rasmussen, 1990). Habermas argues that it is this form of action which is primary, i.e. "...the use of language with an orientation to reaching an understanding is the *original mode* of language use..." (1984, p. 288).

Communicative action, with the embedded feature of a reflexively oriented critique, thereby holds the potential to lead human beings towards liberation from domination and distorting ideology. As Snedeker (2004) notes:

*Fundamental to Habermas' analysis of communicative reason is the assumption that mutual understanding is possible under the conditions of rational argument provided by genuine dialogue. The very practice of such dialogue is the ongoing accomplishment of consensus and the rejection of coercion and manipulation". (p. 73)*

The difference between instrumental and communicative learning, as proposed by Habermas, is recognised by Mezirow as a key proposition underpinning transformative learning theory (1990, 1997, 2003). Unlike instrumental learning, testing the validity of communicative learning is not necessarily amenable to empirical evaluation, or an appeal to tradition or authority. Rather,

as discussed in Habermas' work on communicative action (Habermas, 1987), validity must be assessed through consensual validation, that is, through engaging in rational, or critical-dialectical, discourse.

Habermas' conception of emancipatory learning has embedded within it the notion of ideological critique, the ability to recognise and criticise the distortions created by the operation of ideology and domination. Mezirow's transformation theory, building on Habermas' work, argues that transformative learning fosters the development of the qualities and skills required for critical reflection and critical-dialectical discourse, both of which are essential in promoting participation and democracy (2003, 2012).

The role of Habermas' work in providing this foundation has been discussed by many writers (see, for example, Brookfield, 2005; Cranton, 2002; Cranton & King, 2003; Kreber, 2012; Mezirow, 2009; Schugurensky, 2002; Taylor, 1998). One of the most significant contributions in this area is that of Fleming (2002), who reviews the work of both Mezirow and Habermas in an attempt to respond to critics who have claimed that Mezirow's transformation theory is too focused on the individual and lacks sufficient emphasis on the social. Fleming concludes that:

*The frames of reference that get transformed in Mezirow's theory are seen now as having, like the lifeworld, personal, social and cultural dimensions that are interconnected. The dichotomy between individual and social learning becomes spurious as effective learners become in reality a community of cultural critics and social activists involved in their own personal development. (2000, p. 1)*

The contribution made by Habermas to the development of adult education in general, and to emancipatory approaches to education in particular, has been explored by many authors (see, for example, Brookfield, 2005; McGregor, 2004; Murphy & Fleming, 2010; Pietrykowski, 1996; Schugurensky, 2002; Zuiderwaart, 2015). Other writers have also explored this influence in a more applied fashion,

noting the influence of Habermasian ideas on their facilitation of transformative learning (for example, Brown, 2004; Deshler, 1990; Greene, 1990; Mandell & Herman, 2009; Smith, 2016; Tennant, 2005).

#### **2.4.3 Critical social theory and transformation**

Mezirow states that his development of transformation theory, while drawing on the work of Habermas, does not constitute an extension of the development of critical theory and, in particular, the work of the Frankfurt School. However, there is an important relationship between Mezirow's approach and critical social theory that is worth touching on briefly here.

While many historical accounts of critical theory begin with the work of Horkheimer, there is an argument to be made that the origins of critical theory can be traced to the work of Freud and Marx (Dandaneau, 2005). Marx and Freud ascribed agency to the individual (Freud) and to the working class (Marx) in being able to critique their current position and take action to produce change. The themes of critique and change remain central to critical theory today. Max Horkheimer coined the term 'critical theory' while director of the Institute for Social Research, then affiliated with the University of Frankfurt, and now often referred to as 'the Frankfurt School'. As well as Horkheimer, influential thinkers associated with the School and identified with critical theory include Lowenthal, Adorno, Fromm, Marcuse and Benjamin (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1986; Dananeau, 2005; Elliot, 2009; Marcuse, 1969; Nicholas, 2012; Rothe & Ronge, 2016; Tyson, 2012;). Associated contemporary influential theorists include Habermas and Honneth (Corchia, 2015; Elliott, 2009; Fleming, 2016; Strydom, 2011). The critical theory of the Frankfurt School, and its subsequent developments and variations, has had a significant influence on some approaches to adult education (Davies & Barnett, 2015; Murphy & Fleming, 2010).

Critical theorists are primarily concerned with understanding and exposing relationships of power as they exist in society and generating insight into the systems of reproduction that produce oppression and exploitation (Elliott,

2009). Indeed, “A consensus seems to be emerging amongst criticalists that power is a basic constituent of human existence that works to shape the oppressive and productive of the human tradition” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008, p. 411). In exploring the role and importance of power, critical theorists have focused on the role of language, the nature of ideology and the concept of hegemony in shaping power relationships and oppression.

Of particular importance is the idea that critical theorists seek to go beyond simply documenting, understanding and interpreting the social world. Rather they bring to the task of theorising a commitment to ideological critique that stems from their recognition of the way that dominant discourses and ideology actually operate to construct social realities (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008). Furthermore, this approach is purposeful in the sense that it seeks not only to critique, but also, through praxis, to produce emancipatory change. As Gannon & Davies note, critical theory sets out to ‘make a difference to the social world, to emancipate subordinated groups from oppressive versions of society’ (2007: 76).

A central tenet of critical theory is the concept of ideology critique. Brookfield (2005) discusses the purpose of such critique and how this practice might be integrated into an educational approach:

*As an educational activity, ideology critique focuses on helping people come to an awareness of how capitalism shapes social relations and imposes – often without our knowledge – belief systems and assumptions (that is, ideologies) that justify and maintain economic and political inequity.*  
(Brookfield, 2005, p. 13)

This concept of ideology critique, and of the role that learning and education can play in revealing the operation of distorting hegemonic assumptions, has led to the development of a number of theoretical and applied approaches, including critical pedagogy (see Steinberg, 2013) and radical pedagogy (see, for example, Bracher, 2009). The work of Freire has also been characterised as part of this

critical pedagogical tradition, despite some differences with the original conceptions of the early critical theorists (Morrow & Torres, 2002).

Critical pedagogy, as the educational expression of critical theory, was initially focused on issues of class. In more recent times it has expanded to encompass a concern with multiple forms of oppression, including, but not limited to racism, sexism and homophobia. A number of influential theoreticians, practitioners and advocates of critical and radical pedagogy have emerged, including hooks (1994, 2004), McLaren (1995, 2015), Apple (2000, 2006), Giroux (1988, 2004) and Brookfield (1995, 2012). Regardless of the range of manifestations which both critical theory and critical pedagogy now present, central to all are the ideas of the need to use the tool of ideology critique to reveal the realities of oppression and domination, and a clear linking of this critique, through praxis, to action to bring about emancipatory change.

The transformation theory of Mezirow, while not strictly a form of critical theory or critical pedagogy, can be thought of as sitting within the broader tradition of these critical approaches. Mezirow is not exclusively concerned with learning processes that operate to reveal the hegemonic operation of oppressive ideology. However, this can be one of the functions of transformative learning, particularly with regard to critical reflection on sociocultural distortions, which include the operation of oppressive ideology. In this way, Brookfield (2005, 2012) locates Mezirow simultaneously within two traditions of criticality. The first is the tradition focused on ideology critique as discussed above. Brookfield states that, for Mezirow:

*... doing ideology critique is equivalent to what he calls "systemic" critical reflection that focuses on probing sociocultural distortions. Mezirow argues that ideology critique is appropriate for critical reflection on external ideologies such as communism, capitalism, or fascism or for reflection on our own 'economic, ecological, educational, linguistic, political, religious, bureaucratic, or other taken-for-granted cultural systems' (Mezirow, 1998, p. 193). (Brookfield, 2005, p. 13)*

The second critical theory tradition in which Mezirow may be located is the more psychologically inclined tradition. This considers a range of acquired assumptions and the way that these may operate to distort experience and the meaning-making process (Brookfield, 2000; 2005). This tradition sees a link between people's developed personality characteristics and the potential for domination by oppressive ideology.

In Mezirow's work, perspective transformation leads to more critically aware, integrative and open frames of reference, an essential precondition, he argues, for democratic participation. Perspective transformations of a specifically sociocultural nature may also involve a particular component of ideology critique and, through praxis, subsequent engagement in social action and social change. The links between Mezirow's work and the broader concerns of both critical theory and critical pedagogy are therefore significant.

## 2.5 Conclusion

Jack Mezirow's development and articulation of transformative learning theory has been a project stretching across four decades, with significant impact in the field of adult learning. The theory describes a type of learning whereby socially constructed meaning structures are transformed through critical reflection and rational discourse into new, more open, inclusive frames of reference. The influence of the ideas of Freire, Habermas and critical theory have been identified in this theory and speak of the links between Mezirow's account and the broader issues of emancipatory education and social change. The following chapter looks at the ways in which Mezirow's theory has been further developed, as well as presenting literature and discussing transformative learning in a more applied fashion.

## **Chapter 3. Transformative learning theories: Further development, facilitation and application**

As noted earlier, Mezirow's articulation of transformation theory and his work on developing ideas around transformative learning have been extremely influential in the field of adult education. While Mezirow is generally recognised as having initiated the discussion on transformative learning, it has indeed been a discussion, with many other theorists and practitioners critiquing, developing and extending Mezirow's work or taking the concept of transformative learning in different directions with new theoretical orientations. This chapter reviews some of the major directions that have been developed around transformative learning, examines work that discusses the practical facilitation of transformative learning and presents a number of illustrative accounts of transformative learning in applied settings.

### **3.1 Further development of transformative learning theory**

A number of commentators have described the various 'branches' of transformative learning based upon or informed by Mezirow (see, for example, Tisdell, 2012). Baumgartner (2001) identified four major streams of thought on transformative learning: emancipatory; cognitive-rational; developmental; and spiritual. Brooks (2004) similarly identifies four theories of transformative learning: Mezirow's rationalist theory; Boyd's Jungian theory; Freire's emancipatory theory; and transformative modes of action learning. Stuckey, Taylor & Cranton (2013) suggest three broad categories: the cognitive/rational perspective as represented by Mezirow (1991); the extrarational perspective, drawing on the work of Dirkx (1998), Lawrence (2012), and Tisdell (2000); and the social critique perspective represented by Brookfield (2012). Other writers (see for example, Gunnlaugson, 2004; O'Sullivan, 1999, 2002) have also identified the emergence of cosmological, spiritual and integral theoretical approaches. It should be noted that these categories frequently overlap and that the categorisations used below are not intended to indicate exclusivity.

### **3.1.1 Emancipatory approaches**

Emancipatory approaches to transformative learning are essentially those that emphasise the importance of praxis and social change as an integral part of both the transformative learning process and its outcome. In many respects such approaches represent the blurred boundary between transformative learning and critical pedagogy, as discussed above. Given that the relationship of Freire and Habermas to Mezirow's work has been discussed in detail earlier in this chapter, the emancipatory branch of transformative learning theory, which focuses heavily on Freire's work, will not be further discussed here. However, discussions about the emancipatory dimensions of Mezirow's theory will be revisited later in this thesis.

### **3.1.2 Jungian and subjectively oriented approaches**

The Jungian or subjectively oriented approach to transformative learning has been most fully developed and expressed in the work of Dirkx (see, for example, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2012; Dirkx & Formenti, 2014). Dirkx argues that his approach to transformative learning is consistent with and encompasses the work of Mezirow, but that his focus is on the experience of the learner's 'inner world' rather than the cognitive, epistemic and sociocultural dimensions of the learning process (Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton, 2006). In describing this difference, and his own focus, Dirkx notes that:

*Transformative learning also involves very personal and imaginative ways of knowing, grounded in a more intuitive and emotional sense of our experiences. This aspect of transformation, the way of mythos, reflects a dimension of knowing that is manifest in the symbolic, narrative and mythological. (Dirkx, 1997, p.1-2)*

Dirkx' concern is with the inner world and the ways in which this interacts with and shapes the learning experience. Central to this approach is the emphasis placed on recognising the role of emotions in learning. Dirkx argues that these need to be considered in a symbolic as well as a literal manner, meaning that we should be interested in the "deeper, underlying personal or transpersonal issue

that has been evoked by the instructional process" (2006, p. 17). This reflects the Jungian emphasis on understanding powerful emotional issues as intrinsic aspects of human being, involved with the process of individuation (Mattoon, 2005; Cohen, 2015).

The other writer who has been particularly influential in examining transformative learning from a Jungian perspective is Robert Boyd (1989, 1991). Drawing on Jungian depth psychology, Boyd is primarily concerned with the process of individuation. As Brooks (2004) notes, Boyd:

*... sees feelings, affect, and emotions, which arise during the learning process, as reflecting unconscious concerns attracting our attention and the purpose of transformative learning to be to free individuals from unconscious content and reified cultural norms and constraints to the potential for self-actualization.* (Brooks, 2004, p. 215)

In a similar fashion to Dirkx, Boyd sees significant differences between this approach to transformation and that articulated by Mezirow. Boyd's concern is less with a rational, problem-solving process and focuses instead on conflicts within the psyche and the process of discernment (Boyd, 1989; Boyd & Meyers, 1988). In particular, Boyd was interested in exploring this approach to transformative learning within the small group setting.

The Jungian-inspired approach to understanding and facilitating transformative learning, with its emphasis on the centrality of emotion, has also been influential in the work of a range of other theorists and practitioners. These include Scott (1997) who looks at grief as a particularly important emotional aspect of transformation, Compton (2002), who recounts the role of imagination and metaphor in her use of the labyrinth as a symbol for transformation, and Cranton (2000, 2004, 2006) who explores the notion of authenticity as an outcome of the Jungian process of individuation.

### **3.1.3 Developmental approaches**

The perspective on transformative learning that Baumgartner (2001) refers to as the ‘developmental’ is most significantly represented by the work of Laurent Daloz (1999, 2000, 2011) and Robert Kegan (1994, 2000; Helsing, Howell, Kegan & Lahey, 2008). Kegan discusses in some detail the importance of understanding what ‘form’ is actually transformed in transformative learning processes. He points out the difference between informational learning which deepens “the resources available to an existing frame of reference [and] ...brings valuable new contents into the existing form of our new way of knowing” (2000, p. 49), and transformational learning, which involves not only changes in what we know, but how we know. This, according to Kegan, might involve developing the capacity to move beyond concrete thinking into abstract reasoning, where one is situated within a pre-existing frame of mind and the other actually reconstructs the frame itself.

In developing his ideas around transformative learning, Kegan draws on concepts generated in the field of constructive-developmental psychology. In this sense, Kegan is concerned with an epistemological view of transformation, an idea about human development that is concerned with the process whereby people come not simply to new ideas but rather to a new set of ideas about their ideas (2000). The importance of this epistemological approach to transformative learning is that it highlights the developmental processes involved, and also clearly limits those experiences that can be thought of as truly transformational. As Kegan (2000, p. 59) notes, “not every kind of change, even important change, constitutes transformation”.

Daloz (1986, 1999, 2000) similarly draws on constructive-developmental psychology in exploring transformative learning as an epistemological question, arguing that “what shifts in the transformative process is our very epistemology – the way in which we know and make meaning” (Daloz, 2000, p. 104). Daloz emphasises the importance of the interaction between learner and external context in determining whether the potential for development of more adequate frames of reference is realised or not. Daloz (2000) argues, therefore, that transformation involves a developmental process that requires four conditions

to be present. These are: An engagement with otherness; the conscious and critical reflection on assumptions about how life is; a mentoring community; and, opportunities for committed action (Daloz, 2000).

The constructivist-developmental approach outlined by Kegan and Daloz has also been utilised or adapted by other writers in the area of transformative learning theory. Belenky and Stanton (2000) for example, draw on such an approach in discussing the impact of asymmetrical relationships in shaping women's ways of knowing. They argue that Mezirow's work represents an account of the outcome of a developmental process, but that the actual process itself needs fuller articulation, particularly if we hope to understand the transformative experiences of people who have been excluded and silenced. In an applied setting, Taylor (2000) similarly uses a constructive-development orientation to explicitly shape teaching practice aimed at changing learner's relationship to the underlying form of their knowledge.

### **3.1.4 Integral approaches**

An emerging interest in holistic and integral approaches to adult learning has seen a number of writers in the field of transformative learning draw on the work of Ken Wilber (1996; 2000a; 2000b, 2012) and his 'integrally informed' approach to psychology and society. For example, Gunnlaugson (2005) notes that attempts have been made recently to develop inclusive models of transformative learning, bringing together perspectives from different disciplines and approaches. While recognising that there is great value in this, he argues that it simply doesn't go far enough and that these integrative frameworks 'fall short of being comprehensive, balanced and inclusive' (2005, p. 331). In attempting to address these shortcomings, Gunnlaugson draws on Wilber's integral approach and in particular his AQAL metatheory.

While Wilber's work is complex and exceptionally broad, and it is beyond the scope of this chapter to adequately review his theories, key to his work is the use of a quadrant model representing different perspective dimensions of human experience (i.e. subjective, intersubjective, etc.). In this way, the model purports

to show a much more comprehensive picture of human capacity and hence, in Gunnlaugson's application, a more accurate model of where transformational learning may occur. The significance of Gunnlaugson's use of Wilber is that it has the potential to greatly expand the focus of transformative learning from the rational-cognitive and/or affective-emotional orientations of previous theorists. The integral approach includes a concern with not only personal, but also intrapersonal, relational, cultural, planetary and universal dimensions of being (Gunnlaugson, 2005).

In a critique of modernist frameworks for curriculum development, Maxwell (2002) also draws on Wilber's work in calling for pedagogical methods that allow us to move well beyond the existing boundaries of current curricular development frameworks. For Maxwell, Wilber's quadrants represent an epistemological map that can be used to analyse the work of a range of educational theorists and in so doing highlight what is privileged or omitted in the development of theory. This process invites a panoramic perspective and assists in developing ideas about the scope of a transformative education (Maxwell, 2002).

In illustrating his approach to transformative learning, Gunnlaugson (2004) provides a detailed case study of the application of an integrally oriented education program in an international college in Sweden. The one-year intensive adult education program moved from a focus on holistic approaches to teaching and learning to an integral approach. Gunnlaugson notes that "cultivating an integrally informed approach in students' lives helped many graduates integrate the promptings of their interior life with forms of visionary action" (2004, p. 330). This integrative approach is also illustrated by Osterhold, Rubiano & Nicol (2007), who provide an example of a graduate level course that aimed to incorporate "all human dimensions – body, vital, heart, mind and spirit – into the learning and inquiry process" (p. 221) in an attempt to model an approach to transformative education.

### **3.1.5 Approaches with a focus on spirituality**

Along with other theoretical developments that attempt to broaden the scope of transformative learning theory, there has been an increasing interest in examining the role of spirituality in the transformative learning process and, indeed, in the wider field of transformative education (see for example, Kazanjian & Laurence, 2000; Klobucar, 2016; Shahjahan, 2004; Swinton, 2016; Tisdell, 2003).

This interest was confirmed in research conducted by Duerr, Zajonc & Dana (2003), who examined attitudes towards transformative and spiritual dimensions of higher education in a range of American universities. They were particularly interested in “ways that transformative learning can move beyond individuation to further the ethical and spiritual development of the learner” (Duerr et al., 2003, p. 180). The authors found broad support for an approach to transformative learning that encompassed spirituality.

Similarly, Shahjahan (2004) argues that spirituality needs to be brought to the centre of discussion in higher education, posing the question “how would centering spirituality transform our ways of teaching and learning?” (p. 295). In advocating this ‘centering’ process, Shahjahan argues for teaching practices that are inspiring, inclusive, focus on equity and social justice and that evoke student spirituality, seeing it as a journey towards wholeness. Reclaiming spirituality in education, according to Shahjahan, is part of the process of becoming more human, thereby increasing potential for both individual and social transformation. McWhinney & Markos (2003) draw on the ‘mega-myth’ of death and rebirth represented by Navaho healing rituals to illustrate the idea of a transformative educational journey. They argue that this description of a transformative educational process points to four different transformative paths: The productive and instrumental; the personally transformative; the emancipatory or socially transformative; and, the holistic, representing a spiritual and ecological evolution.

Tisdell & Tolliver (2003) and Tolliver & Tisdell (2006) explore the role of spirituality in “teaching for social transformation that directly deals with cultural

issues, and its role specifically in culturally relevant transformative teaching in adult higher education" (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003, p. 369). Their qualitative study of adult educators found that spirituality was important in dealing with: Internalised oppression; mediating among multiple identities; crossing cultural boundaries; and the process of construction of cultural knowledge (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). They note that "by continuing to draw on different modes of knowledge production to inform our educational work, including drawing on spirituality through the use of symbol, art, and music, there is more of a chance for learning to be transformative" (p. 389).

Reflecting on the changing nature of contemporary society, Miller (2002) argues that people are increasingly looking for "a different way of approaching education that includes a spiritual perspective" (p. 95). For Miller, spiritual learning is "transformative in that it allows us to see the world anew. We begin to see the interconnectedness of life at every level of the cosmos" (2002, p. 100). Hart (2001, 2004) also explores the notion of contemplative knowing as one of the fundamental ways of knowing, arguing that it has been generally excluded from most contemporary pedagogy. In a similar vein, Robinson (2004) explores the role of meditation in transformative learning through a personal narrative of her own learning journey. She advocates the use of mindfulness meditation to create in learners the capacity for 'one-pointed awareness', which can then be used to explore the learner's habits of mind.

Charaniya (2012) brings many of these themes together in her discussion of what she describes as the cultural-spiritual perspective of transformative learning. Charaniya argues that this type of transformative learning moves beyond intellectual and logical dimensions. As she notes, "...when the resulting learning moves the learner to that metaphysical plane where the impulse to connect with others is strengthened by a holistic awareness of the interconnectedness of life, that is when the spiritual-cultural perspectives are most prominent" (Charaniya, 2012, p. 236). While Charaniya does not argue that this type of transformative learning experience is inherently or uniquely different from other forms of transformative learning, she makes a case for

educators to give purposeful consideration to the role that spirituality and culture may play in such learning.

### **3.1.6 Ecozoic or cosmological approaches**

O'Sullivan (1999, 2002, 2008, 2012; O'Sullivan & Taylor, 2004) has approached the issue of transformative learning by engaging in a far-reaching and visionary articulation of a new form of education, one which he refers to as a "transformative-ecozenic education" (1999, p. 6). O'Sullivan's vision is based on a critique of modernism which argues that, while many benefits have flowed from the Enlightenment project, modernism has reached the limit of its usefulness and new approaches are called for. He argues, "Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically alters our way of being in the world" (O'Sullivan, 2012, p. 164).

The educational vision being articulated by O'Sullivan is one that is profoundly holistic and integral. He argues that the features of such an educational approach will include an orientation to knowledge that is synthetic and holistic, that is time-developmental in nature, and that includes 'earth education', by which O'Sullivan means "not education about the earth, but the earth as the immediate self-educating community of those living and non-living beings that constitute the earth" (1999, p. 76).

While O'Sullivan's vision is short on practical strategies for developing or implementing such a transformative-ecozenic education, his work has been influential amongst a range of writers and theorists seeking to move beyond the bounds of Mezirow's perceived focus on rationality, and to integrate a concern for the natural world and ecological considerations. O'Sullivan, Morrell & O'Connor (2002) provide a number of examples of the application of O'Sullivan's model, or at least approaches that emphasise the extrarational in their approaches to transformative learning.

Williams (2013) is an example of an attempt to bring the concerns of transformative learning and sustainable science together in the service of a paradigmatic shift in human ecological relationships. He argues that an approach to learning that embraces critical onto-epistemological inquiry has the capacity to inculcate “a deep and embodied sense of sustainability, distinct from the shallower forms that proliferate human consciousness today” (Williams, 2013, p. 110). This link between transformative learning and environmental and sustainability concerns has been increasingly recognised as an important direction for transformative educational practice. This includes transformative learning as a pedagogical approach for teaching sustainability (Blake, Sterling & Goodson, 2013; Burns, 2015); utilising specific teaching techniques to facilitate transformative learning about environment and sustainability (Chen & Martin, 2015; Haigh, 2014); to produce innovation in curriculum development (Iyer-Raniga & Andamom, 2015; Moore, 2005); and improving sustainability practices in specific industry settings (Quinn & Sinclair, 2016).

### **3.1.7 Inclusive approaches to transformative learning**

A number of writers in the field of transformative learning have attempted, in various ways, to bridge the gap between some of the different articulations and formulations of transformation theory discussed above. As demonstrated in the above discussion, while Mezirow’s work has generally been seen as a significant starting point and foundation for the exploration of transformative learning, there are a variety of perspectives on issues such as the nature of transformation, the processes involved, the form that is being transformed and the degree to which transformative approaches should be focused on society or individuals. Inclusive approaches, such as those outlined below, have generally focused on attempts to combine Mezirow’s cognitive-rational approach with other approaches concerned with the extrarational, or to extend the anthropological orientation of transformative learning to embrace a more holistic, ecological focus, and in so doing, expand the scope of transformative learning theory.

Miles (2002), for example, in her discussion of feminist perspectives on globalisation, argues that discussion around transformative learning has been characterised by the divide between humanist and critical approaches, with one being concerned with individual personal development and the other with resistance to social injustice. She proposes an ‘integrative transformative learning’ that “incorporates progressive personal change and progressive social change as mutually constitutive of each other and [that] focuses integrally on both” (2002, p. 23).

Using the concepts of authenticity and individuation, Cranton & Roy (2003) have attempted to develop a holistic perspective on transformative learning. Their motivation stems from the recognition of the divide that has developed between those with cognitive-rational orientations and those with a more extrarational viewpoint. They point out that their aim is not to synthesise these viewpoints, but rather “to suggest that they can and should coexist within a holistic perspective” (p. 87). The two key concepts of individuation and authenticity are explored by the authors, who argue that the cognitive rational and the extrarational can be seen to coexist, leading to the proposition that “the individual and social goals of transformation are both valid” (Cranton & Roy, 2003, p. 95).

Feller et al. (2004) present what they refer to as a ‘fuller expression’ of transformative learning, developed from their experiences with a cohort of students involved in online and face-to-face learning. Quadrinity learning, as articulated by Feller et al., is an attempt to build into pedagogy a commitment to exploring issues of mind, body, spirit and emotion. In a similarly applied setting, Brown (2004) develops a ‘tripartite theoretical framework’ that attempts to weave together adult learning theory, transformative learning theory and critical social theory as part of a program to produce educational leaders committed to social justice and equity. Her model includes the incorporation of the three pedagogical strategies of critical reflection, rational discourse and policy praxis. Moore (2005) attempts to develop a metatheory of transformation and change by integrating the work of Mezirow with the transtheoretical model (TTM)

developed by Prochaska and colleagues (1994). Moore describes TTM as a theoretical model that “systematically integrates the stages of self-initiated and professionally facilitated change with processes of change from diverse theories of psychotherapy” (2005, p. 395).

Some attempts have also been made to integrate Mezirow’s work with other established theoretical perspectives. Malkki (2010), for example, proposes joining Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning with Damasio’s neurobiological theory of emotions and consciousness (see, for example, Damasio, 2012). Malkki’s argument is that this linking allows for an understanding and analysis of the prerequisites and challenges to reflection that is not adequately addressed in Mezirow’s work. West (2014) has also addressed a perceived over-emphasis on the cognitive-rational in the work of Mezirow and others, by attempting to join transformative learning theory with insights from critical theory, narrative research and psychoanalysis in order to create a psychosocial theory of recognition.

Some of the approaches to integrating various conceptions of transformative learning attempt to do so by placing transformative learning within broader, more comprehensive theories of learning. Illeris (2003, 2004, 2014a, 2014b) provides an example of this in his outline of a theory of learning that attempts to encompass not only cognitive but also social and emotional dimensions of learning. Illeris’ model, in its various iterations, assumes that learning involves both external and internal processes, and that all learning encompasses the three dimensions of knowledge and skills; feelings and motivation; and communication and cooperation (2003). Illeris (2014a) notes that, over time, Mezirow has moved to give greater recognition to the role of emotions and social relations in transformative learning, but argues that this still doesn’t go far enough. He proposes using the concept of identity as a general term for the mental dimensions of transformation.

The bringing together of the individualised ‘meaning-making’ of Mezirow’s theory and the social orientation of practice-based learning is the concern of

Hodge (2014). He characterises practice-based learning as promoting “... a nondualistic account of learners and context bound up in the dynamic unity of practice.” (Hodge, 2014, p. 166). While not suggesting a formal integration of the two approaches, Hodge argues that the concepts embedded in each can be usefully applied to reveal different aspects of a learning experience, creating an illuminating potential for both theoretical perspectives. Responding to the emergence of critiques of Mezirow’s theory on various grounds, Hoggan (2016) argues that, in part, these critiques have emerged due to, firstly, the ways in which transformative learning has been used in the literature and, secondly, a lack of clarity in the terms often employed in such discussions. He notes, “The theory has been operating as a theory, a synthetic metatheory, and an analytic metatheory, and argues that a beneficial use of the theory going forward is as an analytic metatheory” (Hoggan, 2016, p. 58). The argument here is that such a usage would allow other individual theories of learning and change to be aggregated under the metatheory of transformative learning.

Dix (2016) brings this discussion full circle, in trying to integrate the various approaches to transformative learning by searching for “... a deep and definitive essence” (p.140) that might be shared amongst these variations. Dix challenges the assumptions (which he claims are inherent in most approaches to transformative learning) that motivation and critique must be self-regarding, and that critical rationality need be discursive. Instead, he argues that “the essence of all transformative learning is cognitive transformation involving metacognitive reconstrual and commitment that reshapes the learner’s cognitive-motivational perspective” (Dix, 2016, p. 140)

The next two parts of this chapter review literature that represents some of the ongoing research and scholarship in the field of transformative learning, but literature that is not necessarily concerned with theory development *per se*. While this literature has been characterised as dealing either with accounts of transformative learning experiences or of explorations of ways in which transformative learning may be facilitated, in reality there is a great deal of overlap between these two categories, and, indeed, with some of the more

theoretical material reviewed above. The intention of these sections is to provide insight into some of the arenas in which transformative learning is being observed, analysed and fostered. The literature discussed here also points to the breadth of the application of transformative learning theory, in individual, group and organisational learning contexts, in both formal and informal educational settings, and, of particular interest for social workers, in the development and operationalisation of social welfare programs.

### **3.2 Transformative learning: Facilitating transformation**

While the literature discussed in the previous section presents work that represents developments in largely theoretical realms, some of the transformative learning literature is more clearly focused on the actual process of fostering or facilitating such learning. As might be expected, much of this literature focuses on the importance of promoting and providing opportunities for critical reflection and critical-dialectical discourse, but a range of other strategies are also discussed and presented. In considering this literature it is interesting to note the comments of Cranton, who has written extensively on the processes involved in facilitating transformative learning (see, for example, Cranton, 1996, 2002, 2006; Cranton & King, 2003; Hoggan & Cranton, 2015; Stuckey, Taylor & Cranton, 2013). Cranton states, “We cannot teach transformation. We often cannot even identify how or why it happens. But we can teach as though the possibility always exists that a student will have a transformative experience” (2002, p. 71).

#### **3.2.1 Critical reflection**

Critical reflection emerges as a clear focus in many discussions of how transformative learning might be facilitated. Morley & Dunstan (2013), for example, identify critical reflection as a core strategy for responding to neoliberal challenges in social work education, and note that such reflection “... provides a framework for students to experience rich, transformative learning...” (Morley & Dunstan, 2013, p. 151). Storytelling as a pedagogical practice is central to Crawley’s (1997) account of reflection and transformative learning. She

argues that storytelling must be of a kind that involves critical self reflection in order to contribute to meaningful transformative learning. Telling tales in this sense "... is a means to engage dialogically with meaning perspectives" (p. 46). Also exploring the use of reflection as a facilitative strategy, Ziegahn (2001) argues that the critical reflection central to transformative learning may actually be enhanced in the online environment. She reflects on the experience of teaching in an asynchronous online classroom where dialogue centred on issues of cultural difference. Ziegahn notes that the "... nature of online discussion represents the merging into a single medium of the interactive and reflective aspects of language critical to cognition" (2001, p. 145).

A different perspective on facilitation and critical reflection is provided by Generett & Hicks (2004), who argue that traditional approaches to facilitating transformative learning (including continuous inquiry, collaboration and critical reflection) did not prove sufficient in their experience of working with practicing teachers. They discovered that "... teaching transformatively requires the ability to envision the world as it might be otherwise" (Generett & Hicks, 2004, p. 195). The authors encouraged participants to analyse their oppression and to generate alternatives that represented not simply hopeful options, but 'audacious-hope', creating a space for transformative possibility.

Critical reflection is also at the heart of the facilitative processes described by Brookfield (2009). For Brookfield, such reflection is always grounded in the tenets of critical theory and employed to reveal hegemonic assumptions and the operation of power. To facilitate such reflection, Brookfield models the application of critical reflection himself, with an emphasis on autobiographical illustration. Critical reflection is also central to a technique described by Marsick & Maltbia (2009), who use action-learning conversations (ALCs) as a method of developing skills for critical reflection in the service of transformative learning.

Brock (2010) found critical reflection to be the single most important precursor in facilitating transformative learning among undergraduate business school students. In another example, Das & Anand (2014) describe the way that

frameworks for critical reflection were employed in an international student exchange program. The authors focused on four strategies – critical incidents and debriefing; peer learning and support; deconstructing and reconstructing theory and practice; and partnerships and participation – to enable critical reflection. In a similar vein, Liu (2015) discusses her work with teacher educators and the ways in which reflection can be supported and analysed to foster transformation. She argues that attention needs to be paid to cognitive processes, content, goals and experiences as part of the process of critical reflection.

### **3.2.2 Group and peer learning**

The importance of group and peer learning has also been explored in the facilitation literature. Kasl & Elias (2000) focus on group learning as a means of fostering transformation, providing a detailed case study of a group that significantly transformed its understandings and purposes. They argue, amongst other points, that the case study illustrates the importance of creating opportunities for discernment and critical reflection, and of recognising that “group consciousness develops in response to demands from the environment” (Kasl & Elias, 2000, p. 249). In their discussion of the use of learning groups and the relationship between group dynamics and learning types, Scribner & Donaldson (2001) noted that transformative learning occurred in the groups they studied, but that an important factor was the amount of time between the group experience and the research interview. Torosyan (2001) discusses a course in decision-making. The author notes the importance of critical reflection, but also of the educator sharing their own critical reflections on the content and process of the course with learners which, it is argued, aids in establishing an atmosphere of group trust and understanding.

Edwards-Groves (2013) explored the use of discussion groups as a method for renewing professional practice. She found that “... in order to develop an ongoing, productive, self-extending space for transformation, educators require planned opportunities to work individually and within communities of professional inquiry” (p. 21). Dahl & Millora (2016) found that providing opportunities for

group-based learning was significant in the learning experiences of university leaders following natural disasters. The authors conclude that “planned group discussions should be encouraged to heighten group dynamics, so that opportunities for critical reflection and thus transformative learning from experiences of natural disasters can be enhanced and disaster preparedness in university policy programmes improved” (p. 14). Similarly, Bergh, Bac, Hugo & Sanders (2016) reported that working in groups was a facilitative factor in medical students’ experience of transformative learning during a District health rotation.

### **3.2.3 Emotions and extrarationality**

A number of authors have explored the ways in which emotions and other extrarational dimensions can be recognised and utilised to foster the transformative process. Lipsett (2002), for example, draws on a cosmological, ecozoic approach to facilitating transformative learning in her account of the use of spontaneous painting. Spontaneous painting as a technique provides access to a creative dimension of self and the self-earth relationship that may reveal, according to the author, the spontaneous, the childlike, the embodied, the organic, the primal/tribal and the wild “passageways to Earth connection” (Lipsett, 2002, p. 225). Also approaching the fostering of transformative learning with a focus on the extrarational, Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks and Kasl (2006) describe methods for promoting expressive ways of knowing. Particular strategies included the use of guided visualisations, art activities (such as drawing, clay work, collages) and group discussion. The authors argue that such activities can operate as a bridge between precognitive experiential knowing and rational knowing.

Yorks & Kasl (2006) offer a taxonomy of expressive ways of knowing. This perspective is grounded in a holistic approach to transformative learning, recognising the importance of affective and emotional aspects of learning. The taxonomy contains two general categories, creating the learning environment and fostering the learning, with a range of strategies discussed in each. The role of emotions in facilitating transformative learning is also explored by Dirkx

(2006). He highlights the emotional context in which learning occurs, and views these emotions as expressions of unconscious meaning. Dirkx discusses a number of specific strategies to be used in group settings whereby emotion-laden images can be used to foster learning, including the use of active imagination activities, metaphors and analogies, and working with such images through text. Dirkx notes that “imaginative approaches to emotion and affect are beginning to supplement reliance on critical reflection and analysis as a means of furthering deep and potentially transformative experiences” (2006, p. 24).

Butterwick & Lawrence (2009) also explore emotion and arts-based approaches to transformative learning, with a focus on popular theatre. They note that such an approach “...taps into knowing that is not yet available to us at a conscious level” (p. 36). Interestingly, Dirkx & Smith (2009) explore the ways in which such approaches might manifest in an online learning environment, offering a positive assessment of the potential for deep and emotionally engaged learning to happen in such settings. Lawrence (2012) argues strongly for an arts-based approach to facilitating transformative learning, noting, “Although critical thinking is one avenue toward transformation, the arts invite engagement that is also emotional and embodied. We encounter the arts through our full presence” (p. 472).

### **3.2.4 Spirituality and contemplative approaches**

The place of spirituality and contemplative practices in fostering transformation has also been discussed by some authors. Robinson (2004), for example, discusses the use of meditation in facilitating transformative learning. Her autobiographical account acts as an illustration but also as a prelude to considering the use of meditation in the classroom. Robinson argues that in such classroom settings, “the key is in building the discipline of concentration, of abiding with whatever mind-states may arise in a moment-to-moment way – in a state of presence” (2004, p. 115). In this manner, according to Robinson, students may become more aware of the extrarational aspects of self and of learning, increasing potential for transformation. Tolliver & Tisdell (2006) also look at methods for engaging spirituality in the classroom, as a method for

fostering transformation. They note that “It is important to emphasize here that educational practice informed by spirituality does not mean proselytising lectures or the imposition of a dogmatic agenda, or even necessarily discussing spirituality directly” (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006, p. 40). Instead, they argue for a practical approach that recognises multiple dimensions of learning, including the affective and connective.

### **3.2.5 Writing and reading**

In various ways, forms of reading and writing have also been explored as facilitative practices for transformative learning. Greene (1990), for example, argues for the use of literature as “imaginative texts... occasions for emancipation of the gaining of critical consciousness” (p. 251). Journal writing as reflective practice is the focus of a discussion of teaching practice from Mannion (2001). He outlines three approaches to journal writing strategies, namely structural, holistic, and post-structural, arguing that each presents opportunities, but that in a post-structural approach “there is no escape from the so-called subjective experience. Neither is there any escape from the objective experience as text continually makes the objective out of and within the subjective” (Mannion, 2001, p. 105). Experiential learning portfolios are seen by Brown (2002) as a teaching strategy that may facilitate learner self-knowledge. In Brown’s application of this approach, students were asked to reflect on experiences in both professional and community settings that led to learning. She notes that “creating a portfolio necessitates that students engage in some degree of critical reflection as they identify, analyze, and evaluate their learning experiences, potentially contributing to a transformation in their perspectives” (Brown, 2002, p. 229).

Karpiak (2003) discusses the use of autobiography as a method for promoting insight and transformative learning experiences. She notes that these become particularly important for writing that is highly reflective or that focuses on uncovering emotions and experiences that have been previously unspoken. She notes that as a result of this approach “students have emerged as capable of much more depth than is normally expected or encouraged in traditional

education" (Karpaik, 2003, p. 114). Johnson (2003) also explores the use of autobiographical writing in the facilitation of transformative learning by providing an autobiographical account of her own development as an adult educator attempting to use autobiographical writing to teach writing skills to university students.

The use of popular and literary romantic fiction to explore the construction of gendered identities is discussed by Jarvis (2006). She is concerned in her teaching with transformations involving a critical awareness of social structures and changes in what we believe about knowledge, or, in Mezirow's terms, socio-cultural and epistemic perspective transformations. Jarvis notes that fiction can offer the experience of a disorienting dilemma, particularly if the fiction resonates with students and their own lives. Burke (2006) also focuses on text, this time on the issue of intensive writing as developed in a program at Simon Fraser University designed to promote skills for critical thinking in writing and analysing text. Burke reports that the initiative tends to result in recursive iterations or cumulatively transformed meaning schemes.

Tyler (2009) and Tyler & Swartz (2012) explore the fostering of transformative learning in the workplace using the strategy of storytelling. They make clear connections between storytelling as a technique and Mezirow's 'ideal conditions' for critical discourse (Mezirow, 1991). Tyler & Swartz note, "For adult educators who wish to foster transformative learning, storytelling can play a potent role...Storytelling effectively deepens learning, and can spark transformative learning, in a vast variety of configurations" (2012, p. 465). Hoggan & Cranton (2015) report on research into the ways that reading fiction can be used to foster transformative learning. They found that this practice, when employed in an intentional manner, promoted desires for change, opened new perspectives for readers, and fostered critical reflection. They note:

*The distinguishing role of fiction in promoting transformative learning is that it serves as an intellectual and emotional catalyst. The reading of fiction has the potential to arouse strong emotional responses and to*

*encourage critical reflection on habits of mind, both of which are central to a transformative learning experience.* (Hoggan & Cranton, 2015, p. 22)

### **3.2.6 Photography and other creative approaches**

Other forms of creative expression have also been discussed as facilitative practices. The use of ‘media action projects’, or MAPS, in creating transformational educational spaces is presented by Whang & Waters (2001). This technique involves students constructing albums of photographs and text that are then critically discussed, with the aim of uncovering assumptions and presuppositions. Whang and Waters argue that this process creates spaces or freedoms in the learning process, in particular, the freedom to see, to question and to act. Armstrong (2005) discusses the use of autophotography, a blending of photography and autobiography as a pathway for critical reflection with a focus on social justice and democratic education. He argues that “... autophotography is a pedagogy that draws into question many of the values and norms instilled early in an adult’s life and potentially modifies them if they are shown to be oppressive” (p.42-43).

Clover (2006) explores the use of participatory photography as a method for promoting transformative learning experiences with groups of disadvantaged women and children. Clover argues that “Participatory photography combines a practical, informative image and a poetic subjective image. It is a vibrant form of transformative, imaginative learning and visual narrative because it demands creativity, risk, and skill from its artists” (p. 289). Lawrence & Cranton (2009) looked at photography as a method with the same goal, suggesting a range of ways to incorporate photography into teaching and noting the potential for this approach to contribute to social change. Similarly, Jarvis (2012) argues that both film and fiction can be used to foster transformative learning because they enable “... us to speed up the process of learning that might occur through ordinary lived experience, to imagine living other lives, including some that are rare and unusual” (p. 486).

### **3.2.7 Collaborative inquiry**

Collaborative inquiry as a method for facilitating transformation is explored by 'The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness' (2002, 2009), a research team at the California Institute of Integral Studies. This group used transformative learning theory to examine transformations around issues of Whiteness and White-privilege. The authors identify collaborative or cooperative inquiry as beneficial because it is self-directed, is grounded in an experiential-based epistemology and involves cycles of action and reflection. Drawing on the work of Heron (1992), Kasl & Yorks (2002) also explore the use of collaborative inquiry as a method for facilitating transformative learning, while Hussein (2006) reports on the use of 'critical practitioner inquiry' as a methodology for teacher education in Africa. Hussein argues that African teachers have traditionally been thought of as "... voiceless implementers of educational policies and materials prepared by others" (p. 370) but that through self-study, and in particular the use of CPI, they can become more critically oriented and move towards positions where transformative learning is possible.

Similarly, Hanlin-Rowney et al. (2006) used a variation on collaborative inquiry to discover transformative aspects of their participation in an online study experience. Brooks & Adams (2015) describe using a collaborative-inquiry approach alongside dissonance producing experiences in a professional development program for teachers working with English language learners. They report that inquiry-centred professional learning contributed to the creation of a potentially transformative space for participants.

### **3.2.8 Simulations**

The use of simulations as a means of fostering transformative learning is explored by Storrs & Inderbitzen (2006). They report on the experience of teaching in an interdisciplinary course and of being committed as educators to engaging in critical reflection about their practice. The course includes a simulation designed to contrast different ideological approaches to education. Storrs & Inderbitzen found that the simulation helped students to recognise the impact of power and culture on individual experience, allowed them to become

more aware of the relationship between ideology, political economy and education, and allowed them to critically reflect on society. Daniau (2016) similarly explores the transformative potential of tabletop role-playing games, arguing that these present significant opportunities for promoting learning and personal development.

### **3.2.9 Culturally responsive teaching**

Tisdell & Tolliver (2009) discuss the process of engaging in culturally responsive teaching for transformative learning. They argue that, in order to do this successfully, educators must engage their own cultural imagination, as well as that of their students, "... working with images that arise out of conscious and unconscious memory specifically around aspects of one's culture..." (p. 90). Valdez (2002) recounts the experience of teaching multicultural diversity (MCD) to adult students using a transformative learning approach. Valdez notes that for „„ MCD to be effective at a transformative level the teacher needs to have the courage to teach sensitive material and issues about oppression, discrimination and racism, as they really exist not only in society but also within the very institutions where the courses are taught” (p. 165). Effective strategies employed in such a course include self-revelation by the teacher, small group discussion, experiential exercises, fieldwork, roleplays, dialogue and journal writing.

In conducting a course on teaching methodologies to a multicultural student group, Gravett & Petersen (2009) advocate the use of a structured dialogical approach. The authors advocate ‘pushing’ and challenging to the edge of their comfort zones as a means of encouraging students to reflect. Addleman, Nava, Cevallos, Brazo & Dixon (2014) explore the value of short-term cultural immersion as an experience that can contribute to, and facilitate, transformative learning among student teachers preparing to work in culturally diverse settings. Pane (2015) also addresses issues of culture and transformation, exploring issues for disenfranchised Black youth. She discusses the use of a culturally responsive and critical approach to pedagogy.

### **3.2.10 Frameworks and models**

While Cranton (2002) notes that there are no teaching methods that guarantee transformative learning, she and others have explored models designed to increase such potential. For example, King (2005) developed a model for educational practice designed to create opportunities for transformative learning. She focuses on two aspects of the process - firstly, the experiences of the learner and, secondly, on how the educator must plan and prepare for the program. Her approach for the learner involves a focus on building safety and trust, determining needs and expectations, and creating learning experiences, including an emphasis on dialogue and critical reflection. King's work is also notable for the emphasis she places on the educator's preparation for teaching to maximise transformative potential.

To foster transformative possibilities, Cranton (2006) argues that the key lies in the student-teacher relationship and, in particular, on the development of authenticity in that relationship, leading to the development of a five-faceted model of authenticity that provided clear pointers to practical strategies:

- *Having a strong self-awareness of who we are as teachers and as people*
- *Being aware of the characteristics and preferences of learners and others, including how they are the same and different from our own*
- *Developing a relationship with learners that fosters our own and their ability to be genuine and open*
- *Being aware of the context and constraints of teaching and how these factors influence what we do and who we are*
- *Engaging in critical reflection and critical self-reflection on practice so as to be aware of the assumptions and values we hold and where they originate.* (Cranton, 2006, p.6-7)

In a more encompassing approach, Hicks, Berger and Generett (2006) reflect on their professional development work with teachers aimed at creating transformative curricular experiences. The authors relate how they had come to realise the importance of three factors for both facilitating and sustaining

transformative change. The first is the establishment of, and contribution to, an intentional learning community. The second is facilitating movement from consciousness to action, in this case around issues of race and culture. Finally, the authors relate strategies of teaching actively for change, that is, awakening an awareness of agency in the learners. McAllister et al. (2013) also look to a broader framework as a method of fostering transformative learning. They employ the STAR framework – Sensitise, Take Action, and Reflection – when working with student health professionals. They note that the “value of transformative learning for health students lies in its capacity to awaken them to issues of injustice that lead to and sustain health inequities, and to promote critical thinking and questioning of previously held assumptions, beliefs, values and perspectives, so that they may be part of systemic change” (McAllister et al., 2013, p. 91-92). The authors found that the star framework was an effective and easily understandable tool for transformative learning among this student group.

### **3.3 Accounts of Transformation**

Building on the articulation of Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning, the discussion above presented a selection of the literature that explores how such learning experiences might be facilitated. The final section of this chapter also presents a selection of literature, this time with a focus on writing that presents accounts of transformative learning. These often take the form of either case examples or research on the effects of particular strategies or educational designs. Given the scope of literature on such learning experiences this review is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather illustrative of this material. It has been selected from the larger body of work dealing with accounts of transformative learning, based on its relevance and applicability to social work education and to a critical framework.

#### **3.3.1 Teacher education and professional development**

A number of accounts of transformative learning have focused on learning within higher education settings, and, in particular, on professional development activities with adult educators and teachers in training. Sim (2001), for example,

was concerned with the process of integrating discipline knowledge and pedagogical knowledge in the education of secondary school teachers. She offers an account of the use of a transformative approach, utilising reflection, communicative learning and active experience to achieve transformative learning outcomes. Daley (2001) conducted qualitative interviews with social workers, lawyers, nurses and adult educators engaged in continuing professional education. In particular, Daley notes that significant, emotional interactions with clients often led participants to examine their previously held assumptions.

The experience of adult educators participating in masters programs was researched by Taylor (2003), with a view to exploring whether or not such graduate experiences transformed participants' assumptions about their role and about adult learners. Whitelaw, Sears & Campbell (2004) were interested in whether transformative learning experiences occurred for university staff engaged in professional development activities relating to the use of technology in teaching. Drawing on Mezirow's framework, the authors found that "for some faculty members, developing technology-based curriculum became the disorienting dilemma or the trigger point to challenge their teaching and learning paradigm, prompting them to reflect on their experiences and practice" (p. 12). Greenman & Dieckmann (2004) examine the experience of a group of educators who participated in a culturally based university teacher education course, and who found the experience transformative.

The transformative experiences of teachers learning to use educational technology was the subject of research by Kitchenham (2006). Kitchenham states that there were "... numerous instances of changes in perspective, altered meaning schemes and meaning perspectives, revised habits of mind, evidence of critical discourse and critical reflection, and critical self-reflection on assumptions" (p. 222). Key to this process was the fact that working with computers constituted a disorienting dilemma for many of the students, leading to reflection on their own assumptions about learning. Gravett & Peterson (2009) discuss work with students training to become nursing educators, where their aim is to assist students to use a learner-centred dialogic approach to

teaching. Their method included requiring students to reflect on their personal beliefs about learning, knowledge and teaching.

Carrington & Selva (2010) and Carrington, Mercer, Iyer & Selva (2015) report on the experiences of pre-service teachers using reflection as part of a service learning experience. Carrington & Selva note that the transformative potential of this approach was strengthened by the integration of critical social theory as part of their pedagogy. As the authors note: "Use of this theoretical framework is important because pre-service teachers often enter teacher education programs with problematic or unexamined assumptions, beliefs and knowledge about students, teaching and the role of schools in society" (Carrington & Selva, 2010, p.46).

Critical reflection on their own perspectives was a feature of an online professional development program for K-12 teachers described by Forte & Blouin (2016). The authors report that such reflection resulted in transformative learning experiences that aligned students' perspectives with qualities regarded as desirable for ESL teachers. Snepvangers & Bannon (2016) also discuss the importance of critical self-reflection in the transformative experiences of student art and design teachers who had experienced an industry placement. The authors identify a set of "ecologies of practice" that support transformative learning in art and design education (p. 54).

### **3.3.2 Other higher education settings**

In addition to accounts that focus on training teachers and future educators, many descriptions of the application or illustration of transformative learning come from work with students in other types of graduate and undergraduate settings. Indeed, Kasworm & Bowles (2012) note that there are many hundreds of published accounts of research into transformative learning in higher education settings. Martin (2001), for example, focuses on the concept of unlearning as part of a transformative approach to teaching in a fine art course. He argues that given the assumptions about art which many students bring to the course, it is necessary to challenge them to examine their presuppositions in

order to explore “the relationship between humanity and its context and top express new perceptions of this relationship through a variety of visual means” (p1). Grace, Gouthro & Mojab (2003) recount their experience of running a summer institute with a group of 40 graduate students, focusing on culture and diversity in education for adults. The authors describe their approach to the institute as one specifically intended to produce a transgressive, transformative learning journey. Schapiro (2003) describes the shift which took place in a PhD program in Human and Organisational Development, away from a focus on andragogical and self-directed learning towards a critical and collaborative pedagogy, drawing on insights from transformative learning theory.

Cohen (2004) reports on the transformative learning experiences of students in a Learning Community Bachelor’s program at Lesley University. Participants were interviewed 2-5 years post completion and, according to the author, these interviews “reveal the transformational effects of this educational experience” (p. 243). Lange (2004) explores the relationship between transformative and restorative learning as a way of expanding the boundaries of transformative approaches to incorporate a more critical dimension. Lange argues for movement “beyond the psychologising of transformative learning and the autonomous, rational actor to consider how actors are embedded in social and economic relations and how these relations connect the personal and social” (p. 123).

Boyer, Maher, & Kirkman (2006) looked for evidence of transformative learning in the reflective writing of graduate students involved in an online course. Boyer et al. found that “embedded within students’ reflective discussions were comments that supported the phases of transformative learning. It was evident that fundamental changes in their established ideas, beliefs, habits, or assumptions had occurred” (p. 350-351). Ziegler, Paulus & Woodside (2006) also explored transformative group learning in an online learning group, focusing on the centrality of narrative and dialogue. Ziegler et al. note that while some of the transformative learning literature conceptualises the learning process resulting from discourse as an individual one, their “[F]indings from this study emphasize

not only how dialogue may extend or change individual perspectives but also how the group as a whole constructs a shared experience" (p. 315). Dass-Brailsford (2007) studied the issue of racial identity change among graduate students undertaking a multicultural education course. The educators in the course adopted a transformative learning approach in the belief that „„ when students first explore and reflect on their own beliefs, values, and prejudices before critically examining the oppressive societal policies that allow those with power and privilege to maintain an advantaged status, positive changes with societal implications are possible" (Dass-Brailsford, 2007, p. 60).

A concern with having students recognise and challenge dominant ideological assumptions underpins Langan, Sheese & Davidson's (2009) account of a sociology course. They note that the simple presentation of critical analyses is not sufficient to produce transformative change and that attention needs to be given to collaboration, reflection and caring as part of the transformative process. Interestingly, these authors also discuss the use of intentionally disruptive experiences, designed to act as disorienting dilemmas. Mandell & Herman (2009) discuss their work in a college with a specific student-centred learning approach, using a mentoring approach to adult learning. They argue that "[A]t the heart of both transformative learning and mentoring is critical reflection on customary academic roles.... These changes of habit do not occur automatically. They require ongoing attention, thought, and practice" (p. 79). In the work reported by MacLeod & Egan (2009), medical students were engaged in a community practice experience of palliative care. The authors note the importance of the emotional and spiritual aspects of palliative encounters as drivers of reflection on pre-existing assumptions. Tello, Swanson, Floyd & Caldwell (2013), discuss an approach to teaching business ethics that employed an integrative model for teaching based on transformative learning theory. They argue that such a transformative approach highlights "the importance of the affective domain in student learning and suggest that business faculty members have the obligation to deliver learning experiences that require students to learn to learn, reflect upon their values, and develop a philosophy of life that has meaning to them and their relationship with others" (p. 112).

Saravanamuthu (2015) uses transformative learning theory in working with accounting students. The author demonstrates that such an approach has the potential to challenge the neoliberal domination of accounting education and support students in re-evaluating their own moral consciousness and professional identity. In the area of legal education, Babacan & Babacan (2015) describe the adoption of transformative pedagogies in work-integrated learning (WIL). The authors note that the workplace provides a unique site for transformative learning opportunities, and detail the ways in which critical reflection and dialogical approaches were brought into this setting. They argue for the potential of such an approach to foster both personal and social transformation. Knaak, Karpa, Robinson & Bradley (2016) discuss the issue of stigmatisation of people with mental health issues as a problem that exists amongst nursing students as well as the broader community. They describe a learning approach that draws on transformative learning theory as a way of producing individual and cultural change. The authors report significant attitudinal change through the development of a broader perspective.

### **3.3.3 Workplace and non-formal settings**

Transformative approaches to learning have also been documented in other formal and informal educational settings, including workplaces, not necessarily related to professional development. Kasl & Elias (1997) argue for the combination of insights from Mezirow and Jung in their presentation of case studies of transformative learning, drawn from their work at the California Institute of Integral Studies. Their case studies illustrate the importance of processes such as discernment, critical reflection, group learning, and 'spirit consciousness' in the transformative process. Yorks & Sharoff (2001) describe the shift from traditional to holistic nursing practices as a professional reorientation that encompasses an epistemological transformation. They chart the changes in frames of reference that might accompany such a shift and draw on Mezirow's model in making sense of this process. The unique characteristics of the urban adult learner are the focus of work by Kappel & Daley (2004) that compares these traits to the assumptions underpinning transformational

learning theory. Documenting the occurrence and nature of transformative learning in their study, Kappel and Daley conclude that for urban dwellers the promotion of transformative learning may be rendered more complex and challenging, but nevertheless remains a significant aid in assisting people to deal with an unpredictable life course.

Tyler (2009) discusses the ways in which storytelling can be used to promote transformative learning in the workplace, establishing connections between the principles of facilitated storytelling and Mezirow's ideal conditions for critical discourse (Mezirow, 1991). Fisher-Yoshida (2009) also draws on an example from a corporate workplace in exploring the transformative learning potential of coaching techniques. Here, the coach is working with the client to, in part, develop a new awareness of their operational assumptions. Glowacki-Dudka et al. (2012) discuss an adult learning workshop with a very diverse group of learners. The authors report that adopting an explicitly radical approach to the course, and utilising an explicitly radical textbook, both challenged and excited the participants. They report, "Some transformations occurred within the 5 weeks of the course, while others took a bit more time to be realized, yet each learner had transformed over the course of the study" (p. 126). Brown (2015) also explores transformative learning in a non-formal setting, looking at the work of non-governmental development organisations. She describes the range of pedagogies employed in these settings, concluding that:

*"... all these activities, through their use of pedagogies associated with transformative learning theory, did provide opportunities for their learners that led to changes, both at a personal level and through relationships and networks that had the potential to contribute to social change" (Brown, 2015, p. 159).*

### **3.3.4 A focus on women**

Transformative learning approaches have also been used by feminist educators and activists, drawing on a long tradition of consciousness-raising and liberatory action. Clover (1995) delivers a feminist critique of popular and transformative

education, noting that while such approaches may have a broad focus on oppression and exploitation, they often reproduce and reinforce oppressive gender stereotypes and manifest a masculinist orientation. Sartor (1997) provides an account of a personal journey of transformative learning, centred around her initially unquestioned valuing of the concept of an independent woman, contrasted with her desire for relationship and intimacy. The author recounts how she came to identify shifting meaning schemes and took action based on those shifts. Bierema (2003) conducted an action research project designed to explore how women develop gender consciousness and subsequently use that consciousness to challenge patriarchal power relations in their lives. Bierema conceptualises this development of gender awareness as a transformative learning process, occurring both individually and collectively.

Hansman & Wright (2009) bring a clearly emancipatory perspective to their work with women in Bolivia. They state that “[W]e believe that education may provide the opportunity for people to view themselves and their worlds differently, transforming their perspectives, and thus opening the possibilities of helping learners effectively promote social justice and action” (p. 205). The authors provide accounts of women’s transformative experiences as a result of being involved in a legal promoter’s course, with a focus on empowering women in Cochabamba. Women’s empowerment is also at the heart of Meyer’s (2009) account of a support and training program for women in East Harlem. The program attempts to facilitate transformative learning through the use of journaling and coaching techniques, creating opportunities for personal transformation. She notes that it is important to realise that not all participants will have a transformative experience, but points to the result that 75% of the women involved achieved their stated goals.

Drawing on insights from both the relevant literature and from their own research and practice with women, English & Irving (2012) point to some specific considerations that they believe to be important when considering women and transformative learning. These include the importance of relationships; the body; emotion; race and class; and the importance of creativity

and the arts. Purtzer & Overstreet (2014) have used transformative learning approaches to understand and facilitate mammography screening behaviour. They demonstrate that facilitating dialogue and critical reflection can serve to shift isolating frames of reference for women. The transformative learning experienced by researchers themselves is described by Voelkel & Henehan (2016) in their account of a research project looking at perceptions of a former brothel now used as a visitor's centre in Arkansas. Their interest was in uncovering the master-narrative, exposing dominant ideologies and White privilege. The researchers describe the shift that occurred in their own previously held assumptions about a range of issues including critical and feminist theory.

### **3.3.5 Leadership and vocational learning**

Education for leadership is a theme that has also been addressed through transformative approaches. In particular, the concept of 'life mission', or the question 'why am I?' was used in a study by Kroth & Boverie (2000) to explore the connections between a sense of purpose and adult learning. The authors argue that the question 'why?' is at the heart of Mezirow's disorienting dilemma "because it requires individuals to unfreeze their meaning perspectives, tacit assumptions, and belief systems, and to look at the meaning of their own existence" (p. 134). Preece (2003) examines the educational context of Southern Africa, with a focus on strategies for developing transformative leadership. Donaldson (2009) discusses a program in educational leadership offered at the University of Missouri-Columbia, where educators employ intentionally transformative practices, focusing on building cohorts, using role-based case studies, reflective portfolios and participatory action research. A student-centred and transformative approach to leadership education is reported by Haber-Curran & Tillpaugh (2015). Bringing together theories of adaptive leadership and transformative learning, the authors note that students experienced a shift in their relationship with learning during the course, including reframing learning and self.

### **3.3.6 Environment and sustainability**

Transformation has often been advanced as one of the goals of adult environmental education (see, for example, Jones, 2003). Kovan & Dirkx (2003) looked at the lives of environmental activists in a study designed to understand the processes of learning and self-renewal. They discuss the importance of a calling or sense of vocation related to such work, and argue that as this “work brings the person into deep and intimate relationship with the outer world, it also becomes a location for a form of deep learning and the realization of inner meaning and change” (p. 101). Feinstein (2004) explores the potential for student immersion in a learning process shaped by traditional Hawaiian ecological knowledge to produce transformative learning experiences. Feinstein reports that, while many of the 12 students involved experienced subjective reframing, only one reported “a paradigmatic shift in her identity and a subsequent reordering of how she thinks and acts” (p. 111). This transformation was seen as the consequence of the student’s involvement in the course and the individual’s own personal context, resulting in an exploration of both identity and culture.

Lange (2009) describes the process of designing and facilitating a course on sustainability with an explicitly transformative intent. Students visit sustainability exemplars in the community, engage in cultural analysis and self-auditing, socioeconomic analysis and action planning. Lange argues that the transformative potential of the course is enhanced by creating a ‘learning sanctuary’ “a place of immunity from the full weight of social forces” (p. 197). D’Amato & Krasny (2011) use a transformative learning approach to make sense of the experiences of participants in an outdoor adventure education program. Participants reported personal growth as a result of their experiences in the wild, but the authors note that this was often intertwined with a commitment to change behaviours.

An ‘alternative college’ with a focus on civil society, is the setting for Blake, Sterling & Goodson’s (2013) account of transformative approaches to sustainability. The authors found that a number of factors had a significant

impact on the potential for transformative experiences to occur. These included the communal living environment, collaborative endeavours, emotional honesty and space for the emergence of transformed frames of reference. Hioctour, Giannoukos & Stergiou (2015) encourage trainees in their course to engage with artworks as a pedagogical technique to encourage reflection on the relationships between humans and nature. Processes of critical questions and critical reflection are also employed with the trainees, leading the authors to conclude that teaching through art is an effective and potentially transformative way of exploring human-nature relationships.

### **3.3.7 Community**

The nature of transformative learning in the context of what might be described as community and social organisation has been a subject of interest for a number of writers. A goal of creating collaborative relationships between university and community, using a community development approach, frames Folkman & Rai's (2000) account of the use of transformative learning in action research. Courtenay, Merriam, Reeves and Baumgartner (2000) were interested in exploring what happens to a perspective transformation over time. To this end they followed up participants from an earlier study who had reported perspective transformation as part of the experience of becoming HIV positive. Despite the introduction of new drug therapies that significantly altered the health outcomes and prognosis for HIV positive people, the researchers found that the original perspective transformation had not been reversed, but that there were further changes to meaning schemes. The role of social support in women's health and health promotion was examined by Hurdle (2001), who argues that social support is essential for effective health promotion. In examining the implications of this finding for social work, she advocates the use of transformative and feminist pedagogy in social work practice, where the use of group and collaborative learning strategies can be applied in health practice.

In another example, welfare reform initiatives in the American state of Montana required families receiving public assistance to attend life skills education programs. Christopher, Dunnagan, Duncan & Paul (2001) reported on the use of

transformative learning theory to design these educational programs and as a tool for evaluating their outcomes. The authors reported that transformative learning outcomes did occur for participants, including a more empowered sense of self, a shift in the way participants saw themselves in social relationships, greater control over their lives, and connectedness with others. Ettling (2002) examines an educational process involving over one hundred women in transition from situations of domestic violence. The educational approach was an explicitly transformative one, designed to promote new understandings of self and relationships with others. Ettling's research highlights the connections between individual change and social transformation, reporting that many of the women involved in the study voiced a desire to share their experiences and to take action to produce broader change

Community organisers involved in broad-based community organisations were interviewed by Scott (2003) in a research project designed to gauge the extent to which such leadership roles led to transformation. Scott's argument is that individual transformation takes place within a socio-political setting and should be linked clearly to social/structural changes in institutions. Bennetts (2003) reports on the activities of the 'Second Chance Trust' a UK-based scheme that offers small amounts of money to individuals for the purposes of self and community improvement, with an emphasis on building self-reliance. Out of the 197 recipients surveyed, 156 noted what Bennetts classified as transformational change, across a number of areas, including self-transformation; transformed relationships; career improvement; and quality of life. Boxler (2004) offers an insightful account of attempting to bring critical adult education to a job-retraining program. Boxler's account discusses the processes involved in attempting to bring a critical approach to such a setting, noting, amongst many other issues, that while a goal of personal participant transformation would have been acceptable to the institution, a socially transformative approach may need to be manifest in a covert fashion.

Easton, Monkman & Miles (2009) report on transformative learning in the work of a Senegalese NGO working in the field of literacy and empowerment activities,

and in particular with the issue of female genital cutting. The authors note that the success of the program stems from a strong commitment to a participatory approach, a willingness to experiment with methods, recognition of the importance of collective dimensions of transformation, and adopting human rights as a core theme for their work. Also in Africa, Duveskog & Friis-Hansen (2009) discuss work in a farmer field school (FFS) with a focus on action learning. The authors note a number of changes amongst graduates from their program, including changes in habit, transformations of perspectives and engagement in social change and collective agency. They relate the many challenges involved in their work and the need to focus on transformative approaches to ensure that "FFS and similar programs do not become a forum for domestication of farmers' behaviours and practices; instead they truly stimulate critical reflection among people to become their own agents of change"

(Duveskog & Friis-Hansen, 2009, p. 249).

English & Peters (2012) looked at the transformative learning experiences of women working or volunteering in feminist non-profit organisations. The authors describe a number of factors that have been significant in fostering transformative learning among these women, including the importance of the body, relationships, an awareness of power and context, the role of the passage of time, and personal experience. Interestingly, they clearly identify a type of transformation that extends beyond the narrowly cognitive:

*These women's narratives evidence the psychoanalytic and social-emancipatory trajectories. Their learning has been both about their own internal knowing and about urgent world change. Adult educators working in these movements need to be attentive to the cross of both these traditions in these social justice workers* (English & Peters, 2012, p. 115-116).

Participants in a participatory planning process in California were reported to have experienced a range of transformative learning experiences (Zapata, 2013). The author of this study was interested to see if those transformative learning experiences have resulted in sustained changes and practices. Zapata finds that

the transformative learning was sustained over this time frame but that a lack of support from the planning organisation meant that there were few changes in participant behaviour.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

The material presented in these literature review chapters on the development and application of transformative learning theory points to both the diversity of theoretical orientation and practical application, and the emergence of some common themes and issues. While there is a lively discussion about where the boundaries of transformative learning exist, and whether emphasis should be placed on rational or extrarational approaches, or indeed whether an integration of the two is possible, there is broad agreement that transformative learning is learning which provokes fundamental change in the way a person sees and makes sense of their world. Furthermore, there is agreement that transformative learning is a process which involves praxis, the enacting of personal change in the social world, whether through changed personal behaviour, participation in action for social change, or a combination of both.

Critical reflection and dialogue are generally seen as crucial aspects of the transformative process, even while the specific understanding of what these concepts mean and how they might be enacted remains open for debate. Transformative learning is seen as a process which may manifest in a wide range of settings, not restricted to formal educational institutions. Indeed, tales of deep and significant shifts in perspective have emerged from a variety of social settings and with diverse groups of learners. While there are commonalities in some of the key elements used to facilitate transformative learning, there is also a very wide array of creative strategies employed to operationalise these key elements, ranging from group discussion to autobiographical writing and spontaneous painting. Regardless of whether the focus is on accessing deep unconscious emotions or on revealing the operation of dominant ideologies, all of these strategies aim to support learners to use experience as a catalyst for reflecting on previously unquestioned assumptions and presuppositions,

thereby beginning the process of transformative change. The following chapter turns to a consideration of social work, social work education and the links to transformative learning.

## **Chapter 4: Social work, social work education, and transformative learning in social work education**

This chapter continues the review of literature relevant to this research project, but moves away from transformative learning theory to briefly consider the nature and features of social work and social work education. These two areas will then be brought together to highlight the points of congruence between social work education and transformative learning.

In order to establish these points of congruence, it is useful to identify some key features of the social work profession itself. The first section of the chapter therefore reviews selected literature that discusses or illustrates the nature of social work, and in particular the critical and emancipatory tradition within the profession. It is clearly beyond the scope of this review to provide a comprehensive account of all aspects of social work, and the review of literature is intended to highlight issues of particular relevance to the research project's consideration of transformative learning theory in relation to the profession.

The second section of this chapter then looks more closely at social work education. The aims and purpose of social work education are considered alongside some key aspects of this field, including the use of critical reflection, and dialogical and experiential approaches to education. Finally, the last section of the chapter looks more specifically at the nexus of transformative learning theory and social work education, articulating the salient congruencies and identifying the small body of literature that exists linking these two areas together.

### **4.1 Social work**

The challenges of arriving at a concise and accurate definition of social work have been noted by many (see, for example, Dickens, 2012). In part, this is due to the wide range of areas in which social workers practice and the diversity of social and personal issues with which social workers are concerned. However it

is also partly because of the dynamic nature of the profession as its role in society constantly changes and adapts in response to wider social and ideological forces and as the profession engages with ideas and challenges flowing from areas such as postmodernism and critical theory (Bolzan, 2007).

Rode (2016) has provided a useful history of the attempts to develop a consensus definition of social work, noting that most attempts are either enumerative or abstract in nature - attempting to list basic characteristics and objectives, or identifying abstract concepts or properties that characterise the profession. A further discernable dichotomy is that definitions often split along the lines of those with a more clinical, individual orientation and those oriented towards macro practice or social change (Dickens, 2012). In terms of definitions, other writers have moved away from broad, consensual approaches and focused on providing a definition with a clearer focus on practice *per se* (for example, Bolzan, 2007), or for very specific fields of practice within social work (for example, Holtzhausen, 2011).

Perhaps the most commonly quoted definition of social work is that which the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), in conjunction with the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), has developed, over several iterations. The most recent of these, adopted in 2014, states that:

*Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.* (IFSW, 2016)

In part, this definition reflects criticism of the previous version, which, it was argued, displayed a Western bias; failed to recognise Indigenous perspectives; and was overly individualistic (see, for example, Truell, 2014). As Ornellas,

Spolander & Engelbrecht (2016) note, the new definition represents a shift toward “the strengthening of theory and knowledge, the movement from individual to collective approaches and in the increased emphasis on macro concepts and structural sources of inequality” (p. 3). Arguably, these shifts reflect a broader movement within the profession towards an emphasis on Indigenous perspectives, strengths-based practice and social change (Staniforth, Fouch & O’Brien, 2011). However, it is worth noting that these authors’ research indicated that social work practitioners asked to define social work themselves remained largely focused on change at the individual rather than societal level and seldom acknowledged Indigenous perspectives. While the general direction of the evolving definition is laudable, some criticisms and tensions still remain, including tensions between the desire for universal versus indigenous definitions (Gray & Fook, 2004; Law & Lee, 2016) and the need to explicitly integrate environmental and sustainability issues into the definition (Bowles, Boetto, Jones & McKinnon, 2016).

While attempts to define social work reveal differences in particular emphases within the profession, there is broad agreement that social work is a profession which has faced, and continues to face, challenges in terms of its purpose, legitimacy, and its role in contemporary society, both generally and in specific fields of practice (see, for example, Diamani & Sewpaul, 2015; Ife, 1997; Jessen, 2015; Mullaly, 2007). It is important to note that not only does the profession face challenges from without, but also that, within social work, almost every aspect of theory and practice can be considered contested territory. However, inherent in most definitions of the profession is recognition of the breadth of social work thought and practice, with social workers operating at different levels of social organisation, from the individual to the global, across a number of different domains, and in a wide range of fields of practice (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015; Alston & McKinnon, 2001).

#### **4.1.1 Characteristics of a normative profession**

As a profession, social work can be characterised as normative in that it envisages a better world through practice guided by the enactment of core

values and essential concepts (Bisman, 2004; Holscher, 2014; Sayre & Sar, 2015). As Trygged notes, “the social work profession stands on a normative platform” (2010, p. 651) with its foundations in moral philosophy and theories of ethics (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015). The core values and philosophical positions that have underpinned social work, and shaped specific forms of practice, have changed over time both in response to developments in knowledge and techniques and as a reaction to the socio-political context within which practice occurs. Bisman (2004) argues that “During the profession’s formative years, moral concerns drove social work’s development” (p. 111), and that the profession needs to take care not to lose sight of the importance of this moral and philosophical foundation. This emphasis on the place of morals and moral philosophy as a foundation of social work has been addressed by a number of writers (see, for example, Clark, 2006; de Jonge, 2014; Payne, 1999).

Regardless of the struggles to arrive at a universally agreed upon definition of social work, in the contemporary profession this normative foundation is now generally seen as encompassing two core concepts as characteristic of the profession: social justice and human rights (Androff, 2016; Gasker & Fischer, 2015; Healy, 2008; Ife, 2012; Kam, 2014; Katiuzhinsky & Okech, 2014; Nipperess & Briskman, 2009; O’Brien, 2010, 2011; Reisch, 2016). It could also be argued that a further defining feature of the profession is the focus on practitioners as facilitators of change, whether that change is at the individual, family, group, community or social level (Richards-Schuster, Ruffolo & Nicoll, 2015; Segal, Gerdes & Steiner, 2007).

These general concerns have translated into explicit statements about the core values of the profession. Such statements exist in the general literature (see, for example Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015) as well as in foundation professional statements. The Australian Association of Social Workers, for example, identifies three core values pertaining to the profession (respect for persons; social justice; and professional integrity) and enshrines these in the Code of Ethics (AASW, 2010). Social work is centrally concerned with ethics – the ways in which values and issues of moral philosophy are codified and translated into practice (Banks,

2006; Parrott, 2015). In daily practice, social workers are often confronted with ethical dilemmas that they must grapple with (see, for example, Banks & Williams, 2005). Most national social work bodies have now produced codes of ethics for the profession, and there is a substantial body of literature that compares and discusses these codes (see, for example, Bowles et al., 2016; Congress & McAuliffe, 2006;). The production and nature of such codes of ethics has also been the subject of critical debate (Banks, 2003; Bilson, 2007; Briskman, 2001; Weinberg & Campbell, 2014). Healy, for example, examines the debate between universalist and relativist conceptions of ethics, arguing that these can be thought of as existing on a continuum and that social work should adopt a position of “moderate universalism” (2007, p. 24). Holscher and Sewpaul (2006) also point out that a critical analysis of social work ethics in a dominant neoliberal social context needs to consider the role of social work in normalising structural inequalities by acting as a mediator between the powerful and powerless. But it is generally argued that such codes provide practical guidance and a clearer sense of identity and purpose for social work practitioners.

While a concern with moral philosophy, values, ethics and social justice may be common to most approaches to social work, there is a clear continuum of perspectives through which these commonalities may be manifest. A number of writers have charted the history of the social work profession (see, for example, Beddoe, 2014; Mendes, 2005; Payne, 2005a) and within those accounts two major perspectives on social work can be discerned. These can be thought of as the mainstream or conservative and the progressive or critical perspectives. As Mullaly notes, “The former accepts our current social system; the latter seeks to transform it” (2007, p. xvii).

#### **4.1.2 The critical tradition in social work**

As noted above, many aspects of social work theory and practice, and indeed values and philosophies, can be considered contested territory. While such debates cover a lot of ground, the tension between conservative or mainstream and critical/radical approaches is particularly relevant for this project. The conservative approach is generally characterised by an emphasis on

individualism and individual responsibility, and social work practice from this perspective is concerned with the amelioration of social problems so that individuals and groups may re-join or participate in society as productive citizens (Howe, 2009). Mullaly (2007) has identified such conservative approaches as being rooted in the societal paradigms of neo-conservatism and liberalism. He argues that social work as a profession, and social workers as individuals, have generally been socialised into a liberal view of society and of social welfare.

The critical approach, on the other hand, is characterised by an acceptance of social justice and human rights as philosophical foundations for practice, stemming from a recognition that some people are disadvantaged and oppressed through no fault of their own but rather as a result of the way that power, opportunities and resources are distributed in society i.e. 'structural disadvantage' (see, for example, Hosken, 2016). Furthermore, it is recognised that this situation is inequitable and unacceptable because it denies people's inalienable rights such as those set out in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (Ife, 2012; Nipperess, 2016; Nipperess & Briskman, 2009). Such a philosophical basis is also a call to action, pointing to the need for both individual support and social change to address issues of oppression that are social and ideological in origin (Allan, 2003; Mullaly, 2007). Pease & Nipperess (2016) have characterised this critical perspective in social work as describing "a group of approaches to social work that are diverse but share a common commitment to both personal and structural change" (p. 4).

Mendes (2009) summarises the contrast between these two approaches in social work, noting that:

*From its very beginning as a profession, social work has been divided between those who would emphasise the treatment and cure of individual problems and deficiencies, and those who prefer to emphasise structural inequities and the importance of social reform. (Mendes, 2009, p. 35)*

It can be argued that this differentiation between social work with a focus on individual problems and social cohesion and social work with a focus on society, structural disadvantage and the socio-political context of people's lives can be traced back to social work's origins as a profession in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and represents an ongoing theme in the profession's development (Mendes, 2009). While these earliest origins are significant and interesting, what may now be referred to as contemporary critical social work emerged from the Marxist critiques of social work in the 1960s and 70s (Mendes, 2009). Historical accounts of the critical or emancipatory tradition in social work have been explored by a number of authors (see, for example, Fook, 2002a; Mendes, 2009; Payne, 2005b; Pease & Nipperess, 2016).

Such critical and emancipatory approaches represent a broad conceptualisation, one that encompasses a range of particular practice theories. Pease & Nipperess (2016) note that critical social work continues to develop, and can now be seen as including approaches such as radical casework; critical practice; critical postmodernism; feminist social work; structural social work; anti-racist social work; radical social work; anti-oppressive social work; human rights-based social work; and anti-discriminatory social work. While recognising this diversity, Healy (2001) argues that these approaches share some particular orientations, including recognising that broad social processes contribute to personal issues; that a critical and self-reflexive position in relation to both practice and policy is necessary; and that critical social workers work with and for the oppressed to produce social change. Similarly, Allan (2009), in her discussion of new developments in the critical tradition, identifies five key principles that underpin a critical approach to social work:

- *A commitment to work towards greater social justice and equality for those who are oppressed and marginalised within society*
- *A commitment to working alongside oppressed and marginalised populations*
- *An analysis of power relations which serve to marginalise and oppress particular populations in society*

- *A commitment to question taken-for-granted and dominant assumptions and beliefs*
- *An orientation towards emancipatory personal and social change.* (Allan, 2009, p. 59)

More recently, debate has developed within critical circles, and in the profession more broadly, regarding the role and influence of postmodern perspectives. As a profession with its philosophical basis in the grand narratives of social justice and universal human rights, social work is in many ways an exemplar of modernist thought. However, many have argued that post-theories offer new ways forward for social work, both in terms of its theoretical understanding of society and in application, through forms of practice shaped by postmodern thought (see, for example, Besthorn, St George & Wulff, 2014; Kendall & Hugman, 2013; Ungar, 2004; Vodde & Gallant, 2002; Walker, 2001). Hugman (2003), for example, argues that postmodernism has a contribution to make in the realm of social work ethics, allowing practitioners to take account of the uncertainty that characterises the modern world.

Others have argued that postmodernism offers little of value to social work, and indeed may endanger many of the core characteristics of the profession (Atherton & Bolland, 2002; Trainor, 2002). Caputo, Epstein, Stoez & Thyer (2015) offer a critique of the influence of postmodernism in social work, arguing that:

*The potential negative consequences of postmodernism for social work are significant. Such consequences include the prospects of reversing progress in social justice regarding marginalized groups, undermining the knowledge base of the profession, denigrating evidence-based practice, and jeopardizing the profession's social status.* (Caputo et al., 2015, p. 638)

Noble (2004) is similarly concerned with the impact of deconstructive postmodernism on social work and, in particular, of a progressive social work agenda. She argues that “[S]ocial work needs to wake up from the enticing,

almost mesmerizing, effect of postmodern discourse and take another look at the way economic, gender and colonial issues continue to lie at the root of injustice and impoverishment" (p. 302). Noble's concern is that postmodern thought and practice distracts from recognition of the impact of structural forces and undermines progressive movements such as anti-racism.

Others believe that postmodernism and post-structuralism can make significant contributions to social work analysis and practice, but that in order to do so they must retain important aspects of critical thought and analysis. In discussing the impact of postmodern ideas on critical social work, Allan (2009) assesses the potential for modernist and postmodern ideas to be brought together. She notes that the key issue is:

*... how to hold together the different approaches and so practise in ways that pay attention to inequitable material arrangements and their impact on individuals and communities, at the same time heeding difference and diversity while maintaining an open, reflexive and self-critical stance.*

(Allan, 2009, p. 60).

Fook (2016) also produces a strong argument for a critical approach to social work that is characterised by the combination of critical perspectives with postmodern thinking. She notes that postmodernism, as an epistemological theory, is concerned with different issues than moral theories, in which category she includes radical, structural and feminist theories. Fook argues, "we need to combine both types of theorising in order to begin to understand our complex world and the plethora of experiences within it" (p. 17).

While debates about the role of postmodern thought in critical approaches to social work continue, and while there is clear recognition of the significant contradictions that exist within the critical approach (see, for example Pease & Nipperess, 2016), it is clear that the critical perspective within social work is a significant and enduring aspect of the profession and sits in stark contrast to many of the features of mainstream or conservative theory and practice.

The characteristics of social work as a profession, both in terms of those areas where a broad consensus can be discerned and in terms of those areas where tensions and differences exist, are necessarily reflected and manifest in social work education. A brief account of some of the features of social work education sets the scene for a consideration of the points of congruence between this and Mezirow's transformative learning theory.

## **4.2 Social work education**

In the most simplistic sense, social work education aims to equip students with the knowledge, skills and values necessary for effective practice. Since the ideological considerations mentioned earlier clearly influence the definition of 'effective practice', and may tend to privilege some forms of knowledge and values above others, it is obvious that the nature of social work education will be heavily dependant upon whether the goal of social work is seen to be the maintenance and reproduction of the existing social system, or the making of a contribution to social transformation (Jones, 2003).

### **4.2.1 Standards for social work education**

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), as the professional body responsible for accrediting social work education programs in Australia, has outlined what it considers the acceptable and expected content of social work education in the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) (AASW, 2012). These education and accreditation standards establish a set of principles and standards for social work education, as well as describing the expected content and structure of social work programs. In an overall sense, the standards describe the purpose of social work education as being to prepare "students for practice in the workplace in local, national and international contexts" (AASW, 2012, p. 9). In articulating a set of specific principles for social work education, the AASW (2012) notes, amongst other things, that such an education should prepare students to be "self-initiating, critically reflective, innovative and able to solve problems"; that "primacy is given to the

development of reflective and reflexive practice, structural analysis, critical thinking and ethical professional behaviour"; and that education supports and encourages "a commitment to and demonstration of the values and ideals of the social work profession" (p. 9).

As well as identifying a number of specific content areas that must be included in all Australian social work programs, the ASWEAS also discusses broader categories of required content. These focus on practice knowledge and skills; knowledge of social work ethics; methods of practice; skills for practice; the context of practice; fields of practice; knowledge from other disciplines (including an understanding of society and self); and knowledge about interprofessional practice. It is worth highlighting that amongst the skills for social work practice as described in the standards, skills for reflection and critical thinking are given prominence, while an understanding of the context of social work is described as including the ability to critically analyse society, pay attention to issues of power and disadvantage in a number of forms, and to critically analyse systems, including political, social, economic and ecological (AASW, 2012). The standards also recognise the central role played by field education and sets out a number of principles to be incorporated into field education programs.

There are a number of aspects of this articulation of standards for social work education that are worth highlighting in light of the concerns of transformative learning theory and critical approaches to social work. First, the standards make it clear that the development of skills for reflective and critical thinking are seen as essential components of social work education. Secondly, students are also expected to develop a critical social analysis, including the nature of power, disadvantage and oppression and their relationship to social structures and ideology. Thirdly, students must understand processes of change and develop a focus on empowering and non-oppressive practice. Lastly, emphasis is placed on the centrality of experience as a key driver of learning, through the implementation of the field education requirements.

The exercise of describing a set of standards for social work education, including mandated content, is a common and sometimes controversial feature of professional social work internationally. For example, Pardeck & Yuen (2006) discuss the accreditation guidelines developed by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in the United States. Taylor & Bogo (2014) discuss issues relating to education accreditation standards in the United Kingdom, noting the problematic nature of the approach to competencies and capabilities adopted as part of a reformed process. The culturally bound nature of such standards is highlighted in Dubus & Greene's (2015) discussion of Cuban social work where they question whether the values, ethics and understanding of social work embedded in American standards can, or should be, exported to other countries.

At least partly in response to such concerns about culture and hegemony, attempts have been made to articulate 'global' standards for social work education. Sewpaul & Jones (2004) and Sewpaul (2010) discuss the development of the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training jointly initiated by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (IASSW & IFSW, 2004). Based on literature, consultations with social work educators and commentary received during the process of arriving at a common definition for social work, Sewpaul & Jones (2004) identify a set of core purposes for social work before moving on to detail a range of specific standards for social work education and training. Several of these are particularly noteworthy in respect to the concerns of transformative learning approaches. For example, in relation to curricula, the authors argue that skills for critical thinking and reasoning, along with openness to new paradigms should be a core standard for social work education, aiding in the development of critically self-reflective practitioners. A critical understanding of socio-structural disadvantage and oppression, and an emphasis on the importance of change processes across social, political and economic spheres are also identified as standard expectations for social work education. Sewpaul (2010), who chaired the Global Standards Committee, notes that despite the extensive consultation engaged in as part of the process of

developing the goals, they remain flawed, and she remains ambivalent about both process and product.

Moving from this broad consideration of the aims of social work education, and the standards that have been set, both nationally and globally, in an attempt to secure these goals, it is valuable to look at three specific pedagogical emphases which emerge from the literature surrounding social work education and which have particular relevance for transformative learning theory. Field education, critical reflection and dialogical/group processes are all significant features of social work education. It is also important to note the existence of a critical approach to social work education, including the engagement with issues of privilege, whiteness and other expressions of power.

#### **4.2.2 Field education and the role of experience in social work education**

In social work education, the importance placed on translating classroom theory into real life practice is highlighted through the inclusion of significant field education components in social work programs. As a key element of social work education there is a large body of literature regarding the nature, efficacy and challenges of the field education experience (see, for example, Cleak & Wilson, 2013; Jones, 2015). In the United States, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has referred to field education as the 'signature pedagogy' of social work (Boitel & Fromm, 2014; CSWE, 2008). Essentially, field education placements provide an opportunity for social work students to integrate classroom learning with supervised experiences from the workplace, as well as developing new learning in an experiential manner. It is generally regarded as a central aspect of students' transition from student to practitioner (Rehn & Kalman, 2016). Bogo (2015) reflects the general recognition of this importance and centrality of field education when she notes that both:

*Students and alumni characterize it as such, and national accrediting bodies, both in the United States and internationally, recognize its crucial impact on the quality of social work services delivered to the public. In addition, there is likely more scholarship and research conducted on field*

*education than on any other component of the curriculum.* (Bogo, 2015, p. 317)

However, it is also a field where a number of significant challenges have been identified. Hay, Dale & Yeung (2016), for example, surveyed field educators in New Zealand, identifying that, while there were many positive outcomes of being involved in supervising students, there were also significant challenges, including workload issues and resourcing. This echoed earlier research by Barton, Bell & Bowles (2005) who interviewed field educators to ascertain what they saw as the costs and benefits of having social work students on placement in their agencies. The authors report that benefits, including the work students did and their contributions to educators' own development and reflective practice, outweighed the costs which related mainly to demands on time and resources.

A range of other specific challenges involved in field education have also been identified, including dealing with disability (Hearn, Short & Healy, 2014), off-site supervision (Zuchowski, 2013), rural and remote locations (Jones-Mutton, Short, Bidgood & Jones, 2015), use of technology (Colvin & Bullock, 2014), Indigenous approaches to field education (Clark & Drolet, 2014) and more broadly, the impact of neoliberalism (Zuchowski, Hudson, Bartlett & Diamandi, 2014; Morley & Dunstan, 2013).

Social work educators have also explored a range of strategies and techniques in attempting to understand and maximise the learning opportunities that flow from field placements. Mumm (2006), for example, conducted research to document the ways in which field educators taught practice skills to social work students, and the efficacy of these strategies. Techniques identified included the use of process recordings, discussion, role-playing, co-counselling and modelling. Mumm found that students reported discussion as being the most helpful technique, followed by modelling and co-counselling. Testa & Egan (2016) looked at the use of online discussion boards and found that, in a supported environment, they were useful tools for critical reflection during placement.

Bogo (2015) attempted to identify a set of best practices, to guide student learning on field placements. She argues that these should include: positive and welcoming learning environments; the presence of collaborative relationships; opportunities to observe and debrief; opportunities to actually practice with clients; and the use of mutual reflective dialogues. Zuchowski et al. (2014) review a range of positive strategies from a number of universities that attempt to address some of the significant challenges of contemporary field education. The authors conclude that, despite these positive examples, "... there is a need to continue the work of developing and evaluating programs and strategies to better support diverse groups of students and field educators" (p. 78).

While field education represents possibly the most significant attempt to embed experiential learning in social work education, it is worth noting that other forms of experiential pedagogy have also been an important feature of social work education (see, for example, Anderson & Harris, 2005; Cheung & Delavega, 2014). Noting that experiential learning is a "... vital aspect of social work education", Thomas & Marks (2014, p. 254) explore the use of student-generated videos in a community practice course. Similarly, Rowntree (2014) details an experiential approach to supporting students in exploring and understanding sexuality as an issue for social work practice. Carey (2007) describes a community-based project where students are able to adopt dual roles, both as a student and as a grass-roots organiser in a particular social action setting. Carey argues that the development of such grass-roots leadership skills is an important component of macro social work education. In a further example, Cheek, Rector & Davis (2007) document the experiences of a group of social work students given the opportunity of participating in a community-based domestic violence project as part of their studies. The authors note that:

*... social work objectives such as alleviating social suffering, improving personal and social well-being, community development are quite ambiguous when compared with educational objectives of doctors, lawyers, and teachers. Therefore, experiential learning is an essential element in linking theory and*

*practice in social work education.* (Cheek et al., 2007, p. 144)

Within social work education, the importance of experience as the starting point for learning has often been coupled with an emphasis on the importance of critical reflection.

#### **4.2.3 Critical reflection in social work education**

Critical reflection has emerged as a core component and concern of social work education and practice (see, for example, Askeland & Fook, 2009; Clare, 2007; Fook, 2012; Jones, 2015; Redmond, 2005; Yip 2006a). Fook & Askeland (2007) argue that, when applied in a social work educational setting, critical reflection:

*... involves the identification of deep-seated assumptions, but with the primary purpose of bringing about some improvements in professional practice (Fook & Askeland, 2006; Fook, in press). What makes such reflection critical is the focus on power (Brookfield, 1995, p.8) which allows the reflective process to be transformative, especially when linked with the basic ideas of critical theory (Fook, 2002, pp.40–41). In this latter sense, critical reflection must incorporate an understanding of personal experiences within social, cultural and structural contexts. (Fook & Askeland, 2007, p. 521-522)*

Bay & Macfarlane (2011) reflect this definition in their discussion of the way critical reflection is taught at an Australian university, where an emphasis is placed on supporting students to recognise their own taken-for-granted assumptions and frames of reference, and to reflect on the operation of power relations. Morley (2016) explores the links between critical approaches to social work and critical reflection as a process. The model that she discusses attempts both to improve practice by linking it to theory and to adopt a reflexive approach to examine our own social positioning. Morley notes that such a model has both deconstructive and reconstructive aspects. She argues, "... critical reflection, when informed by a critically reflexive blend of both modernist and post-structural theories, can greatly improve the emancipatory potential of critical social work practice" (p. 35).

A wide range of specific strategies has been employed in seeking to facilitate and foster critical reflection in social work education. Gockel & Deng (2016), for example, explore the use of mindfulness training to facilitate critical reflection with social work students, while Gallagher, Thompson & Hughes (2015) argue that the use of electronic student portfolios can similarly facilitate skills in critical reflection. Walmsley & Birkbeck (2006) discuss the use of autobiographical writing as an exercise in promoting critical reflection about students' values and life experiences. The authors argue that such an approach can be highly effective and deeply powerful, but that it is predicated on the existence of trust between students and educators. Pack (2013) discusses the way in which an integration of practice-based research and critical reflection helps to ensure that social work students maintain an emphasis on the 'critical' in critical reflection.

Lam, Wong & Leung (2007) look at the fieldwork aspect of social work education in light of their recognition of the importance ascribed to critical reflection. The authors analysed students' reflective journals and noted that emotional distress, in the form of, for example, frustration, fear and disappointment, often preceded effective reflection. Value dilemmas encountered in the placement setting often led students to reflect on long-held beliefs, while the knowledge-practice praxis was a common theme in journals. In a different type of example, Walton (2012) presents a teaching strategy that involves using a visual arts approach to encourage criticality and breadth in student reflections. Mulder & Dull, (2014) use a photovoice method with a similar intention, noting that such an approach allows students to explore and express their own frames of reference through stories and photographs.

Not all commentators see the use of reflection in social work education as an unerringly positive development. Yip (2006b), for example, looks at the use of reflection in social work education and argues that while this process can be valuable, caution needs to be exercised in certain situations. The author notes that reflective practice often involves a process of self-reflection, whereby a

student or worker evaluates their own thinking, feeling and performance, a process that others have argued is essential for the generation of new perspectives. While this is generally seen as a positive process, Yip argues that, under certain conditions it may be destructive to the social worker's self-development. Inappropriate conditions, according to the author, "include an oppressive social environment, demanding working environment, social workers' unresolved past trauma as well as social workers' poor physical and mental health" (p. 783). Social work educators, in the classroom and field, therefore have a responsibility to ensure appropriate conditions for students to engage in such self-reflection, while minimising destructive risks.

#### **4.2.4 Dialogue, groups and peer learning in social work education**

Related to the strategies and techniques that focus on developing and implementing skills for critical reflection is a body of literature emphasising the importance of dialogue and dialogical processes in social work education. These are often group-situated, but not necessarily so. Tsang (2007), for example, looks at the concept of dialogue as part of the process of critical reflection. Such dialogue, the author argues, can be individual and internal or shared with others. He traces the roots of dialogue amongst a number of disciplines and provides examples of the application of internal and external dialogue in social work education.

The use of dialogue to create bridges of understanding between students and practitioners from different social identity groups has been explored by a number of writers (see, for example, Schatz, Furman & Jenkins, 2003; Schatz, Tracy & Tracy, 2006). Rozas (2004, 2007) illustrates the use of Intergroup Dialogue (IGD) as a tool for learning about self in the setting of learning around issues of race, racism and oppression, arguing that "our ongoing dialogical existence with others plays a role in the development of self" (2004, p. 230). Rozas argues that the outcomes of this approach included developing a richer sense of self-awareness, the gaining of knowledge and being able to deal with issues characterized by high levels of uncertainty and complexity. In a similar vein, Nadan, Weinburg-Kurnik & Ban-Ari (2015) report on the use of

international IGD in a multi-cultural social work education setting, highlighting the benefits for preparing students to practice in an uncertain world. A focus on the relationship between educator and students frames Ross's (2007) discussion of the use of dialogue. For Ross, the use of dialogue is part of a wider process of continually challenging and recreating her teaching practice. A central part of this commitment is "to create spaces for dialogue with students and colleagues who hold cherished beliefs or differences to me, that I may find threatening or unwelcome" (p. 481).

Group and peer-based learning are also identified in the social work education literature as significant features of pedagogical practice. As Postlethwait (2016) notes "[S]ocial work seems to be a natural fit for a cooperative small-group teaching approach, as the nature of professional functions is such that social workers at every level are expected to work collaboratively with clients, colleagues, and stakeholders" (p. 257). Swain (2007) makes a strong argument for small-group learning in social work education, seeing such groups as sites of active involvement and the spaces in which people struggle with ideas in ways that cannot be replicated in other settings, such as large didactic lectures. van Katwyk, Liegghio & Laflamme (2014) make a similar argument for the use of group study circles, finding that they promote democratic, critical and integral learning. Peer approaches to teaching harness some of the benefits of group approaches, and have also been given attention in the literature. Fougnier (2013), for example, describes a peer tutoring program run as part of a social work course. Interestingly, Fougnier reports that the tutors themselves gained a better understanding of user-participation through being engaged in the program. Miller, Duron, Bosk, Finno-Velasquez and Abner (2016) examined the use of a peer-learning network in social work doctoral education. They argue that the interdisciplinary aspects of such peer networks allows social work students to gain better understanding of complex problems.

#### **4.2.4 Critical perspectives in social work education**

Given the significance of the critical perspective in professional social work discussed above, it is not surprising that a critical approach is also present in discussions around social work education. Literature emerging in this area is particularly interested in the ways in which the rise of neoliberalism has impacted on the profession (Holscher & Sewpaul, 2006; Wallace & Pease, 2011) and subsequently on the practice of social work education. Wehbi (2009, p. 503) for example points out that the “neoliberal push” in universities has impacted on educators’ capacity to prepare students to contribute to social change. Morley & Dunstan (2013) outline the ways neoliberal ideologies and practices have restricted the ability to deliver quality field education programs in social work, and Morley (2016) further argues that global capitalism and neoliberalism risk reducing social work education to a process of competency-based skills acquisition. In response to these pressures Morley describes the development of a critical social work program at an Australian regional university, grounded in critical, anti-racist and pro-feminist approaches, designed to counter the effects of neoliberal discourse (Morley, 2016). Evaluation of the program leads Morley to conclude that “using a critical theory-informed curriculum and critically reflective pedagogical processes contributes to a form of transformative learning in students that inspires participation in collective social action” (2016, p. 51). Within this process, the role of critical reflection emerges as crucial to students’ transformative learning experiences (Morley & Macfarlane, 2014).

Linked to this critical dimension of social work education are emerging pedagogical approaches around issues of privilege and whiteness. Vodde (2001) for example argues that social work education is not doing an adequate job of addressing issues of power and oppression despite holding itself up as a champion of social justice. Ortega & Busch-Armendariz (2014) similarly claim that white racial privilege, the primacy of market forces and the marginalisation of alternate perspectives results in the privileging of certain knowledge within social work programs. Critical social work educators have begun developing pedagogical strategies to better understand and address this dynamic, particularly in relation to issues such as white privilege (Abrams & Gibson, 2007;

Dharman, 2012), heteronormativity (Walls et al, 2009), and male privilege (Noble & Pease, 2011).

### **4.3 Transformative learning and social work education**

The discussion above, while necessarily brief, highlights some of the core features of social work and social work education. In the following section, the points of congruence between social work, social work education and Mezirow's transformative learning theory are highlighted, before moving on to consider the literature which explicitly links these together.

#### **4.3.1 Points of congruence**

A number of points of congruence between transformative learning and social work education can be identified, based on the literature reviewed here. Both transformative learning theory, in Mezirow's articulation and its many variations, and social work education are primarily focused on the interactions of the individual in the social world. Mezirow's cognitively oriented approach to transformation theory, for example, still has a primary social-relational focus as learners enact altered meaning structures in the social world, particularly through rational discourse and dialogue. For social work education, the acquisition of new skills and knowledge, and the socialisation into social work values and ethics, is primarily directed at equipping learners to become effective practitioners, and to deal effectively with the socio-political context in which practice occurs; that is, to translate theory and knowledge into action in the social world.

Social work education and transformative learning theories are also both concerned with issues of change. This may involve change at the level of the individual as learner (for example, via perspective transformation) or the support and facilitation of change in others (as in many forms of social work practice). Both are also concerned, however, with broader change. The discussion above highlighted the ways in which contributions to social change

are built into many definitions of what social workers do and, indeed, are an ethical requirement in some cases. Similarly, most accounts of transformative learning argue that individual change must be linked, via praxis, with action and change in the social arena. As discussed in the previous chapter, the emphasis placed on the centrality of social change varies amongst transformation theories, and this is also the case with social work education and practice, where critical/radical approaches place greater emphasis on this aspect of education and practice.

The inclusion of social change as a focus in both transformative learning theories and social work is, however, indicative of the importance of the emancipatory tradition present in each. Both of these fields can be considered broad churches in the sense that they encompass theories and orientations with a range of ideological perspectives, but the importance of the emancipatory tradition in shaping each is undeniable. This connection is further highlighted when considering the ways in which specific examples of emancipatory thought, such as critical theory and the work of Habermas and Freire have impacted on both.

Social work education is concerned with the centrality of experience as a source of learning, and has a strong tradition of facilitating such learning through field education experiences as well as experiential approaches to the classroom. Experience is, of course, also central to all transformative learning theories, which see experience as the starting point for learning and transformation. The previous discussion of transformative learning included the identification of critical reflection and discourse as essential components of the transformative process. The discussion of social work education, above, has also highlighted the ways in which these have become significant, in many ways essential, aspects of social work education.

There is an emerging sense, then, that transformative learning theories and social work education share a set of similar foundations, aims and processes. The level of congruence between these two areas argues for a further exploration of their relationship and the ways in which this might be used to both understand

the experience of social work education and to guide its development and implementation. Somewhat surprisingly then, there is relatively little literature that directly connects the work of Mezirow and other transformative learning theorists to social work education.

#### **4.3.2 Transformative learning theory in social work education**

Interest in transformative learning theory and the work of Mezirow can be identified in a number of different ways in the social work education literature. Given the importance ascribed to critical reflection, and reflective practices more generally, it is not surprising that these aspects of Mezirow's work are often referenced in this literature. Tsang (2005) notes that Mezirow's work on reflection, along with that of authors such as Kolb, Schon, Eraut and Brookfield (as cited in Tsang, 2005), provides the theoretical underpinnings for the attention given to reflection in both practice and educational settings in social work, while Redmond (2004) also includes Mezirow's work on critical reflection as part of the tradition, including Kolb, Schon, Freire and Boud (as cited in Redmond, 2004), that has been used in developing reflective practices in education for health and social services. Ixer (2016) likewise identifies Mezirow amongst a list of theorists constituting the substantial literature on reflection. In this general sense of referring to Mezirow's work on reflection, Appleton (2011), Curry-Stevens (2012), Abbott and Mayes (2014), Jensen-Hart, Shuttleworth & Davis (2014), and Domac, Anderson, O'Reilly & Smith (2015) are all examples of discussions of reflection in social work education that make reference to Mezirow as a significant theorist in this area.

Morley (2008, 2012) and Morley & Dunstan (2013) have made explicit links between critical reflection and critical approaches to social work, arguing that this is a connection that has not been given the attention that it deserves. Morley (2012) discusses critical reflection as a process of deconstruction and reconstruction, and notes the significance of Mezirow's work in this second stage particularly. She echoes the transformative learning process outlined by Mezirow in noting that reconstruction, as a part of the reflective process:

*... involves taking the awareness gained from the deconstruction process about the political processes and power dynamics implicated in the construction of knowledge and meaning and using this insight to (i) develop revised interpretations of experiences and to (ii) enable alternative understandings and courses of action to emerge. (Morley, 2012, p.1525)*

In a similar fashion, Fook & Askeland (2007) draw on transformative learning theory and the work of Mezirow as part of their consideration of the provision of critical reflection training. In particular, they are interested in the ways in which such training may challenge cultural assumptions. They note the importance of Mezirow's contention that transformative learning involves an engagement in rational discourse and has an affective or emotional element. Yip (2006a) utilises Mezirow's account of reflection in his description of 'practical reflexivity' in educating students to work in mental health settings, and again (2006b) in his consideration of the role of reflection in students' professional and self-development. In an applied example, Bay & Macfarlane (2011) discuss the ways in which critical reflection is taught in their undergraduate social work course, where transformational learning is the goal. They note that their conceptualisation of critical reflection, and the methods they use in teaching it, is closely aligned with Mezirow's articulation of transformative learning theory. Noting that Mezirow's theory suggests that frames of reference can be transformed through reflection on the assumptions that we hold, the authors state that as "... social work educators, we help students become more aware of their current conceptions, so they can become more conscious of the fact that different possibilities exist" (p. 754-755).

Mezirow's work and transformative learning theory more generally also emerge in literature with an orientation towards critical and emancipatory social work. In these instances, transformative learning theory is clearly being considered in its emancipatory iteration, whereby individual perspective transformation is linked to efforts to expose and oppose dominant discourses. Hafford-Letchfield (2014), for example, explores the need for different approaches in social work with older people if entrenched structural discrimination is to be overcome. In

this movement towards a critical educational gerontology, Mezirow's work on critical reflection and perspective transformation is seen by the author as significant. Similarly, Owens, Miller & Grise-Owens (2014) discuss the development of teaching philosophies in social work education, with the authors identifying their own philosophical position as a "liberatory teaching-learning philosophy" (p. 338), drawing on the work of Mezirow, Freire and Dewey.

In a more applied example of this critical dimension of transformative learning theory, the use of zines as a pedagogical tool in critical social work education is explored by Desyllas & Sinclair (2014) who begin their discussion by noting that, "[I]n an increasingly conservative world informed by neo-liberal ideology, where injustice is maintained by multiple forms of privilege, power and oppression, it's imperative that social work remains committed to critical and liberatory approaches to education and practice" (p. 296). The authors describe the use of zines as a transformative learning strategy, drawing on structural and anti-oppressive frameworks to allow students the opportunity to engage with social justice issues, build group solidarity and inspire action.

A number of authors have used ideas drawn from transformative learning theory in either understanding social work students' experiences on field placement (for example, Lee & Fortune, 2013; Papouli, 2014), or while engaged in international study experiences (Roholt & Fisher, 2013), but these concepts have also been used to actually design field activities with a transformative intent (for example, Pockett, 2015). Nino, Cuevas & Loya (2011) provide an interesting example of this last category, describing the development of a community-based agency grounded in Mezirow's transformative learning theory, and intended to promote transformative learning. Created by a university social work department, the agency was to both provide services and provide opportunities for service learning and placements for social work students. Researching the experiences of students placed in the agency, the authors note transformations across a number of dimensions. In a similar fashion, Hughes (2013) describes a community placement activity integrated into the first year of an undergraduate social work program. Underpinning the design of the program is Mezirow's

transformative learning theory and an explicit recognition of the role of critical reflection in perspective transformation.

Transformative learning theory has also been used as an analytical tool in researching aspects of social work education. For example, Hughes (2011) reports on research into the experiences of social work students and the impact of their learning on their sense of wellbeing. The research uses transformative learning as part of the theoretical framework. Based on his findings, Hughes argues that it is important to take students' whole selves into account as part of their learning, and to recognise the impact of learning on student wellbeing. Transformational learning theory was also the conceptual framework used to analyse the experiences of social work students engaged in developing cultural genograms as a method for increasing awareness of cultural diversity (Warde, 2012). Warde found that the development of a cultural genogram could act as a disorienting dilemma because students were required to examine and challenge their values. In a further example, McCusker (2013) describes an action research project looking at social work students' achievement of transformative learning in a communication skills course. The researcher draws on both Mezirow's articulation of transformative learning theory and constructive developmental pedagogy to design the teaching and learning approaches used in the unit. While noting the challenges involved in measuring transformation, McCusker reports that a majority of students involved in the unit experienced transformative learning.

A small number of accounts of the design of specific pedagogical strategies based on transformative learning theory, or shaped by such theory, also appear in social work education literature. For example, Chan, Lam & Yeung (2013) note that students' habitual independence can operate as a barrier to effective teamwork in social work courses. They use Mezirow's concept of perspective transformation and the practice of reflection as a way of understanding this situation and to design strategies to produce change. Powell, Scott, Scott, and Jones (2013) examined the use of an online archive of patient narratives for use in the education of physiotherapy and social work students. They argue that such

narratives can deepen students' understanding of both self and others. They note that this reflects a transformative learning approach to education, arguing that if "the student is presented with beliefs, values, ideas, perspectives or life circumstances different to their own, they can be stimulated into self-reflection, which in turn can encourage transformative learning by challenging their accepted ways of thinking and operating" (Powell et al., 2013, p. 26). In another example, Grise-Owens, Cambron & Valade (2010) adopted an approach based on transformative learning theory to design social work education curricula that harnessed the power of current events to challenge students existing perceptions. They present a case study of the ways in which the experience of hurricane Katrina was used as a 'teachable moment', being integrated into a range of subject areas and assessment tasks. The authors state that in this way "a routine assignment became transformative as students critically applied theories to contexts of current events within the framework of community and social justice" (p. 137).

Interestingly, transformative learning has also begun showing up in discussions of how social work education might begin to engage more effectively with issues of environment and sustainability (see, for example, Jones, 2012). Addressing this challenge, Gray & Coates (2015) argue that this will require a fundamental shift in the values and theories that underpin social work. In discussing how this shift might happen and be facilitated, they turn to Mezirow's model of perspective transformation, arguing that a transformed curriculum should take account of this process. Addressing similar issues, Philip & Reisch (2015) argue that social work needs to expand its understanding and engagement with environmental issues and, in particular, with the concept of environmental justice. They argue that "transformative learning theory might be an effective way to change how students perceive the world by altering fixed assumptions into ideas that are more flexible and reflective" (p. 479). In a more applied sense, Crawford et al. (2015) discuss the emerging issue of how social work education is dealing with issues of environment and climate change. They argue that transformative learning offers a pedagogical pathway to engage with these issues, noting the:

*... challenge of climate change is that it has created a shortfall in social work knowledge of and for practice that needs to be rectified. Through transformative learning, championed by educators in schools of social work as well as those in the field such new practice/s can be enacted* (Crawford, et al., 2015, p. 596).

The authors report on an initiative that involved embedding environmental considerations in field education curricula. Their subsequent survey of participants showed that transformations had occurred in varying degrees for different participants.

Some of the discussion regarding transformative learning theory and social work education adopts a broader approach, surveying social work education in general, or suggesting broader pedagogical models or frameworks drawing on transformative learning theory. In this broad sense, Witkin (2014) argues the need for a transformative orientation in social work education as a whole. In doing so, he considers the ways in which the term 'transformation' has become overused and over-inclusive, making the case for a more specific and particular understanding of transformative learning, aligned with that articulated by Mezirow. Witkin proposes a conceptualisation of transformation for use in social work education, emphasizing the importance of creativity and imagination, and problematising and questioning. Lee & Greene (2004) provide an example of a teaching framework based explicitly on transformative learning theory as developed by Mezirow. Their area of focus is cross-cultural learning and they provide a set of guidelines for integrating transformative practices in this area into the social work classroom. The authors argue that a transformative learning approach is particularly relevant in this areas as such approaches have a core concern with self-reflection on existing assumptions. Lee & Greene note, "students from different cultural backgrounds will have different assumptions about reality. Since these rules are implicit and unwritten, one's assumptions about reality tend to become taken-for-granted and unquestioned" (2004, p. 5).

Blunt (2007) provides an explicit and targeted use of transformative learning theory in social work education in her development of a model of cultural competence for transformative education. A key aspect of the process of demonstrating cultural competence, according to Blunt, is the ability to identify and implement effective learning strategies. Transformative learning becomes a central consideration here, for both educators and students. The author goes on to describe the role of subjective and objective reframing, critical reflection and reflective discourse in the transformative process. Still dealing with issues of culture, Mackinlay & Barney (2014) present a teaching and learning approach that aims to decolonize Indigenous Australian studies. While recognising the problematic aspects of transformative learning theory as a theory largely constructed by White, non-Indigenous people, the authors discuss the ways that the principles of Mezirow's transformative learning approach are embedded in their model.

There is a clear sense then that there is a significant degree of alignment between transformative learning, in both its theory and application, and the concerns and practices of social work education. While Mezirow's work on reflection has been recognised as an important contribution to the development of ideas and practices for critical reflection in social work, transformative learning theory more generally has also attracted interest from a relatively small number of academics and educators, as demonstrated in this review.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

This literature review, across three chapters, has surveyed relevant literature in the areas of transformative learning, with particular emphasis on the work of Mezirow. The place of critical theory, and the work of Habermas and of Freire as theoretical foundations for this work was discussed, and a range of alternative directions and developments of transformative learning presented. This included some consideration of instances where transformative learning has been documented and thoughts on how such transformations might be facilitated.

The review then moved on to a consideration of social work as a profession and social work education as the context within which learners are prepared for their entry into professional practice. A number of features and common themes were identified in both the general social work and educational literature, including an emphasis on experiential approaches, critical reflection and dialogue. Based on these accounts of social work and social work education, a number of points of congruence between these areas and transformative learning theory were identified.

This then led to a presentation of the social work education literature which draws directly on the field of transformative learning and/or the work of Mezirow. Despite the apparent convergence between the aims and processes of social work education and transformative learning theories, this is a relatively small body of work, and mostly concerned with the nature and importance of critical reflection.

This research aims to make a contribution to this literature by using transformative learning theory in an explicit manner to both better understand the experiences of social work students as they reflect on their course of study, and to provide some guidance to social work educators seeking to promote transformative learning experiences in their classrooms. The next chapter details the methodology employed in the project.

## **Chapter 5: Methodology**

The primary concern in selecting a methodology for this project has focused on its congruence with the assumptions, principles and values that underpin social work as a profession (and specifically the critical tradition within social work), social work education as a practice, transformative approaches to adult learning and my own values and beliefs as both a social worker and adult educator.

The contested elements of theory, in both the disciplines of education and social work, and their particular manifestation in social work education, highlight the richness and complexity of adult learning and education. A methodology that seeks to understand and guide learning must therefore have the capacity to produce results which capture this complexity, while also being able to recognise and account for the political nature of all forms of educational practice.

Reflecting the core values of social work and critical social theory, the outcomes of the research need to take a form with both instrumental and emancipatory value. Knowledge produced through the project should be capable of being applied in future educational practice, but should also, at least potentially, make a contribution towards individual and social change.

While a number of research methodologies and theoretical frameworks may have met these criteria, the methodology chosen for the project can best be described as qualitative practitioner action research, framed by the paradigm of critical theory. This description is ‘unpacked’ and discussed in the body of this chapter. The body of this chapter therefore begins by discussing critical theory as the overarching theoretical paradigm used to frame the methodology of the research project. The congruence between such a critical theory approach and the research topic itself is highlighted.

The second section of the chapter then discusses action research as a specific methodology for framing the research process. In particular, that form of action research known as practitioner research is presented as an appropriate

methodology, congruent with the topic and aims of the project, as well as with the general tenets of both critical theory and action research.

The specific methods used in the project are then described in the third section, including sampling, recruitment of participants, the interviewing process, and data analysis and management. A number of ethical issues which were anticipated or which arose during the research are then discussed. The challenges and limitations of the chosen methodology are considered in section four. The chapter concludes by highlighting the ways in which the chosen methodology and methods dovetailed with the research topic and the change agenda inherent in both transformative learning and critical approaches to social work education.

### **5.1 A note on the qualitative-quantitative question**

While the qualitative-quantitative debate may have lost intensity over the last three decades, discussion over the value and validity of these different approaches persists. Indeed, Denscombe (2014) notes that many would still argue that these are distinct or even incompatible approaches to social research. Neuman (2014), however, argues that the distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches to social research is often overstated and frequently presented as a rigid dichotomy. Other authors have also signalled the resolution of the qualitative/quantitative debate, indicated by an increased recognition of the need for a variety of methodological approaches and the importance of adopting a pluralist approach to research design (Maggetti, Gilardi & Radaelli, 2013).

There are two primary reasons that underpin the choice of a qualitative approach for this project. First, given that this project is focused on the complex interactions of educational practice, personal worldview and socio-political context, and that the primary interest is in exploring students' experience of these dynamics, a qualitative approach offers significant potential for capturing an authentic sense of the richness and complexity of this experience. Secondly,

but equally importantly, the qualitative approach employed here increases the potential for this project to create opportunities for the participants (both researcher and students) to engage in critical reflection on their experiences, the meaning that has been constructed from these experiences, and the assumptions and presuppositions that underpin these meanings. In doing so, the qualitative approach, through its emphasis on dialogue, helps to create conditions whereby the research process itself can become a catalyst for deeper, more critically aware understanding and, potentially, for transformative learning. It is argued that the creation of this potential would be much harder to achieve using quantitative methods.

## **5.2 Critical theory as the overarching theoretical framework**

Critical theory, and the work of Habermas in particular, bears a significant relationship to transformative learning but they are also relevant in the context of selecting and developing a research framework. In this section of the chapter, the value of this paradigm as a research framework is considered. The relationship between a critical theory research framework and the research topic itself is then discussed, establishing the suitability of this paradigm as the overarching theoretical framework for the research.

In identifying the key interests and concerns of the critical theorists, it is important to note that critical theory does not represent a unified or homogenous body of thought (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008). A range of theoretical concerns and approaches sit under the critical theory label, including, but not limited to, Marxism, psychoanalytic criticism, semiotics, narratology, postmodernism, feminism, and gender and queer theory. In part because of this array of philosophical approaches, “critical theory provides a multi-faceted and wide-ranging critique of many of the most important issues and problems that one might encounter in the contemporary world” (Malpas & Wake, 2006, p. xi). The central features of critical theory have been outlined in the previous chapter. These then allow a consideration of critical theory as a research framework.

### **5.2.1 Critical theory as a research framework**

As is clear from previous discussion, one of the central concerns of the critical paradigm is an analysis of the nature of knowledge and the role it plays in structuring social relations. It is, therefore, not surprising that critical theory has been explored as an approach to research, where the generation of knowledge and the process of sense-making are primary concerns (see, for example, D'Cruz & Jones, 2004; Rasmussen, 2015; Shear, 2016). What distinguishes this approach from other, particularly positivist and interpretivist, approaches is the manner in which the fundamental assumptions of the paradigm are reflected in its approach to knowledge generation through research. Research that is informed by critical theory or which adopts critical theory as a theoretical lens is always directly concerned with the issue of praxis. As Kincheloe & McLaren (2008) note:

*Whereas traditional researchers see their task as the description, interpretation or reanimation of a slice of reality, critical researchers often regard their work as a first step toward forms of political action that can redress the injustices found in the field site or constructed in the very act of research itself.* (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008, p. 406)

Habermas' work on epistemology (e.g., 1971) argues that knowledge serves specific interests and therefore can never claim political neutrality. The critical theorists critiqued the positivist stance, in part, for the claims it made to such an objective and value-neutral body of knowledge. At the same time, interpretivist approaches, while often recognising the values, position and influence of the researcher, were criticised as seeking simply to understand the world. Through the concept of praxis, critical theory argues for such an understanding to be explicitly and irrevocably linked to action for change. Critical theory, in this way, can be thought of as constituting an alternative research paradigm, alongside a number of related approaches, such as feminism and postmodernism (D'Cruz & Jones, 2004; Schensul, 2012). Research informed by critical theory is concerned with the nature of knowledge and, in particular, the role that ideology and relations of power play in shaping what we know and how we come to know it. Furthermore, it seeks not simply to understand these dynamics as they manifest

in particular social relationships but also to offer critique in a way that holds at least the potential to create change of an emancipatory nature.

While some particular research methodologies, for example participant action research (PAR) and collaborative inquiry, are more closely associated with critical theory, critical theorists reject a reliance on a single methodological approach (Mill, Allen & Morrow, 2001; Morris, 2006). In this sense, congruence with the assumptions underpinning critical theory is generally held to be more important than the details of a specific research method. Critical theorists do not claim or pretend a position of ideological or value neutrality. Rather there is recognition of the ideological place and role of the researcher in the research process and an obligation to locate the researcher in an open and explicit manner (D'Cruz & Jones, 2004; Morris, 2006). There is also a clear purpose for the research project, extending beyond simply producing explanation and promoting understanding. This purpose encompasses an imperative to produce change in those dynamics that have been the subject of research and critique.

Kincheloe & MacLaren (2008) define a criticalist (researcher or theorist) as someone who uses their work as a form of social and/or cultural criticism and who accepts a key set of assumptions. These assumptions go some way to identifying the key themes of critical theory, particularly as they apply in research. They include the assumptions that:

- *All thought is mediated by social and historical power relations*
- *Facts cannot be isolated from values and ideology*
- *Language is central to the creation of subjectivity*
- *The existence of privileged groups in society and that the reproduction of oppression through the acceptance by subordinate groups of their position*
- *Oppression is multi-faceted*
- *Mainstream research practices often serve to reproduce systems of oppression* (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008, p. 404-405).

As Morris (2006) notes:

*...a critical theory researcher brings an ideological commitment to the research arena along with a social action agenda. Research questions and problem statements are not neutral; they are statements and reflections offering polemics on power relationships and remedies addressing inequalities inherent in those relationships.* (Morris, 2006, p. 135)

### **5.2.2 Congruence between critical theory and the research topic/aims**

The ways in which the tenets of critical theory inform an approach to research also serves to highlight the congruence between a critical theory framework and the specific nature of this research project. As previously noted, transformative learning theories are indebted to the insights of critical theory and to the work of Habermas in particular. Both critical theory and transformative learning emphasise the need for learning and knowledge to be clearly linked, through praxis, to change. In making this argument, they both consider the potential for critical reflection and rational discourse to contribute to ideology critique, revealing the operation of hegemonic domination and creating the potential for liberation and emancipation from distorting ideology. These themes of a critical approach with an action and change orientation are further echoed in the principles of social work as a profession, at least in its more progressive or structural forms (for example, Allan, Briskman & Pease, 2009; Mullaly, 2007; Pease, Goldingay, Hosken & Nipperess, 2016) as well as the practices of social work education.

In this project, the experiences of social work students are explored, with a focus on the degree to which their worldview, seen as the result of processes of meaning construction (or, in the language of transformative learning, the construction of their meaning perspectives) and, therefore, likely to include distortions as a result of hegemonic processes, may or may not have been challenged and changed as a result of their experience of social work education. The research project takes a political position in arguing that transformative change is desirable in that it is likely to lead to what Mezirow (2003, p.58) described as, “more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally

able” frames of reference that, in themselves, increase the potential for individuals to become involved in action that promotes broader, progressive social change (Mezirow, 2003). It is this purposive aspect of critical theory and transformative approaches to adult learning that led this research project to also explore, based on the experiences of research participants, the ways in which transformative learning experiences might be further promoted and facilitated in social work education.

In exploring the theoretical and practical connections between transformative learning and social work education, where an emphasis is often placed on learning both as a form of ideological critique and as involving action for change, this project therefore sits comfortably within a critical theory framework. However, as noted above, it can be argued that critical theory does not, in itself, constitute a research method and that there are a number of different approaches to conducting research that may also fit comfortably within this paradigm. In seeking to adopt a methodology that further emphasises the points of congruence between the research aims and methods, this project therefore looks to a more specific expression of research methodology, namely practitioner action research.

### **5.3 Practitioner action research**

Taking critical theory as the overarching theoretical framework for this project, the challenge was then to find a further compatible methodology. Action research presented as a possibility because of the apparent fit between the principles that underpin this approach and those inherent in critical theory and transformative learning. While articulating a particular approach to research, action research as a methodology also encompasses a wide range of actual practices, suggesting a flexibility that was both useful and desirable.

### **5.3.1 Action Research**

There are many different definitions of action research and varied descriptions of what such research might entail (Bradbury, 2015a). Banks (2016) notes that action research includes a broad range of approaches, with greater emphasis on either the action or research aspects of the project, but that this approach generally focuses on “using research to empower people and bring about social change” (p. 20). Reason & Bradbury (2008) state that:

*... action research is a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.* (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 4)

Stringer (2014) says that action research is “a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives” (p. 1). The history and origins of action research have been described by many authors (see, for example, Bradbury, 2015b; Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Lawson, 2015).

McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead (2003) set out what they see as the differentiating characteristics of action research. These include:

- *It is practitioner based*
- *It focuses on learning*
- *It embodies good professional practice*
- *It can lead to personal and social improvement*
- *It is responsive to social situations*
- *It demands high order questioning*
- *It is intentionally political*
- *The focus is on change, and the self is the locus of change*
- *Practitioners accept responsibility for their own actions*

- *It emphasises the values base of practice.*
- (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 2003, p. 12-16)

Coghlan & Brannick (2005, p. 5) further clarify the distinguishing features of action research by contrasting the philosophical foundations of this approach with those of positivism and hermeneutic/postmodern research paradigms (see Table 4.1).

<b>Philosophical foundations</b>	<b>Positivism</b>	<b>Hermeneutic and postmodernism</b>	<b>Critical realism and action research</b>
Ontology	Objectivist	Subjectivist	Objectivist
Epistemology	Objectivist	Subjectivist	Subjectivist
Theory	Generalizable	Particular	Particular
Reflexivity	Methodological	Hyper	Epistemic
Role of researcher	Distanced from data	Close to data	Close to data

Table 4.1 Research paradigms and action research (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005, p. 5)

Action research has also been distinguished from other research approaches by the process of inquiry that is advocated in this model. Again, various accounts of this process exist, generally distinguished by the degree of collaboration, participation and 'looping', or reflexivity, involved (Dominelli, 2016; Stringer, 2014). Berg (2007), for example, describes the basic action research routine as involving four stages; identifying the research question, gathering the information to answer the question, analysing and interpreting the information, and sharing the results with participants. Similarly, Coghlan & Brannick (2005) describe the action research cycle as consisting of the stages of diagnosing, planning action, taking action and evaluating action. While Berg's description suggests a single loop process, Coghlan & Brannick (2005) argue that an action research process will normally consist of multiple action research cycles.

Action research is, in many respects, antithetical to positivist approaches to research as a result of its commitment to produce change in that which is being researched, rather than simply describing the status quo (Stringer, 2014; Thorley, Marjoribanks & Kranz, 2014). This also highlights an important relationship to critical theory, which, as discussed above, is similarly committed to change (Kemmis, 2009; Shear, 2016). Action research, coupled with the critical theory paradigm, therefore argues for the incorporation of action and change into the research aims, and importantly, from a critical theory perspective, for change which is normative, i.e. directed towards a particular set of values and ideological positions.

Action research has been applied in a wide range of social settings and has developed in a number of different directions, each emphasising particular aspects or dimensions of the approach (see, for example, Bradbury, 2015b; Greenwood & Levin, 2008; Lawson, Caringi, Pyles, Jurkoski, & Bozlak, 2015; Van Katwky & Ashcroft, 2016). In searching for a method that would most closely align with the aims and nature of this research project, the fact that my focus was on dimensions of my own professional practice as well as the experiences of students with whom I work suggested a specific direction.

### **5.3.2 Practitioner action research**

Practitioner research has a significant history in the field of education, and an increasing level of importance in the areas of health and social care, including within social work itself (e.g., Barrett & Roberts, 2010; Campbell, 2004; Campbell, 2013; Fuentes, 2013; Goodfellow, 2005; Lapan, 2012; Lunt & Shaw, 2016; Roberts, 2008; Russo, 2015). Babione (2015, p. 5) points in particular to the way in which such practitioner research has emerged as important in educational settings, now constituting a discernable ‘teacher inquiry movement’. As with action research, a range of varying definitions, and approaches with different emphases, exist in the area of practitioner research, but the definition provided by Shaw (2005) captures the general focus of this methodology as “...evaluation, research, development or more general inquiry that is small-scale, local, grounded, and carried out by professionals who directly deliver those self-

same services “ (p.1232). McLaughlin (2012) locates practitioner research in the social work context, noting that:

*A practitioner researcher is a social worker that, either in their spare time or as part of their current employment, undertakes research that is small scale and is carried out by the professionals who deliver these self-same services. This research is likely to have local relevance and focus on resolving a ‘practice puzzle’ and usually comes with a commitment from the practitioner researcher to change and improve practice. (McLaughlin, 2012, p. 126)*

Fox, Martin & Green (2007) note that there are no unique methods or techniques attached to practitioner research and that it is no different from other forms of research in that its aim is about generating new knowledge. They argue, however, that “practitioner researchers *are* different as a result of their unique position in the research process” (p. 1). Practitioner researchers may claim both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ status in their research, given that they will be directly involved in the delivery of services under consideration (insider) but may also be exploring the experiences of the users of those services (outsider) (Campbell, 2013). While some commentators may argue that the term practitioner research simply means research undertaken by practitioners, with no further implication for particular approaches, strategies or methods, others see practitioner research as clearly a form or variation of action research. Herr & Anderson (2005) note, for example, that the term practitioner research:

*... implies that insiders to the setting are the researchers, whereas in other traditions of action research, the researcher is an outsider who collaborates to varying degrees with insider practitioners or community members. (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 3)*

In particular, practitioner researchers advocate the use of practitioner research as an appropriate methodology in those situations where professionals seek to examine and learn from their own practice (see, for example, Campbell, 2013;

Keeping, 2008; Lunt & Shaw, 2016; Roberts, 2008). They argue that coupling the emphases of action research and practitioner research approaches creates meaningful opportunities for informed and committed action, giving rise to both new knowledge and improved practice. Importantly, entering into practitioner research, particularly in the case of experienced practitioners, requires such practitioners to “re-experience ‘not knowing’” (Menter, et al., 2011, p. 26), a condition useful for critical reflection and learning.

Shaw (2005), in reviewing the use of practitioner research in social work, suggests that such research is likely to include some, if not all, of the following:

- *Direct data collection and management, or reflection on existing data.*
- *Professionals setting its aims and outcomes.*
- *Having intended practical benefits for professionals, service organisations and/or service users.*
- *Practitioners conducting a substantial proportion of the inquiry. It is in this sense ‘insider’ research.*
- *Focusing on the professionals’ own practice and/or that of their immediate peers.*
- *Being small-scale and short-term.*
- *Usually self-contained, and not part of a larger research programme*
- *Data collection and management typically carried out as a lone activity.* (Shaw, 2005, p. 1235-1236)

Importantly, Shaw argues that, while this picture goes some way to describing the features of practitioner research in social work, if such research is conceptualised as having *only* the above characteristics, then it risks institutional capture, and may become an individualised and conservative practice. He suggests that developing a critical approach to practitioner research may involve, amongst other things, more collaborative and participative approaches, especially those that include a focus on the direct participation of service users (Shaw, 2005).

Ideally, research projects adopting a practitioner action approach would therefore be developed as collaborative, participatory processes with full involvement of participants/service users in all stages of the project. Such a full-blown, collaborative model has not been used in this project, in part for the reasons described in the thesis introduction. However, the project attempts to militate against such individualism through the use of a reflective, dialogical approach to interviewing and the sharing of transcripts with participants, inviting further reflection and input. While this does not constitute a full-blown collaborative research model, it does go some way towards ensuring a more participative and critical approach to practitioner research, and aligns the project more closely with both action research and critical theory perspectives.

#### **5.3.4 Congruence between practitioner action research and the research topic/aims**

Drawing on the features of action research and practitioner research, practitioner action research as used in this study can be conceptualised as reflectively oriented inquiry by a practitioner, in collaboration with service users/students, into aspects of their own practice and experience. Practitioner action research within a critical theory paradigm aims to produce knowledge that can be applied to solve problems or improve practice in ways that reflect a commitment to progressive, critical ideas.

While the focus in this study is on the experience of social work students, the context of that experience and the particular dimension under consideration relates directly to my own practice as a social work educator, and that of my colleagues and peers. While many examples of practitioner research will focus on specific, clearly delineated aspects of an individual's practice, in this project the focus is somewhat broader, looking at students' experience of the practice of social work education in a particular organisational setting, within which the researcher is one of a number of individual practitioners. A practitioner focus is therefore appropriate for this study.

While not claiming to engender a collaborative or fully participative model of action research, this project emphasises the role of the research participants as collaborators in the research process. Such an approach to the roles of researcher and participants is also congruent with the action research approach.

The knowledge produced through this inquiry is intended to be both explanatory, practical and change-oriented. The practitioner action research methodology creates the potential for developing a fuller understanding of the ways in which students experience social work education and, in particular, the impact of such education on challenging and transforming existing, hegemonically influenced, frames of reference. At the same time, and importantly, the project will seek to address a specific 'problem', by producing knowledge resulting in action. In this instance such action relates to changing teaching practices to better facilitate transformative learning. This action orientation to research outcomes, and specifically the targeting of the research topic as the site for change, is compatible with a practitioner action research approach.

The changes sought as a result of this research are normative in that they reflect the values of the researcher and those that have been identified as underpinning critical theory, emancipatory transformative learning and critical social work. In many respects these could accurately be described as based around ideas of ideology critique, social justice and emancipation.

#### **5.4 Research methods**

This section of the chapter moves from these conceptual and theoretical considerations to issues of a more practical nature. The actual methods utilised in conducting the research project are detailed here. Discussion includes the ways in which participants were recruited and research sample generated, the interview process, data analysis and management and a discussion of the ethical issues that pertained to the study.

In addition to the development of an extensive review of literature, this research involved conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with a cohort of final year social work students at James Cook University. The goal of this method was to establish a dialogue with students in which we could collaboratively explore dimensions of their learning while they were students in the social work programme. In particular I was interested in hearing students speak about learning experiences that significantly changed, or contributed to changing, their personal worldviews, and the actions that may have ensued from such change.

#### **5.4.1 Recruitment and sampling**

Sampling is one of the first issues that a qualitative researcher must resolve, answering the simple question of who will provide the information being sought (Denscombe, 2014; Henry, 2009; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Bearing in mind the critique of objective, positivist research approaches, the goal of sampling in this project was to generate a group of participants who were in the best position to discuss the research questions and whose experiences were likely to relate clearly to the goals of the project. I was in agreement, therefore ,with Morris (2006), who argues that in post-positivist research approaches, "... the most appropriate approach to sampling is not random sampling but 'purposive' sampling, in which the researcher looks for study participants who will give the most complete data about the study focus" (p.91). Purposive sampling has been identified as an appropriate and common approach to sampling in practitioner action research (Russo, 2015).

While the potential population of final year social work students at JCU all possessed specialised knowledge of the issues under consideration, engaging in the project involved responding to an invitation to participate in the research. This means that the final sample represented those who were available and willing to engage as participants. A minimum target of 25 participants was established, reflecting a proportion of the population likely to approach theoretical saturation and a number that was manageable in light of the practical limitations of time and energy, given the labour-intensive nature of qualitative research (Denscombe, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Neuman, 2014).

The sample of participants was drawn from a population consisting of all students who had completed, or were enrolled in, the final year of their social work degree at James Cook University in 2008. Administratively, it is surprisingly difficult to actually identify those students who have reached the very end of their degree programmes. For the purposes of this project, students enrolled in their final placement subject and who did not have outstanding undergraduate subjects to complete were identified as the research population. This represented a total of 75 students. The population included both on-campus and distance education cohorts, across the Townsville, Cairns and Mackay campuses.

In accordance with the process approved by the university ethics committee, the contact details of these students were obtained through university administration records, and all members of the population were approached via email and/or post, with information about the research project and an invitation to participate. This approach was made through administrative officers in the School of Arts and Social Sciences, acting as an independent party not connected to the research. The material sent to potential participants included an information sheet detailing the nature of the research project (Appendix 1) and a copy of the informed consent form, which students would be required to sign should they agree to participate (Appendix 2).

The initial approach generated a positive response from 18 students. As this number was less than the desired sample size a second invitation to participate, framed as a reminder of the initial approach, was sent out to students via School administrative staff. This second round of invitations generated a further 10 positive responses, exceeding the target sample target of 25 participants. All positive responses were accepted into the research project. Three students subsequently withdrew from participation due to changes in personal circumstances prior to the commencement of interviews.

#### **5.4.2 Participants**

The gender of participants was overwhelmingly female with only 1 male respondent. This constitutes 4% of the total sample, compared with a male presence of 10% of students in the 2012 course data for social work at JCU. Only one participant identified as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. This 4% contrasts with the 5% Indigenous participation rate in 2012 data. There was a wide distribution of ages:

Age (yrs.)	20-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65
	24% (n=6)	28% (n=7)	16% (n=4)	20% (n=5)	12% (n=3)

72% of participants (18) were completing a Bachelor of Social Work degree and the remainder (28%, 7) were completing the Graduate Bachelor of Social Work, meaning that they already possessed an undergraduate university qualification. Of the participants, 44% (11) had studied as fully internal students, 24% (6) as fully external students and 32% (8) identified that they had studied a mixture of units internally and externally.

#### **5.4.3 Interviewing**

The data collection method for the research was the use of semi-structured interviews. Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti & Mckinney (2012) note “that interviewing, like communication in general, is as much collaboratively constructive of the meanings of experience as it is an efficient means of gathering information” (p. 3). The use of a flexible, in-depth interview method reflected a number of important assumptions and values embedded in the project and discussed above and in earlier chapters. These include the importance of a reflexive, dialogical approach and a commitment to allowing the participants’ own voices and experiences to be clearly heard in the research. Semi-structured depth interviews are seen as an effective mechanism for expressing these goals (Merriam, 2009). As noted by Denscombe (2014), in semi-structured interviewing:

*... the interviewer is prepared to be flexible in terms of the order in which the topics are considered, and, perhaps more significantly, to let the interviewee develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised by the researcher. The answers are open-ended, and there is more emphasis on the interviewee elaborating points of interest.* (Denscombe, 2014 p. 186)

Participants were each interviewed once, at a time and location convenient to them and which had been negotiated with the researcher. Participants were engaged in either face-to-face interviews or, where necessary, interviewed over the telephone. Generally speaking, telephone interviews were used in the case of distance education students who were located outside of Mackay, Cairns or Townsville. Due to the timing of the interviews and the nature of a regional university, some internal students were also interviewed by phone as they had left Townsville and returned to their home towns elsewhere. Despite concerns that telephone interviews may be shorter and less satisfactory than face-to-face encounters (for example, Lavrakas, 2009) no discernible difference in quality or average length of interview was noted in this study, indicating that the use of phone interviews was effective and appropriate (Ruane, 2015). Prior to the interview, participants were again provided with an information sheet explaining the nature of the project and were asked to sign an informed consent form. For telephone interviews, participants gave verbal consent, which was audio-recorded. The interview was based on a semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix 3) which suggested initial areas for exploration but which also allowed sufficient flexibility to respond to other relevant topics as they arose (Denscombe, 2014; Menter, Elliot, Hulme, Lewin & Lowden, 2011; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This interview schedule was provided to participants ahead of time, alerting them to the areas to be discussed and allowing them time to consider the topics and their responses.

The interview was audiotaped, as per the informed consent, and subsequently transcribed. Interviews generally took between 60 and 90 minutes each. A paid assistant who had signed a confidentiality agreement transcribed the recordings. This material then became the basis for the process of data analysis. Copies of

these transcripts were annotated by the researcher, highlighting interesting issues and raising questions about information within them. These annotated transcripts were then returned to the participants with an invitation that they read them and note any questions, amendments, clarifications or areas of particular interest that emerged. Six students replied to the researcher after receiving the annotated transcripts. Two students suggested minor amendments for clarification, and these amendments have been integrated into the data, while the remaining four students simply thanked the researcher for providing the transcripts.

#### **5.4.4 Data analysis**

The fundamental challenge of qualitative data analysis is to transform raw data into meaningful findings (Merriam, 2009). Patton (2002) suggests that there are no strict formulas or recipes that prescribe the way to perform this transformation, but rather a number of guides that offer suggestions of how to approach the task. It is possible, however, to describe the essential nature of this process:

*The challenge of qualitative analysis lies in making sense of massive amounts of data. This involves reducing the volume of raw information, sifting trivia from significance, identifying significant patterns and constructing a frame-work for communicating the essence of what the data reveal. (Patton, 2002, p.276)*

In this project, data analysis has taken the form of a thematic analysis of interview transcripts (Creswell, 2007; Denscombe, 2014; Merriam, 2009). This thematic analysis has reflected both an inductive and deductive orientation, that is, allowing themes to emerge from the data (inductive) and exploring the data in a more focused manner using a set of sensitizing concepts drawn from existing theory (deductive).

In the inductive process, the transcripts were read and re-read a number of times, noting issues, experiences and themes that emerged from the data. This

examination allowed data to be coded, and codes were used to identify the occurrence of significant themes in and across individual transcripts (Schensul, 2012; Stringer, 2014). The coding process itself consisted of three stages or passes through the data of increasing complexity and specificity, involving open, axial and selective coding (Bryman, 2008; Neuman, 2014). These codes and themes were then used as sorting and collecting devices, allowing a process of comparison and connection to be developed. In many respects this process reflects the central features of a grounded theory approach to data analysis (Bryman, 2008; Denscombe, 2014).

The deductive dimension of the analysis involved using sensitizing concepts to organise and explore the data, looking for instances in the interviews that reflected or related to these concepts. This approach can be considered a form of analytic comparison where data is examined to identify agreement or difference from the analytic standard (Neuman, 2014). Aneshensel (2013) refers to this process as theory-based analysis:

*A social science theory is a coherent set of general principles connected to each other by logical arguments that proposes an explanation for a phenomenon. In other words, it is a system of ideas that provides a plausible and rational description of cause-and-effect type relationships among a set constructs. Theory-based data analysis tests this explanation. Based on the results of this analysis, the theory is supported or refuted, and this information is used to refine, reformulate, or reject the theory. (Aneshensel, 2013, p. 3)*

In this project the primary sensitizing concept was the theory of transformative learning as developed by Mezirow (1990, 2000, 2003). Participant accounts were scrutinized to identify points at which their descriptions of learning were congruent with, or differed from, Mezirow's articulation of a transformative learning experience. Mezirow's description of the phases attached to transformative learning was used to interrogate the data as were the concepts of critical reflection, dialogical relationships, experiential learning and disorienting

dilemmas, all key dimensions of Mezirow's theory. This deductive process was a key part of the analysis given that the research aimed to make an assessment of the utility of transformative learning theory for explaining students' experiences and guiding teaching practice.

## 5.5 Ethical issues

Ethical considerations are clearly an important part of all social science research and care must be taken to ensure that research is conducted with integrity and in an ethical manner (Israel, 2015; Nichols-Casebolt, 2012). Details of this research project and methodology were submitted to the James Cook University ethics committee for consideration and approval. Unconditional approval was granted on the basis of the methodology as described.

Practitioner research raises the importance of distinguishing between the professional practice ethics that may apply to particular practitioners, such as social workers, and research ethics (Fox, Martin & Green, 2007). In examining the latter, a basic set of principles for ethical involvement, with which this project has complied, can be identified:

*...the research participant:*

- *Is well-informed about the study in language they can understand*
- *Is not coerced either directly or indirectly into taking part*
- *Gives their consent voluntarily*
- *Understands that they are free to withdraw from the study at any time*
- *Is given assurance that their participation will not affect their care,*  
*(Fox, et al., 2007, p. 104)*

The major ethical consideration involved in the project relates to this final principle and in particular to the relationship between researcher and participants, where these players also occupied the roles of lecturer and student within the Department of Social Work and Human Services at JCU. There is a

clear power imbalance between staff and students in universities, both actual and perceived, which needed to be addressed in this project. Recognition of this issue of power was particularly important given the use of critical theory as a theoretical framework for the project. The researcher/lecturer in the project subsequently took a number of steps to address this issue.

To a significant degree, this issue was addressed through administrative arrangements that served to lessen the likelihood that the researcher would be in a direct teaching role in relation to the participants during the course of 2008, or beyond. The researcher was on Special Studies leave in the first half of 2008, and therefore did not teach or grade assessment in any subjects, in which participants may have been enrolled. The researcher did not teach in any final year subjects in the second half of the year but was required to act as liaison person for four students on Field Education placement during this period. These students were excluded from possible participation in the research project.

For those participants completing their final year studies in 2008, the researcher was no longer involved in any teaching or assessment relating to these students. This means that the researcher/lecturer was not directly involved in the teaching and/or assessment of any students involved in the research project during the life of the project, and was therefore not in a position to have a direct influence on evaluations or grades for subjects in which the participants were enrolled. This situation was made clear to potential participants through the information sheet provided during recruitment. While these steps certainly guarded against the actual exercise of power in the relationship, there is a strong possibility that some students opted not to participate in the project due to the perception of a possible power issue.

Fook (2002b) notes that, in many instances of social work research, and practitioner research in particular, there is an ethical issue attached to the idea of "intruding on the experiences of those who often have least to gain directly from the research, namely service users" (p. 86). In the case of this project, participants, i.e., students, can be thought of as the service users of social work

education. It therefore becomes important to consider the degree to which this research may be experienced as an intrusion or, conversely, as an opportunity to access a direct benefit. While voluntary informed consent goes someway to addressing the question of intrusion, it is equally important in considering this ethical issue to emphasise that there may have been direct benefits for students involved in the project.

Earlier chapters of this thesis emphasised the centrality of critical reflection as an integral component of both transformative learning and social work education. It was also recognised as an essential attribute of effective social work practice. Participation in this project afforded students/participants the opportunity to reflect on their experience of social work education and, in particular, on the ways in which their worldviews may or may not have changed during this experience. Such critical self-reflection, including critical self-reflection on assumptions, may itself, for some students at least, have constituted the creation of a potentially transformative learning experience. At the very least, it provided students with the opportunity to engage in a process, i.e., critical reflection, which is seen as essential for effective social work practice. In this sense participation in the research may have provided an opportunity to further develop a valued and valuable practice skill.

Other ethical considerations in this project included those that apply to most forms of research and which are commonly the focus of university ethics committees. These include issues of anonymity and confidentiality. In this project, all names and any other identifying information of research participants and any other person mentioned in the interviews was removed from transcripts and excluded from the thesis and any other publications, presentations or other outputs that resulted or may result from this research project. Pseudonyms have been used for the participants in this thesis. A person other than the researcher transcribed audiotapes of interviews, and that person was required to sign a confidentiality agreement prohibiting them from disclosing the identity or any identifying information relating to participants.

Raw data from this study have been stored in a locked box/cupboard in the Department of Social Work and Human Services of James Cook University. Any data that is stored on computer/CD's has been de-identified. This data will be retained for at least five years as per current university policy.

## **5.6 Research Integrity**

Reliability and validity are core concerns in all research activities. Reliability is generally understood as a measure of dependability or consistency and validity as a measure of truthfulness or trustworthiness (Neuman, 2014). Researchers have been at pains to point out that the ways these constructs are measured and even defined will vary greatly between quantitative and qualitative approaches:

*In qualitative studies, we consider a range of data sources and employ multiple measurement methods. We do not become locked in to the quantitative-positivist ideas of replication, equivalence and subpopulation reliability. We accept that different researchers or researchers who use alternative measures may find distinctive results. (Neuman, 2014, p. 218)*

The question of the validity or trustworthiness of qualitative research has been a topic for discussion and debate within research circles for decades. While the arguments about the value and place of qualitative research have been largely put to rest (see above), the evidence-based model, which has gained primacy in many social science settings in recent years, has reintroduced questions concerning the standards of quality by which qualitative research may be judged (Denzin, 2011). Denscomb (2014, p. 297) notes that many “qualitative researchers have adopted a more pragmatic or ‘subtle’ realist perspective” in ensuring research integrity. In reviewing this situation Denzin calls for the articulation and enactment of a “pathway of resistance” (2011, p. 645) that recognises that qualitative research is a diverse field and that criteria of quality therefore need to be fit-for-purpose rather than narrowly prescribed according to quantitative criteria. In many respects this is a revisiting of the arguments of

the 1980s from which emerged a range of ways to consider issues of trustworthiness in qualitative research.

Creswell (2007) reviews the range of approaches that have been explored in attempting to define and describe validity and reliability in qualitative research. Significantly, Creswell (2007) argues simply producing terms that describe these aspects is not sufficient and that greater weight should actually be placed on developing validation strategies that apply through all stages of the research process. These strategies might include such things as prolonged engagement and observation; triangulation; peer review; member checking and clarifying researcher bias. Lincoln & Guba's (1985) observations regarding the soundness or trustworthiness of qualitative research remain relevant and are often referred to (for example, Stringer, 2014). While clearly relating to the standards for assessing trustworthiness in quantitative research (for example, through measures of internal and external validity) they argued that qualitative research requires a set of assessment standards that better reflect the nature of this form of inquiry. The constructs suggested by Lincoln & Guba (1985) are: credibility; transferability; dependability; and confirmability. Similar constructs have subsequently been suggested by other qualitative researchers (see, for example, Winston, 2012).

It is important to note that the constructs of validity and reliability, and indeed the notion of 'truth' also need to be located within their broader socio-political context. The critical theory tradition of ideology critique has led some researchers using this approach to search for more effective ways of understanding what is meant by claims to validity or truthfulness in critical research. Kincheloe & McLaren (2008) note that, "critical research traditions have arrived at the point where they recognise that claims to truth are always discursively situated and implicated in relations of power" (p. 434).

In this study a number of strategies have been employed to address issues of validity and reliability. There has been an explicit, detailed and transparent account of the design and focus of the research. This aids in ensuring that the

subject of the research has been accurately identified and described, a key issue in determining credibility of the project. While no claims of generalisability are made in this project, the research meets the standard of transferability in that the findings will be useful to other social work educators with interests or concerns relating to transformative learning and emancipatory pedagogies, and to social work students with similar interests.

Member checking has been used through the provision of interview transcripts to participants and the provision of opportunities to comment upon, amend or extend those transcripts. This strategy assists in ensuring dependability of the data and analysis. Researcher bias has been addressed through recognising the inevitable impact of the researcher's own position and rejecting any claims to a totally objective or value-neutral stance. The inclusion of a 'researcher positioning statement' helps to bring the researcher's bias into the process in an explicit and transparent manner. The researcher has been involved in a prolonged engagement with the research topic, and the project has been conducted within a clearly scholarly context.

## **5.7 Limitations and challenges**

While the methodology and methods described here have been chosen because of their congruence with the overarching theoretical framework and their potential to yield significant and meaningful results they also bring with them a set of limitations and challenges.

Within the research design described here there is an important challenge in terms of recognising and accounting for difference, particularly in relation to gender and race. A deductive analysis of interviews risks obscuring the ways in which these dynamics may shape the experience of learning, particularly if issues of difference are not central to the sensitising concepts used in that analysis. The incorporation of inductive analyses, attempting to let meaning emerge from the data, may help to address this challenge. There is certainly

scope for further research that looks specifically at the nexus of gender and transformative learning and at Indigenous experiences of transformation.

The project utilises a very limited form of collaboration as part of its design. Ideally, practitioner action research of this kind would entail multiple cycles of interaction and collaboration to produce a more truly participative form of research. One of the benefits of such an approach would be to increase the potential for deeply critical reflection on the part of all participants. Practical constraints have meant that such a full-blown collaborative model was not possible for this study. Efforts have been made, as described above, to introduce some elements of collaboration, and an emphasis was placed on the dialogical nature of the research interviews. Nonetheless, this is recognised as a limitation of this project methodology.

Despite efforts to ensure that the power differential between researcher and participant was recognised and made explicit, and attempts to minimise the potential for that relationship to impact on the process, the possibility still remains that some participants chose to engage, or not engage, in the research because of the nature of the lecturer-student relationship. There may have been, on the part of students either a perceived benefit or cost involved in participation, even where no actual benefit or cost existed.

Looking at the project more broadly, adopting an explicitly critical and emancipatory theoretical paradigm may be seen by some as a challenge or limitation. This approach to action research has been critiqued by postmodernists as representing a set of out-dated and unhelpful assumptions about the world, bound to the problematic project of the Enlightenment. Brown & Jones (2001), for example, argue that such modernist, emancipatory approaches risk silencing other voices and eradicating difference. They propose instead searching for another language, “a language of possibilities rather than certainties, where the task of bestowing meanings is left to ‘anyone’ rather than the authorial ‘one’” (Brown & Jones, 2001, p. 28). I believe that most fruitful approaches may be represented by those seeking to retain the modernist and

emancipatory characteristics of practitioner research, while benefiting from the insights of critical or reconstructive postmodernism. This is the approach that has underpinned this project.

## 5.8 Conclusion

In drawing on McLeod's definition of practitioner research as "... research carried out by practitioners for the purpose of advancing their own practice" (1999 as cited in Shaw, 2005, p. 1232), Shaw alludes to the 'instrumental' aspects of this approach. Knowledge generated through research bears a direct, practical relationship to the future practice of the researcher. In this sense, such an instrumental purpose is part of this project, but the adoption of a critical theory framework, coupled with the researcher's own value position, extends this purpose beyond the instrumental to include what Habermas referred to as the communicative and emancipatory cognitive interests (1972). This means that, while information generated from the research will have a direct and practical impact on the researcher's practice as a social work educator, that impact, mediated through the lens of critical theory, is of a particular kind and oriented towards particular outcomes.

Both critical theory and transformative learning argue for change processes that reveal the operation of distorting and dominating ideology, and help individuals and societies move towards less oppressive, emancipatory perspectives and practices. Combining a critical theory framework with a practitioner action research methodology commits the researcher to an inquiry that aims to work with other stakeholders (in this instance social work students) to generate knowledge which can be used to produce changes in practice (in this case, the practice of social work education), where those changes are directed towards increasing the potential for generating individual and social change as outcomes of learning. The next chapter presents the findings from the research process.

## **Chapter 6. Findings**

This chapter presents the findings from the data collected for this project. To recap, 25 final year social work students participated in semi-structured interviews focused on their experience of changes in worldview during the course of their social work studies. The analysis of the data has consisted of both inductive and deductive processes. In the inductive process, themes are allowed to emerge from the data, creating the potential to notice new and unexpected outcomes. Deductively, the data is interrogated using predetermined analytic categories, in this case the key features of Mezirow's transformative learning theory. The outcomes of these processes are not separated here but rather combined so that they may more fully inform each other.

Briefly, Mezirow's theory of transformative learning argues that, through processes of socialisation and acculturation, people construct 'meaning perspectives' (1991, p. 4), which act as perceptual filters through which new experiences are mediated. Transformative learning occurs when a new experience leads to critical reflection on the foundations of a person's meaning perspective, revealing its inadequacies or limitations. As a consequence of this critical reflection, the person takes action to create a new, more open, inclusive and flexible meaning perspective. Mezirow argues that such transformations usually occur in response to a disorienting dilemma, an event, or series of events, that become catalysts or triggers prompting critical reflection on our existing perspectives (1990). Experience, then, is the foundation for transformation, and the way that new experiences, and particularly significant, disorienting experiences, are dealt with is critical to this process. However, according to Mezirow, simply reflecting upon or even changing one's meaning perspective is not sufficient for transformative learning to have taken place. Action is also required, in the sense of the enactment of the altered perspective in the social world.

The first parts of the chapter report on the experience of learning and transformation as discussed by students and in relation to Mezirow's theoretical

articulation. The final section of the chapter looks at students' experiences of teaching practices and facilitative conditions in relation to learning and transformation.

This research is interested in exploring the nature of transformative learning as experienced by social work students and, in particular, in examining the utility of Mezirow's theory of transformative learning as an explanatory tool. This aim is underpinned by a significant assumption, i.e. that such transformative experiences actually occur. As noted in the introductory chapter, there is anecdotal evidence, from my own experience as a student and from the personal accounts that students have shared with me as an educator, that such significant shifts do occur.

However, to determine whether this assumption was valid for this group of students the starting point for this research was considering the question of whether such transformative learning was part of the research participants' experience of social work education. Interviews began with some exploration of students' backgrounds, and in particular the values and beliefs that had surrounded them in their lives prior to beginning social work education, in an attempt to begin articulating their prior meaning perspectives or worldview. Participants were then asked whether or not they had experienced a significant shift in this worldview, particularly in terms of their values, beliefs and assumptions, as a result of their experience of social work education.

Of the 25 students interviewed, 18 identified in their initial response that they had experienced such a shift in their worldviews and 7 indicated initially that they had not. However, analysis of the interviews conducted with students revealed a somewhat more complex grouping of responses. Through this process of analysis, three clear groups have emerged from the data. The allocation of participants into each of these groups related directly to the degree of congruence between each student's description of their personal learning experience and the features of Mezirow's theory. This allocation relied both on student self-assessment as to whether they had experienced transformative

learning as described by Mezirow, and the researcher's analysis of participant accounts, comparing those accounts with the features of the theory.

Group A represents those students who, according to the features of Mezirow's theory, clearly did not experience a shift in worldview as a consequence of engaging in social work education. This group includes all of those 7 students whose self-assessment was that they had not had such a transformative experience, with the exception of one student, Grace, who replied in the negative to this initial question but whose account of her educational experiences revealed an instance of what would clearly be called transformative learning. Grace's experiences are discussed in greater detail below. This group therefore consists of 6 students or 24% of the total sample.

The second group of students, Group B, are those who self-assessed that they had experienced transformative learning and whose accounts indicate significant learning and change as a consequence of their involvement in social work education. However, analysis of these accounts indicates that the changes described by this group of students do not reflect some of the key elements of transformative learning as articulated by Mezirow. Rather than transformative, the learning experiences of this group could more accurately be characterised as incremental or developmental in nature. Ten (10) students fell into this group (40%).

The final group, Group C, represents those students who self-indicated transformation and whose accounts of social work education have highlighted experiences that come closest to reflecting the transformative process as described by Mezirow. This group consisted of nine (9) students (36%).

Findings from each of these groups are presented below. For each group their accounts of learning are explored in the light of the key elements of Mezirow's transformative learning theory to assist in making an assessment of the degree to which this theory is able to explain the experiences of the students in question. Within each group, some themes have emerged that may be useful in

understanding the nature of the students' experiences as well as the utility of Mezirow's theory.

### **6.1. Group A: No change (we're already there)**

In response to a question asking whether they had experienced a significant shift in their worldview as a result of their experience of social work education, a number of participants responded with a clear negative.

**Lily:** *I don't think the big overarching paradigms or way things are understood has changed, but I think I have got a sharper picture and a sharper understanding and a clearer understanding, of why I am the way I am, or what I think.*

**Mia:** *On the whole, no I don't think it has, because like I was saying I was brought up with values around social justice and human rights and whatever, and as far as I have seen, my study in social work has fitted quite well with those values that I was brought up with.*

**William:** *I can't say. Yeah, I think it has changed but more developed, it is not like I have pushed old beliefs aside but I have sort of I have gotten new knowledge, new theory and so forth. I have digested it and have added pieces to the puzzle. It is not like I have come in a redneck, a racist, and started social work and come out and graduated as someone committed to social work. It's not like that. I already had social justice principles. Studying social work has organised them and focused them.*

**Matilda:** *I don't think that has really changed. I think that has sort of stayed the same. If I was younger then I would say yeah it would have changed, but because I am a bit older I don't think it has changed at all.*

**Louise:** *I don't think so, no. More like getting a better understanding, you know, but my beliefs are the same.*

For this group of participants it seemed clear, both from their initial responses and from the subsequent discussion of their experiences of social work education, that the type of transformative learning experience described by Mezirow, in which a person's critical reflection on their existing frames of reference leads to a significant shift in their worldview, had not occurred while they were engaged in social work education. The single exception to this assessment is Grace, whose experiences are discussed as a member of Group C, below.

In attempting to understand the lack of 'shift' experienced by these students, four key themes emerged through the research interviews. These are the importance of:

- Pre-existing values and beliefs congruent with social work
- Prior employment in the social welfare field
- Significant encounters with social work as a service user
- Previous studies in the social sciences.

Amongst this group of students, some respondents reported that one of these factors seemed particularly significant, while others identified a combination of these as being relevant in their circumstances. In most cases there were also clear connections between any or all of these factors and the students motivation for pursuing social work education.

#### **6.1.1 Pre-existing values and beliefs congruent with social work**

For some students this lack of transformative experience around fundamental values and beliefs seemed to relate clearly to the fact that they entered social work education with a set of personal values and beliefs already highly congruent with those of the profession. In many instances this was clearly connected with a family background that included an orientation towards concerns with equity, fairness and social justice. In terms of Mezirow's theory such a background could be expected to play a major role in shaping the

construction of meaning perspectives or frames of reference. As a normative profession, social work has a clearly articulated set of values and one of the functions of social work education is to expose students to relevant issues and to inculcate those values as part of a core professional identity. For this group of students their worldview was already oriented towards the social work value set. This meant that they were much less likely to experience an incongruence or disorientation that might lead them to question their existing frame of reference.

Mia, for example, talked about family background, the values that it represented and the ways that these served to motivate her interest in social work.

*Mia: I think it came from my family because my dad has always been into social justice. Because I am an only child we kind of ended up having adult conversations, and mum and dad's friends would be round and maybe talking about the same kind of stuff, so I was kind of involved in what they were talking about. Dad would always talk to me about social justice issues and human right issues and he was always getting magazines and journals sent to him and things like that. He's a teacher but he was the head of the teachers union, rep or whatever for his school, so he was into that, and he majored in history, so he was interested in all of that kind of stuff and that kind offed my interest a little bit. He would always talk to me about it. And my mum, looking back, I guess she had a bit of a feminist stance on things, like when I was little she would not let me have barbie dolls. I guess with talking to them and their kind of values and their interests kind of led me to take on that social justice, human rights kind of interest as well, and I wanted to work in that area.*

There is a clear sense in Mia's account of the ways in which this family interest in social justice issues was transmitted to her as a child and young person growing up. This socially constructed meaning perspective influenced her choice of career, but also had an impact on her experience of social work education. Rather than encountering a lot of new and challenging ways of seeing the world,

Mia came into social work already equipped with an understanding of social justice and some background knowledge about a range of social issues.

***Mia:** Yeah, I was always given kind of a left wing side of the story on everything, not like the extreme left wing... but I would talk to him [her father] for ages about stuff like that, and I guess that's where social work kind of rests as well, to the left of things. On the whole my studies did not challenge my values really.*

Louise reported a similar background, where her family's values were clearly oriented towards issues of social justice and human rights.

***Louise:** Yeah my parents were always taking me to like marches and protests and stuff and they went to meetings, groups and things. There was always a big thing about asking what is right, what is the right thing to do, put yourself in their shoes kind of thing. My mum was always giving me books to read and it was just the natural thing in my family, it just made sense to me.*

This family orientation was also translated into action and involvement in social justice activities while Louise was at school and afterwards. Louise did not find social work education served to challenge her core beliefs and values but rather that it promoted a better understanding of issues.

Angela recounted a similar situation with her family background. In discussing the development of her own worldview, Angela reported the significance of having grown up in a family with a strong value orientation.

***Angela:** I put a lot of that down to a very strong family background of service to the community. That is very strong with both my mother and my father and you know our whole family has an orientation to sort of volunteerism and just that idea of people who have more should be helping out people who have less.*

This values context was manifest in the actions of her parents and Angela reported that it was internalised by the children – a process that she connects directly with her interest in social work.

*Angela: Our father was the same, he did a lot for legacy and various other organisations and so we grew up, you just absorbed that without even being aware that that is going on in your family. Certainly we all have strong memories of going out and helping our mother with meals on wheels or going down to the red cross op shop when it was her duty day, or that sort of thing. It was just kind of there and you absorb that kind of thing without even being conscious of it. So in that sense I think I have been doing social work all my life, without actually having that name.*

A pre-existing worldview that was oriented towards social justice was not always a result of the family environment but might have been shaped by other stakeholders in a person's life. For example, in terms of family background, Matilda reported a more challenging environment where social justice perspectives were not a significant aspect of this familial environment but Matilda was deeply influenced by the "kindness, the softness, the gentleness" of both the nuns who taught her at school and her close friends. These influences appear to have had a significant impact in shaping her worldview. She also reported being engaged early in life by the ideas of feminism.

*Matilda: ...[having] a father that was chauvinistic to boot, and I would never accept the little woman's place at home and poor old dad got a very rude shock when female liberation hit Cairns and this little daughter grabbed it with both hands.*

#### **6.1.2 Prior employment in the social welfare field**

A second significant factor for some of this group of students was having had some prior employment in the social welfare sector. This is not an unusual experience for social work students, especially given the high proportions of

students who come to study as mature age entrants. Such employment may also be indicative of a pre-existing orientation to the values inherent in such work. In addition to her social background, discussed above, as a mature age student, Matilda's prior studies and work history had an influence on the values and beliefs that she brought into social work education. Initially qualified as a teacher, Matilda ended up working for Centrelink where colleagues identified an aptitude for social work. Angela had also been working in the social welfare field prior to entering social work education. In fact, social work was appealing specifically because it represented a good match with her existing values.

*Angela: I was working in a not-for-profit welfare agency, before I started my degree, and I had been looking for some time for a course of study that suited my kind of values.*

### **6.1.3 Significant encounters with social work as a service user**

For some students in Group A, while family background was important, other aspects of their experiences prior to entering social work education were more salient. Lily reported growing up in what she described as a "red-neck bush family" where racist dinner conversations existed alongside a church-based ethos of charity and good works. In her life prior to entering social work education she had developed a clear set of ideas about fairness, women's rights and justice, but felt she lacked the language to articulate these. Lily experienced some challenging times as a young woman and a new mother that brought her into contact with social workers and the social welfare system. These personal experiences of the social welfare system figured prominently in Lily's motivation to enter social work education.

*Lily: I was bright enough and articulate enough, to a) figure out what they were doing, and b) tell them to fuck off, so I had quite a few run-ins with social workers as a young mum. One of the things that was very obvious to me is that when you meet a bad social worker if you don't have the language skills and a bit of understanding of how the organisation works*

*you get screwed. So I had this idea, I thought I'd be the type of social worker that helped people screw the system instead.*

Similarly, Matilda experienced frustrations with her experiences of the social welfare system and, like Lily, this contributed to a powerful motivation to enter social work and do things differently.

**Matilda:** *Through my own experience going through the so-called rehab process the cynicism is there ... and having gone through my battle with it I thought this is something I can do. That is how I came into social work, with that rehab focus, to try and get that job done better.*

Frustrating or negative experiences with the welfare system would not, of themselves, produce a worldview that was necessarily congruent with the ethos of social work as a profession. However, when coupled with a social background that includes a social justice orientation and/or employment in the sector, such experiences probably serve to equip students with clearer expectations of what social work is about and the type of material that they are likely to encounter in their education.

#### **6.1.4 Previous studies in the social sciences**

By contrast, William grew up in a politically neutral, conservative household.

**William:** *The only time I ever remember mum or dad having any sort of political comment was when Paul Keating put his arm around the Queen, and that was the only reference that was ever made to politics... They were shocked, they were shocked, I mean they are not exactly subscribed to class hierarchies and so forth, but they were still shocked because it is the Queen.*

Family background was, therefore, not a powerful factor in shaping William's orientation towards social justice values. However, prior to beginning social work, William had already completed a Bachelor of Arts with studies in sociology

and anthropology. It was in this setting that he encountered ideas of political and social analysis that had a significant impact on his frames of reference.

*William: I mean I was studying in a first year sociology subject... [the lecturer] was talking about social stratification and I just thought, I can see this you know, I can just see it as completely real to me, I don't need to sort of re-read it.*

For him, social work represented an opportunity to apply the political understanding that he had already developed. Again, the significant factor here is that William entered social work education already primed with an understanding of social issues and a personal orientation towards social justice. For him, studies in social work helped to focus his ideas rather than challenged his beliefs.

#### **6.1.5 Group A: Absence of elements of transformative learning**

These six students responded negatively to the question of whether they believed social work education had contributed to a significant shift in their worldviews. In their subsequent accounts of social and familial backgrounds and their experience of being social work students, it seems clear that a number of factors have served to position these students in a way that makes it much less likely that they would encounter deeply challenging situations that might then lead to reflection on their existing frames of reference and subsequent change.

None of these students, for example, reported experiencing the type of disorienting dilemma that characterises a transformative learning experience as described by Mezirow's theory. According to this theory, such a disorienting experience is the starting point for the transformative process and therefore, in the absence of such an experience, Mezirowian transformative learning cannot be said to have occurred. This conclusion is congruent with the students' own self-assessment of the nature of their learning experiences.

As well as the occurrence of a disorienting experience the other key dimensions of the transformative process include critical reflection on self, engaging in dialogue with others and enacting new beliefs and values. It is important to note that a lack of transformative learning does not mean that these other elements, in various forms, were not part of these students' experiences. All of these students, for example, spoke about the importance of critical reflection as part of their learning experiences. It simply means that the catalyst and focus of such reflection, for example, was not the type of disorienting experience that the theory describes.

## **6.2 Group B: Changing but not transforming**

Almost three quarters of the research participants had initially indicated that they had experienced a significant shift in their worldview, particularly values, belief and assumptions, during the time of their social work education. In deeper discussions with students, the nature of these changes was explored more fully. Group B, discussed here, represents those students whose reports of change, while always significant and meaningful for the students involved, did not seem to correspond closely to Mezirow's theory. It is worth reiterating that, according to Mezirow, transformative learning occurs when a new experience leads to critical reflection on the foundations of a person's meaning perspective, revealing its inadequacies or limitations. As a consequence of this critical reflection the person takes action to create a new, more open, inclusive and flexible, meaning perspective. In his words, such a perspective transformation is:

*... the process of becoming critically 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 expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings.*

(Mezirow, 1991, p. 167)

Transformative learning is not, therefore, synonymous with the iterative process that characterises many learning experiences, whereby we build a knowledge or skills base through our exposure to new information and experiences. While certainly constructivist in nature, it goes beyond a process of integrating new information to include a deep examination of the foundations of our own worldview and the subsequent creation of altered frames of reference leading to new forms of understanding and action.

For this group of students, the key theme that emerged from explorations of their educational experience was that social work education had been, for them, an incremental, developmental process. Often this was expressed as learning new things that built on existing knowledge, or helping to clarify and deepen existing ideas and beliefs. The nature of the learning experienced by this group was often deep and significant, hence their positive self-assessment of transformation, but seemed to reflect a gradual expansion of understanding rather than a dramatic reassessment of core values and beliefs.

The identification of pre-existing orientations towards social justice also arose in this group's accounts. Again, such an orientation appears to militate against the experience of disorienting dilemmas and therefore a fully transformative experience. An interesting subtheme that emerged in this group was the experience of a disorienting or unsettling experience that led to reflection on a student's meaning perspective, but where the consequence of that reflective process was the confirmation or reinforcement rather than alteration of that worldview.

### **6.2.1 Incremental, developmental journeys**

Charlotte came from a family background characterised by a concern for social justice and equality. She responded positively to the question of whether she had experienced transformative learning while a student, but remarked it had been a gradual rather than dramatic experience. Asked to describe the nature of the change, Charlotte indicated a dynamic that represented more of an increase in awareness than a perspective transformation.

**Charlotte:** I guess I think I have just become a lot more attuned and interested in understanding these processes, these wider kind of social, cultural, historical processes that really shape our lives, and shape the society that we live in, and I guess shapes our identities. That has been one way that my perspective has changed. I am a lot more, I guess I am a lot more aware of those and also interested in, more interested in thinking critically about those things and reflecting on them and trying to understand and identify and then engage those things in my own life. I think my worldview has become more sociological in a way... I think it has been a cumulative thing.

The learning that Charlotte describes here, and elsewhere in her account, is significant and invaluable. However, in terms of Mezirow's theory it appears to lack the kind of fundamental reassessment of meaning perspective that sits at the heart of transformative learning.

A developmental approach to understanding the impact of social work education also featured in Olivia's account of her studies. She brought with her into social work studies values around fairness and justice, so her educational experience tended to confirm these while developing an ability to better understand and express them. Dramatic change was, however, an important part of her experience. Having grown up in a strict, religious family, Olivia experienced a profound shift in worldview, prior to beginning social work education, when she realised that she didn't want or need such a religious belief system in her life. Olivia described these pre-social work transformations quite clearly and suggested that what she encountered in social work was a continuation of this change.

**Olivia:** Aside from my religious views changing dramatically, I think the social work degree is such a developmental thing you know. It's like this coming of rights even though you don't realise that it is until you go through the whole process. The things that it teaches are such good valuable life

*skills to have regardless of whether you are a social worker or not, I think. So I think that it might have been that transition I was going through with my life as well, that I was looking for something to help develop me.*

While indicating a significant shift in her worldview, in discussion about her experience of social work education, Nicole's experience seems to have been one of developing a deeper understanding of issues. She came from a family background where social justice beliefs and practices had been present but not overly significant and where she had been exposed to feminist values and principles. For her, social work education seems to have connected with these pre-existing aspects of her worldview.

*Nicole: Yeah I think it has really, yeah so a deeper understanding rather than any sort of revelation. I think for me it just opened a lot of ways of thinking and made things a lot clearer as to where we are heading and maybe where we should not be heading.*

The shift in worldview that Nadia reported was also in the category of expanding her existing understanding rather than producing a deep shift in frames of reference. Interestingly, Nadia's realisation that not everybody shared the same experiences and lifestyle as her was very similar to that of Ella who is discussed below. The difference is that, for Ella, this realisation was deeply unsettling and drove her to quite intense reflection on her values and beliefs. For Nadia the realisation seems to have resulted in a 'gentler' process of expanding her understanding. This is clearly reflected in her comments about the lack of intense challenge in her studies. In Nadia's case it seems a clear example of a situation where her existing frames of reference were actually congruent with the material she encountered in social work education.

*Nadia: I guess I had my own beliefs and values before I went in, and they kind of just expanded really. I don't think there would be any challenges that I can think of.*

Similarly, Leonie reported that social work education had involved change, but that her fundamental frames of reference were largely unchallenged.

*Leonie: My core values and beliefs and principles didn't change that much.*

Social work education did however lead to changes in confidence levels and self-esteem as well as the ways that Leonie conceptualised the helping and social change process. This change seems to reflect a process that might be called maturation and expansion of awareness. Realising that there is more than one way to bring about social change, for example, is an important lesson, but not necessarily one that would be likely to lead to deep reflection on one's core values.

For Amelia, social work education also seems to have facilitated a broadening of perspective, one that allowed a greater accommodation of diversity. It wasn't an experience however, that challenged fundamental values or beliefs. In fact, as Amelia encountered the core values of social work, she felt quickly comfortable with them.

*Amelia: I started going ok well... I live by all these things and I do challenge, and I started thinking about my personal characteristics as well, like I am open, I am honest, the five values of social work as well, I started thinking about how they fit with me really nicely.*

The idea that social work education can serve to both consolidate existing values and enhance the capacity for understanding complexity and diversity was also part of Isabella's experience.

According to Isabella, one of the changes that occurred for her as a result of social work education is having the confidence to now clearly call herself a feminist and to advocate in an articulate manner for women's rights. This was a theme identified by a number of students in the study, that what social work

education gave them was increased confidence to claim identities and articulate values positions that had been nascent in their pre-social work selves.

*Isabella: I suppose because there has not been any great radical shift in that. It is just more clearly defined for me in the sense of that I can better understand it, I have a greater knowledge, I can speak it a lot easier now, I can, I have the words and the knowledge.*

This seems to be a very significant form of learning experience and obviously constitutes a 'change' that took place for these students during, and as a consequence of, their social work education. But it also appears to be, for these students at least, part of a developmental process that built on existing foundations and unfolded gradually and incrementally. In this sense, it does not square entirely with what Mezirow would refer to as a transformative learning experience.

### **6.2.2 Pre-existing orientations**

Isabella and a number of other students in Group B, unsurprisingly, also indicated that they had what could be referred to as pre-existing orientations towards social work skills, issues, beliefs and values. Charlotte, for example, identified a capacity for critical thinking as an important aspect of her social work education experience, but noted that this had been part of her make-up prior to coming to study.

*Charlotte: I think maybe I have always had that capacity. Perhaps just doing the degree has helped me to identify it and also strengthen it.*

With an existing degree in sociology and politics it is not surprising that Ruby was already familiar with and had internalised many of the core values and beliefs inherent in social work education. In her case this pre-existing orientation seems to have meant that, rather than a transformative shift, Ruby's experience was more one of consolidation and clarification.

**Ruby:** *I feel a lot stronger in my convictions now and I feel a lot more confident in expressing them to other people.*

For Ruby, her existing ‘structural awareness’, developed through her previous studies and employment experiences, was extended and developed as a result of social work education.

For Leonie, perhaps the key transformative experience had been one that occurred prior to university study when she was called upon to begin acting as an advocate for her son who had a disability. Involvement in disability organisations led to an interest in studying social work and the decision to pursue this was quickly validated.

**Leonie:** *Yeah, because I had tried to do study before and had tried different things but just didn't find where I fitted. I kind of feel as though now, this is sort of like where I am meant to be.*

To some degree, a pre-existing orientation is likely to be a feature of many social work students’ experiences. It is difficult to imagine why a person would choose to study social work if there wasn’t some level of motivation or inclination present that could be characterised as a pre-existing orientation towards social justice, equity, humanity and so forth. The significant issue for the students in Group B, in terms of Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning, is that such an orientation seems to have inoculated them against experiencing disorienting situations where their meaning perspectives were challenged by their social work studies.

### **6.2.3 Disorienting dilemmas: Questioned but confirmed**

In Mezirow’s articulation of transformative learning, shift occurs when reflection on one’s existing meaning perspectives results in the realisation that they are in some way inadequate or limited. This realisation then opens the way for the development of altered frames of reference. For some students, a disorienting experience seems to have occurred during their studies that did indeed lead

them to such critical examination of their own values and beliefs. However, for these Group B students such reflection did not lead to an awareness of holding inadequate or limited views, but rather served to confirm or reinforce their existing frame of reference.

Emily provides a nice example of finding herself in a situation where her values were challenged but where, on reflection, they were confirmed rather than changed. In this instance Emily's reaction to material presented in a class, arguing for the inclusion of the natural environment as a concern for social work, seemed at odds with the opinions of her peers who were dismissive of the significance of an environmental understanding. Emily felt isolated and confused.

*Emily: I felt so confronted I started questioning myself, thinking well maybe I am the alien or maybe it is because of my values, maybe my values are totally wrong.*

Through reflection, Emily was able to see where her values had come from and to recognise that they remained valid and valuable for her.

*Emily: I started thinking to myself and asking where does this strong feeling come from, and it came from my values and it came from my father. He always used to tell me these stories and how much he has respect for land. He taught me about the spiritual connection and the significant value of land and things like that.... I realised that these values were very strong and I could not neglect them.... I have always had a respect in that form for the environment, but doing that class really confirmed it I think, and opened up, really confirmed.*

The experience of Sophie is similar in that it involved reflection on a challenge to existing values but it charts a somewhat different course. Growing up in a family setting with very traditional gender roles, Sophie was excited and challenged to encounter ideas around feminism in her university studies. At first, she was convinced by the arguments presented by her lecturers.

**Sophie:** *I think at first I would take whatever the teachers said and whatever was taught so seriously... I think in University they teach a lot about feminism... I agreed with what the school was saying.*

Sophie brought these new ideas into her family and social circle, where cultural experiences and beliefs were different from those she was encountering at university.

**Sophie:** *I mean initially when I did go home and speak to my mum about it she thought it was a load of garbage. That's not the way she was brought up... and I was telling mum about it, and my brother, and they both laughed about it because it was funny that here I was listening to a white view of human society and my mum teased me about it, my father teased me about it, I was not taken seriously.*

Through a process of reflection and dialogue, Sophie engaged with the new ideas encountered at university and came full-circle to realise that she wanted to retain at least some of her original beliefs and values.

**Sophie:** *For a while, I think I was just trying to search for myself and I was new to the whole university scene... and I kind of done the loop. Actually, now, my views are that I do want to be traditional, but still study and still have my rights.*

In these instances it appears that the nature of the disruptive experience was either not powerful enough, or did not differ enough from existing frames of reference to prompt a full transformative process.

In the discussion of her educational experience, Charlotte also identified a time when her existing ideas about particular issues were challenged. In this case the challenge came during a women's studies class, leading to powerful and exciting learning experiences.

**Charlotte:** *I was reading a book by some radical feminist about pornography. It was really challenging, it really helped to change my ideas around that whole industry and what it means – the consequences for women's rights ... I felt so excited and liberated and empowered in a way that I needed to go and talk and share and say this is what I have learned and this is how I see it in our lives, in my life and world, and what do you reckon, you should believe this too.*

At first glance, this experience appears to correspond with Mezirow's description of transformative learning. The student reports having been challenged and that the challenge led to a change in her ideas. She also reports engaging with others in dialogue about the issue, another dimension of Mezirow's process. Yet given that Charlotte's background was one where she was already familiar with feminist philosophy and social justice issues, such experiences seem to reflect an expansion of existing knowledge or a development of existing beliefs and values rather than a transformative shift in Charlotte's worldview. This perspective is reinforced by her own comments regarding the nature of changes that she experienced in social work education.

**Charlotte:** *I think it has been an accumulative thing, rather than just one moment where everything shifted. Certainly I would say that it has shifted in a way.*

The experiences of many of the Group B students illustrate that simply having a disorienting experience may be a necessary but not sufficient condition to produce transformative change.

### **6.3 Group C: Transformative learning in action**

The third group of students, Group C, consists of those whose recounted experiences of social work education contain elements that seem to relate most closely to Mezirow's description of transformative learning. The criteria used to make this assessment was the degree to which the students' accounts of learning

experiences seemed to contain the four key elements of: a disorienting dilemma; critical reflection on one's meaning perspective; dialogical relationships connected to the experience; and putting the newly altered frame of reference into action. Not all of the following accounts display all of the characteristics with equal clarity or strength, but some degree of identification exists in all of them. In the descriptions of these students' experiences, these four elements are integrated into the narrative of their accounts rather than dealt with as separate subheadings. The intent here is to give a fuller sense of the learning experience as it unfolded for the student.

### **6.3.1 Grace**

In response to the initial question of whether or not her worldview had shifted as a result of social work education, Grace indicated that she hadn't experienced any dramatic changes but that social work education had basically equipped her with a fuller understanding of how "the system" worked. She entered social work education with some congruent values and challenging personal experiences of the welfare system. For Grace, having a mother who modelled beliefs around equity and justice was significant.

*Grace: Yeah my mum was a really big feminist, very big feminist. I remember the first time I ever saw it was when I wanted to play soccer and back then girls didn't play soccer with boys - I ended up playing soccer with the boys.*

This background was coupled with very challenging personal experiences of the social welfare system, and social workers, which further inculcated a personal commitment to provide the kind of support for others that she hadn't experienced herself.

*Grace: I figured I could do either a better job than they did or be able to change the system at some way or some level.*

For this student, a lot of the material that she encountered in social work education was not particularly challenging or confronting. However, Grace later describes an experience that occurred while she was on her field placement which seems a clear example of a disorienting experience leading to reflection on her existing frame of reference. Working in a justice/legal agency Grace was asked to work on a case where she did not agree with the actions being taken by the agency and other workers.

*Grace: I was like what the hell, why is this person allowed to do what they are doing, does anyone else see this is wrong? And I just felt like nobody had any issues with it except for me, I was going, oh my god this is huge. When you get into a position where it really challenges your values, when that happens sometimes it is a bit hard on you. I took some time off because it knocked me on my arse, like my values and everything were questioned, and me as a person. I mean, I sort of, I am a pretty stern person but I suppose it made me second guess myself, it made me second guess myself as a parent, as a student What the hell am I doing here, why am I doing this, are we doing it for the right reasons?*

Grace certainly engaged in a process of self-examination, which produced powerful emotional reactions, congruent with Mezirow's description of the 'fear, anger and shame' that often accompanies a disorienting dilemma and subsequent reflection.

*Grace: It was really challenging. I cried and cried and just went 'I am not doing this anymore this is too hard', so I went home and I sat on my dam, and had a few drinks and then went 'oh shit how am I going to do this, what plan am I going to use to get over it, really to be professional about it?'... I locked my gate and just stayed at home and just reflected and sort of cracked the shits and threw stuff and cried and threw more stuff.*

As a consequence of this challenging experience, Grace reported engaging in a process of reflecting on her own values and beliefs, particularly with reference to

traditional expectations about parenting and which parent was better equipped to care for children. She also engaged in dialogue with others, including fellow students and people in her workplace.

*Grace: I spoke to one of the other girls that I get along quite well with downstairs, she said 'that is like a coming of age at the office, and in actual fact that is the process that everyone goes through', so that was quite relieving. They said you either go or stay when you get to that stage... It was good to know that it was not just me. I was really concerned that it was me.*

The outcome of this reflective and dialogical process was recognition that her previous belief system was limited and that a more complex and flexible understanding of parental abilities was possible and desirable.

*Grace: That skewiff, you know, kids should always be with their mums, that's the traditional roles, that's the traditional values and having to fight for my own kids myself when it was actually, the kids were actually safer with the dad, that's when I sort of went err, maybe it is not the traditional way. ...It's not just good enough to be a mum.*

Following this experience Grace was confronted by a very similar case at work, but her reaction and approach to it were remarkably different.

*Grace: I had a case come on my desk, very similar, not obviously the same couple of kids and stuff, but I actually handled it, it did not worry me at all. It was very neutral and investigated and it turned out that the outcome was the same. But it was not a shell-shock, I'll put it that way.*

This shift in her reaction to a similar situation, and her ability to act in a different way based on this new worldview, is a good example of the putting into action of new frames of reference that constitutes the final stages of Mezirow's model. Grace recognised that she now saw things differently and wouldn't be going backwards, constituting an integration of her new meaning perspective into her

life. Indeed, Grace was hoping to find employment in the very agency where her placement experience had been so challenging.

In this instance, despite initially reporting she had not experienced anything resembling a transformative learning experience, the student went on to describe an episode that is largely congruent with Mezirow's description of such an experience. A challenging or disorienting experience was followed by self-reflection on existing values and beliefs. This reflective process, including engaging in dialogue with others, resulted in a re-evaluation of those beliefs and the adoption of a new frame of reference, one which was more inclusive and discriminating. This new frame of reference was subsequently enacted in practice, meaning similar situations were seen and dealt with in a new way.

### **6.3.2 Chloe**

Chloe's experience is, perhaps, not as clear or dramatic. Chloe had completed previous studies in counselling but became frustrated by the lack of focus on broader, structural issues. She was raised in what she described as a White, middle-class family with traditional values and in a community where racist attitudes were commonly encountered. Chloe identified a number of changes that happened for her during her social work studies. One of these was a change with regard to feminism.

*Chloe: Before I began in the social work area I was actually very hesitant to identify whether verbally or emotionally with the feminist principles.... I feel that I've come about and I have actually come to embrace feminism and feel comfortable with using that word to articulate some of my values and my beliefs, in society, in principles etcetera. So I guess I feel that social work really helped me to add more perspective and understanding of gender rights, of equality. I think that's something which wasn't as articulated for me before.*

This shift appears more developmental than transformative in nature. However Chloe also discussed the shift that had occurred in relation to issues of race,

when she encountered content in the course that challenged her existing frames of reference.

**Chloe:** *I think that the social work studies is about challenging your current worldviews and questioning where that has come from. When it came to Indigenous studies, that really challenged my world view according to how I had been bought up as a child, thinking that they were just dole bludgers and they deserved what they got, they were not working for their money etc., etc..*

Chloe then discussed the reflective process that she engaged in when confronted with this kind of situation.

**Chloe:** *[I was] raised as a child with this kind of like this routine, this mind set about um Australia's first people... I guess for me that is the broader reflection of social work, it is about being able to critically analyse and question ourselves why we are doing what we are doing.*

**Chloe:** *For me I find it is about being introduced to a new idea with new knowledge which had not previously come to me because of what I carried with me or what I have been brought up with... and then going through that process of trying to figure out or fish through it, how does that sit with me or why doesn't it sit with me, or you know, why do I feel comfortable or uncomfortable around this, and does it speak any truth to me? I think it is about taking time to really digest it.... So I guess for myself it is like there is some truth being quoted here and I need to investigate it more, whether or not it makes me feel uncomfortable, to see if it can lead me somewhere else.*

Dialogue is an important dimension of Mezirow's theory. In particular, it is through dialogue, according to this theory, that people come to recognise that their discontent and processes of transformation are shared. Dialogue also provides opportunities for testing-out new ideas and evolving frames of reference. Often, for students, such dialogue takes place with peers who may be

sitting in the same classrooms or encountering the same material. For Chloe however, dialogue with peers did not play a big a role, and in fact she was sometimes frustrated by discussions in subject workshops.

*Chloe: I felt sometimes frustrated being at the workshops having to cater for fifty students with a broad sort of idea of things and knowledge and skills, and obviously you can't cater for everyone. Sometimes I felt like it was not suitable for me.*

As someone who already possessed a degree in counselling and who was employed in the sector, for Chloe, engaging with workmates and managers provided her with more fulfilling opportunities to discuss issues that were challenging her.

Importantly, Chloe also describes the challenges and discomfort that was involved in attempting to put her new way of seeing the world into practice and the ways in which this involved a continuing process of reflection.

*Chloe: Yes, because even if I changed, and then I am pushing and applying [the new knowledge] to the challenging new situation it would not be of as much benefit if was not questioning myself, why am I feeling uncomfortable, why is it a greater challenge for me, or what are my new learnings?*

Eventually, Chloe felt that she was able to apply her new knowledge in her practice while on placement.

*Chloe: Lately I have been involved in an Indigenous community because I was on a placement. It was the first time I had really tried to significantly apply this new body of knowledge in a very specified form of practice. But all I can do is try to understand, through my learnings and my studies and my observations and being able to work in this culturally appropriate way and I just find that is so much more conscious on my behalf doing that kind of work instead of another way that I am used to or accustomed to.*

In Chloe's case there seems to have been a clear encounter with information that was disorienting or challenging, particularly of views and attitudes that she had internalised when younger. She made a conscious decision to challenge herself around this material, despite that being an uncomfortable process, and as a result of that reflection on self, adopted new values and beliefs that she then 'tried out' in practice.

### **6.3.3 Ella**

Ella discussed a dramatic learning experience that happened very early in her social work studies. Coming from what she describes as a traditional, conservative background, Ella had a simple but significant realisation.

*Ella: I moved across to social work, and I think in one of the very first classes I had this sudden realisation that everybody did not have the same upbringing that I had.... People thought differently, and people had had all these different experiences. I was close to fifty years of age at this time, and I am almost embarrassed to say how naive I was, but that had been my experience. I had only really socialized with people of a similar, if not working class background, kind of that working class middle class type background of people who had not been severely disadvantaged or marginalized.*

This struck Ella particularly powerfully.

*Ella: Because I had not really seen that before. It was obviously all around me but, as I said, with the people I generally socialised with, they were people [who] thought the same way that I thought, that is probably what it was.*

For Ella, the reflective process that followed this experience was, at least in part, enacted through dialogues that she engaged in with people outside of university, at her workplace and with family and friends. The end result, according to Ella,

was a shift in beliefs about other people and in her own attitudes and behaviours.

*Ella: I guess its just this continual thinking: What must that be like and how blessed I am, but what is that like for them? It took away a lot of judgement that might have been there previously, about just boxing people, you're a criminal because you have been to prison, for example. So just opening up and understanding, well these people, these girls might have come out of prison but what went on for them before that and what led to them going to prison, made me realise they are just human beings like me and they have got, they are people, they have got wishes and desires and they are daughters or they are mothers or aunties or cousins and that they are people. It just gave me this huge amount of acceptance for them, and empathy.*

Behavioural changes also extended outside the classroom and workplace, with Ella describing the ways she was now much more involved in community-based activities, particularly those involving marginalised groups, as well as being a change agent in her own circles.

*Ella: I am starting to think about friends and family that I talk to about my changing world views, and yes I do that and often become a little bit of an activist within the family about challenging people's ideas and ways of thinking, for them to start thinking another way, and appreciating and not judging people, but just accepting people for where they are at. I guess I am doing that stuff like 'well have you ever thought about...' rather than just saying they're a junkie, it's like, what might be going on around them or have led to that or whatever.*

Ella clearly carried her changed frames of reference into the workplace and into her involvement in voluntary and community-based activities. The shift was one that clearly permeated her life and was also visible to others.

*Ella: I know that people say to me, particularly friends more than family, people just say 'you have changed'.*

#### **6.3.4 Sarah**

Sarah gives a clear description of a disorienting experience when she recounts a moment from a classroom discussion early in her degree.

*Sarah: I was sitting in class and we were talking in general and one of the lecturers had said something along the lines of giving aid to people – if they choose to go and spend the money that they are given for aid on cigarettes and alcohol, that is their choice, and who are we to dictate to them what they are supposed to do. It was at that moment I had this light bulb moment and I pretty much almost cried in the seat.*

Specifically, Sarah's 'light bulb moment' related to attitudes that she had about what was right and wrong in relation to parenting and housekeeping. She reported having been particularly judgemental towards her cousin's housekeeping and childrearing practices. Sarah related having very strong views about this, which were connected to her upbringing where "everything was very clear, you know, black and white, an absolute".

*Sarah: Growing up, although I was told you should really help people and, you know, social justice, there was still a very clear, like I was saying with the black and white, a very clear distinction. You can help people but it really is on my terms, if that makes sense. So in the classroom there it really made me realise that it does not always have to be on my terms and that the way that I see things is not the only way to see things.*

The classroom experience led Sarah to engage in a process of reflection on her own beliefs and attitudes.

*Sarah: The first thing I did really was I came home and I was kind of going over things in my head a little bit and pretty much staying inside my head,*

*probably for about a week and then I was like just trying to get things out, trying to work them out, making sure that I am on the right track, and then I made the decision, it was a decision then that yes, my world view was wrong and I needed to alter it.*

This shift in the way Sarah saw and understood the world around her resulted in some direct action.

*Sarah: I ended up having to go to Irene [her cousin] and having a chat with her and apologising. I just explained to her that I understand now that what I believed at the time was the right thing, now that I look at it, was so insignificant, and that I saw things differently from that point. That actually the house was clean and she was caring for her children the best she could with the resources that she had. I suppose where I had lost respect for her I kind of got it back.*

Engaging with other students, family and friends was an important part of Sarah's learning experiences. This appeared to be the case both in a general sense and in the instance of this particular disorienting experience. The dialogical process seemed, for Sarah, to occur as part of her attempts to test out her new insight, which was recognised by her cousin as part of a wider process of change.

*Sarah: Yeah, it really was a huge moment for me. We were having coffee and I was crying at the table and she was crying too and she did say to me that she had seen a shift in me through the course of my study. For me it was a special moment.*

*Sarah: I don't think my learning would have been the same if I hadn't engaged with people in dialogue within the classroom setting. For me, the learning comes from not so much the theory but more from people's experiences in life. I think also, when using the dialogue, what challenges me the most is when I hear something from someone that I respect and it*

*doesn't line up with what I am thinking. I suppose that challenges me a little more than if it was just a random comment in a conversation. I take what happens in the classroom setting or in the uni environment where we are all discussing things and challenging each other along those lines and I bought it home and I do that with my parents as well and family members.*

The importance of being able to talk about the challenges occurring in her education was also emphasised in Sarah's description of the change that occurred for her around (related) issues of gender and feminism. This process involved less of a dramatic disorienting experience but did involve a clear process of exploring her discontent with others.

*Sarah: Because my values were, because my understanding was so far left of centre, I was finding it really difficult to wrap my mind around the concepts [of feminism]. That led me to start talking with people about it, and then I tended to just sit in on conversations when I heard people [talking about feminism], 'Feminist', I suppose was the key word which I heard. I'd kind of sneak into a conversation and more from an observer's viewpoint. And once that started to get filled then I started to seek out people who could really fill in the gaps and consolidate the information.*

Interestingly, in hindsight, Sarah could see that the process that culminated in her 'light bulb moment' had been going on for some time.

*Sarah: I suppose it had been something that was building up and the breaking point was that one moment, I think. But something that had been slowly building because we had done the dimensions of human experience [subject] which really started getting the ball rolling for me, and then it just gradually built as the course went on, where there were small, little insignificant moments, which then kind of built, I suppose, to the big moment for me.*

Sarah also described the ways that this new worldview had impacted on both her general attitudes and her practice on placement.

***Sarah:*** *I am not so quick now to jump into something without really, I suppose, breaking it down. So before, where I probably would have seen something and made a snap judgement, I now take the time to reflect slightly on it before I go ahead, and that has been something that I do inside the classroom and outside of the classroom now.*

Again, the pattern here is one of gradual exposure to new ideas culminating in a moment of intense disorientation/realisation. Reflection on this experience led Sarah to make a conscious choice to restructure her worldview. With both feminism and her acceptance of principles of self-determination, Sarah could clearly describe how they had been put into action and integrated into her life in a way that reflected the new frame of reference.

### **6.3.5 Marian**

Marian's story of change is somewhat different. Coming from a strong social justice orientation prior to beginning social work education, and having trained and worked as a nurse, she found that the content didn't necessarily challenge those values and beliefs but rather reinforced them. However an experience that she had as part of her social work studies ended up having a profound impact on her worldview and, in particular, on her nursing practice. Marian described her work and general orientation prior to social work education.

***Marian:*** *As a nurse my duties were, over the years, very prescriptive and systematic. Work procedures were rigidly enforced. There was not much variation away from the prescribed procedures, and that suited me well. I got a lot of job satisfaction out of doing the right thing, and that is sort of how I lived my life as well.*

In her first semester at university, Marian enrolled in the subject 'Dimensions of human experience', which has a focus on exploring the nature of self and its role in the helping process.

*Marian: Quite frankly when I first walked into that lecture I thought 'oh my god what is this all about?' I was really a bit overwhelmed and I had some trouble understanding where the subject was heading and I felt a bit out of kilter with most of the students. We had a whole batch of young students from America in that particular class, and they seemed to sort of adjust to the subject fairly well, when I was thinking 'what's this all about?'. It was a difficult subject for me, and it was not until about week eight that I settled down into the subject and began to see what it was all about.*

As part of that subject, students were asked to read a piece of social literature that dealt with issues of social justice. Marian chose the novel 'The Diving Bell and the Butterfly'. In that novel, a description is given of the protagonist, a paralysed man, being cared for by nursing staff.

*Marian: There was a section in it where he was being bathed and dressed by a few workers, and the workers were doing all that they had to do. They were not being cruel or anything, they were just not connected to him in any way, they were just doing the tasks. And I thought about that a lot and as a nurse I was really guilty of doing that. I was always really concerned about what work I had to do, I was in my mind three or four steps ahead with the work I had to do, the shortages and increased workload, paper work, and I asked myself a question, 'do I connect with the patient?' And my answer was 'no', and I found that really confronting. It was shattering actually.*

In this instance, reading the account in the novel acted as a disorienting dilemma and as trigger for this unsettling realisation. For Marian, it raised powerful emotions.

**Marian:** I was really distressed about it, because I realised that I had not been doing that. Everything that, as a young nurse, that I set out to do, got lost along the way and, yeah I was really upset about it. It was not a matter of thinking of one instance, there were heaps of them and I felt really ashamed actually.

In Marian's account the clarity of the realisation is so strong that little further reflection was required. She immediately brought her new perspective to her practice.

**Marian:** I realised that over the years the patient had become secondary to all these other competing demands on my time, so I immediately decided to change. I actively chose to make my patients the purpose of my practice and it was amazingly easy to do. Over the last three and a half years I have made a point that when I am with patients to make sure that I am there completely, that I am focused on them, I am connected with them, and you get amazing responses from people when you do that. I don't think that would have happened if I hadn't read that book. Now, I stop, I take the time, and it has been really rewarding, and that's how I have changed, it has been an uplifting experience for me.

The reflective component of Marian's experience appears to be embedded in the phrase "I realised that over the years...". While such a realisation must include a reflecting back on her previous nursing practice as well as the underlying values and beliefs that shaped it, Marian did not expand on this process in any detail. She did, however, note that she often used reflective process to assist her in dealing with challenging issues.

**Marian:** It was just a learning experience and I used the critical reflection in my supervision, and in my journals to help me through all of that, if you know what I mean.

Engaging in dialogue with others was an important part of Marian's experience of social work education, both in the classroom, but notably also at home.

**Marian:** *At home there were always discussions taking place, my daughter is a social worker and my husband is a teacher, so there were lots of debates going on at home.*

Marian was very clear that the shift in worldview that she experienced would translate from her nursing work into other areas of practice in the future.

**Marian:** *I think now I will always be patient, client or whatever centred, you know, because that is what it is about for me.*

### **6.3.6 Ava**

A clear disorienting dilemma also presented itself in Ava's situation, when watching a video raised an immediate awareness of her own internalisation of racist beliefs. The self-examination that followed this experience raised significant feelings, with Ava reporting she was "horrified" to realise the implications of what she had been thinking. She described the construction of her existing frame of reference.

**Ava:** *Looking back I feel that I had absorbed some very racist ideas without even being aware of it, and I had the popular idea that Indigenous people could do more to help themselves and that everyone else has to work for what they get so why should they get advantages that other people don't appear to get.*

For Ava, it was a particular classroom experience that acted as a disorienting dilemma and triggered reflection on these beliefs and assumptions.

**Ava:** *It was in a subject on race, racism and reconciliation, she showed a video where they had a room full of people, some with blue eyes some with brown eyes and seeing how the darker people automatically seemed to take*

*on this submissive role, and how the dynamics changed when that was reversed. I found that such an eye-opener and it really started to change how I think, and I thought I hope I have never treated anyone like that, and I thought how horrible, to be made to feel like you were inferior because of your colouring and its just in your face.*

The experience connected Ava with other past experiences in her life, including being a child in a multicultural school where children were laughed at because they were different, conversations with her in-laws, who exhibited very racist attitudes, and her own experience of travel where she had witnessed absolute poverty. Looking back, Ava became conscious of the frame of reference she had previously been operating from.

*Ava: Looking back I am horrified that I even thought that. It was just the people I was mixing with I guess.*

Interestingly, Ava seems to have used this insight as the catalyst for looking at other aspects of her belief system as well, including values around gender.

*Ava: Another one I realised was that I was probably quite judgemental, in that I held the view that a mother should stay at home with children, and that was their role. I didn't feel entirely comfortable with so many women going out to work. I could see often that it was a financial necessity but I thought, well, I did without. Now I can look back and think, gosh I was a judgemental little...*

The reflective process was one that Ava felt quite comfortable with and she reported really getting a lot out of subjects where that was a focus. She described this process in relation to issues of race and ethnicity.

*Ava: I found what really helped me was to go well beyond the readings that were set and doing my own exploration and try to get my own spin on it. The more I read the more I felt like I understood and it made me think,*

*alright, why am I thinking about it this way and how was this person's culture impacting on this problem, and would it be different if it was from a different culture?*

This shift in beliefs has continued into her personal and professional life, influencing the way Ava behaves in conversations with friends and families as well as her practice interests while on placement. For example, when asked to do a workplace presentation on values of human dignity and worth, Ava chose to focus on issues relevant to Indigenous clients as she saw this as an underexplored area. Ava has applied her new worldviews in a number of settings, as well as seeing a more generalised change in her sense of self.

### **6.3.7 Maria**

Maria had some similar experiences in terms of her frames of reference around race. Maria had a relatively privileged upbringing but was deeply influenced by parental beliefs.

***Maria:** I look back now and I could say that my dad was a bigot and a racist and my mum was probably racist and they were both snobs, yeah it was interesting.*

Her social work studies introduced Maria to a perspective that she had never encountered, and one that she found quite distressing.

***Maria:** Probably the most shocking was learning about the history of Aboriginal and Torres Straight people... it was the first time that I ever realised that, um you know, Aboriginal people were not exterminated by being accidentally shot as black sheep in the paddock. I can remember being really upset that I had not learned anything about the true Aboriginal history at school. I guess through the Indigenous studies that I did as an elective, the stories around [were] really shocking, how they were treated. That was really quite distressing, finding out about that... I think being confronted with the readings day in day out was quite distressing.*

Maria explained that this coming to awareness and subsequent reflection had provoked some emotional responses.

***Maria:** I am angry you know, like I am angry at government, I am angry at friends that don't have any understanding about Aboriginal issues, I am angry with my boys because they won't listen and take it all on board and become passionate about Aboriginal rights.*

Another example from her educational experience stood out for Maria as an example of a disorienting experience that had led to profound reflection and change. Maria was involved while on placement with a sporting organisation for people who have experienced mental illness. At a function attended by a number of Parliamentarians and other political and community dignitaries, Maria was standing with the service users as they were introduced.

***Maria:** They were sort of standing right next to me and I can remember, I was just horrified, I thought, I had this thought, 'I hope they don't think I suffer mental illness'.*

The fact that this thought had arisen deeply troubled Maria, causing her to wonder more generally about her underlying beliefs and attitudes.

***Maria:** It hit me in the heart and I can remember... it kept on spiking me, this whole experience that I had had. So I was really very upset about it because I kind offelt that that experience kind of really rocked who I thought I was.*

Maria engaged in a very deliberate process of reflection on this incident and the feelings it provoked. This included journaling and engaging in a dialogue about it with her supervisor, which helped her to arrive at a clearer understanding of what had happened. She provided an interesting description of that process of reflection.

**Maria:** I guess it is kind of like trying to capture a glimpse of yourself in the mirror. For me, it's like you have got a vision of yourself but there is all this stuff that other people see about you that I will never see. But if you quickly look over your shoulder sometimes you can actually grab it, you can actually capture a shadow of yourself and that's what you have got to do – try and bring that into the mirror image and look at yourself from that way.

Maria believed that having gone through this process, which she described as very painful and difficult, that she would think and act differently in the future but that she would also feel better equipped to deal with similar challenges through critical reflection.

Maria provided an interesting example of the process of action/reintegration that Mezirow discusses, whereby the altered frames of reference are brought fully into the learner's world, resulting inevitably in change to actions and behaviours. It was clear from Maria's account that this had some unexpected consequences.

**Maria:** That's the other thing. As I have changed through my understanding of the world I have actually dropped off friends that are not like-minded. I am more attracted to people that think more like me, in a similar way, that have a similar understanding of issues, political issues in the world. And so I am kind of hanging out with a lot more people that are like 'did you read that in the paper?' And they go oh yes, yes and they almost mirror what I am thinking.

Maria did however express some frustration that she hadn't brought this more fully to its logical conclusion.

**Maria:** I am disappointed that I am not politically active. Yes I am aware and yes I will talk about it, and yes I read what they call petitions and I will

*read that and I will sign petitions on occasions, but I am disappointed that I actually haven't activated my passion.*

### **6.3.8 Zoe**

Zoe described two quite different experiences that seem to relate to significant shifts in her fundamental values and ways of seeing the world. As a child, Zoe had been sexually abused by her father. Disclosure of the abuse within her family led to a traumatic period of time in her youth, but did not result in public disclosure or action against her father. Studying social work seemed to act as a catalyst for change in this regard, and led to a shift in some core values.

**Zoe:** *I think it is quite significant that, before I started my social work degree, I was still talking to my father, and about eight months in cut off contact completely and made a statement to the police. There was a challenge to my fundamental values, my fundamental value at that time was forgive always, and nurture, even nurture, everyone around you even if they are not being honest with you, they are not admitting their mistakes and play a game basically. My fundamental value was not about honesty and it became about honesty.*

This shift in values, and the action that it precipitated seemed to flow, in part, from an exposure to material in the social work course, but was brought to a head by a development outside of Zoe's studies.

**Zoe:** *Well it was an incremental thing as far as the reading that I was doing throughout the year. I read everything, and everything I was reading was making such beautiful sense to me and I was just thinking 'you know this is where I am meant to be', and I was starting to relate to what I was thinking about clients and victims of sexual abuse and it was just making me realise the injustice of it. So it was an incremental thing, but then there was a sudden thing where I heard from the other victims [of her father]. That was what actually made me go to the cops and make my own statement. I actually heard from the other victims about their story that they told me, so*

*there were two things – it was incremental and then it was sudden, but the study stuff was incremental.*

In this sense, the acute disorienting dilemma may be seen as the contact with other victims, while her concurrent social work education provided a context for understanding and dealing with this experience. There were obvious strong emotions attached to the ensuing self-examination and critical reflection, and some recognition of the shared nature of her discontent through the contact with other victims. The shift in value base resulted in a direct change in behaviour and action, with Zoe reporting her abuser to the police. The second of what she characterised as specifically transformative experiences occurred halfway through her Graduate BSW studies. It involved travel, and the experience of culture shock.

**Zoe:** *Yeah, travelling to Nepal. Culture shock brings that on in a big way for me. When you land in somewhere like Kathmandu and everything, all your values, all your ideas about the way life is in this world, are challenged because right in front of you is the way life of a million, more than a million, people who are living in poverty, but maybe don't consider it poverty, so your idea of poverty gets challenge. Your idea of communication gets challenged because there is their different communications methods. Your idea of what is acceptable and what is OK, you know all of that stuff just gets challenged.*

The nature of the changes that flowed from this experience included a reassessment of what was fundamentally important in Zoe's life and led to some changes in her activities as well as the company she keeps.

**Zoe:** *Going to Nepal made me change the way I saw what was important. It really helped me not sweat the small stuff. Nepal taught me religious tolerance. It has really helped me refine my focus, being in Nepal, when I felt so strongly about what is important. And I have discovered that spirituality is so important, I have come back after that trip and really explored that*

*part of myself for the first time in years. I see going to the shops as a really boring, wasteful activity and all wasteful activities are becoming so obvious to me since that experience. Including being with draining people, including you know having social contact that just doesn't mean anything, that sort of stuff. I have become much pickier.*

While this experience seems interesting, it doesn't look, at first glance, to have much to do with social work education. But for Zoe, the two were inextricably linked.

**Zoe:** *Yeah, it is hard to separate the two... I don't think I would have had the same experience in Nepal if I had not of been studying social work for twelve months beforehand and, in fact, I probably would not have even gone to Nepal. So the transformational learning that I was having with the social work study almost created the experience that I had in Nepal. I would not have had that kind of learning if I had not studied social work.*

Zoe reported the importance of being able to talk through such challenges and change with others including family and peers.

**Zoe:** *I have been able to talk to my mum [who works in human services] a lot about that sort of stuff and she has had to be a bit of a sounding board. Other students, I have had the chance to talk them about why, what kind of social work did they want to do, and even have challenging discussions about that and that has helped me discover what kind of social work that I want to do.*

In Zoe's experience, social work education seems to have provided some generally transformative context that allowed specific disorienting experiences to be interpreted and acted on in different ways. Zoe was also clear that aspects of these shifts had been integrated into her personal and professional life.

**Zoe:** *That knowledge... I have been taking it around with me in day-to-day life, and that is a big change since I started the degree.*

### **6.3.9 Sienna**

Sienna was very clear in indicating that she had experienced a significant shift in her worldview as a result of engaging in social work education. Like a number of other students, the specific dilemma that emerged was around issues of racism and Indigenous people. Sienna described her family background in this regard.

**Sienna:** *In my family if you were from an Asian culture or if you were not Australian, white Australian, there was something wrong with you.*

The particular experience that led Sienna to re-examine these attitudes, which she reported as having internalised, was finding herself in a class with an Indigenous student.

**Sienna:** *I didn't know a great deal about the Indigenous culture and was always fearful of them. My first thing was 'what is he doing here?' Pretty naive and a bit embarrassing to admit, but 'what is he doing here?' you know. I always assumed they were uneducated as well... and my first instincts were oh my goodness somebody from there in the class and it was a male as well which was even more of a shock.*

Through her interactions with this student, Sienna began to question some of her preconceptions and came to realisations that drove her to learn more about the situation of Indigenous Australians.

**Sienna:** *We had a social gathering one night. We thought we will go to the pub and have a beer, and it was funny because he had obviously picked up on my sort of staying on the other side of the classroom, not really interacting with him, and he had a bit of a chat and all the rest of it and we became really good friends. Yeah, and that was a huge thing for me – realising they are everyday people just like us, they have just got different*

*coloured skin. And then when I looked into the stolen generation and all that sort of thing, what I found is I wanted to read more about what was in the text books and then took more notice of what was in the media and then felt comfortable enough to have a bit of a chat with him about what his background and that sort of thing.*

While this was a very specific incident, Sienna also identified a number of other changes in her frames of reference that seem to have flowed from particular subjects but also social work education more generally. These included beliefs about domestic violence, gender roles and issues of the deserving and undeserving welfare recipients.

*Sienna: It challenged all the views that come from the family background. One subject in particular, the first subject that I ever did, was human dimensions and I think that was the eye-opener. That was looking at how I viewed the world and why I viewed it like that and I realised that yeah, I knew it was not the right view and there is a better view than that.*

Sienna was conscious of the change that these shifts brought to her work, particularly as a locum in a counselling role that brought her into contact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service users. Through reflection, Sienna gained some insight into the formation of her original frames of reference, linking these to her own background.

*Sienna: It's stereotyping, people are supposed to fit into certain boxes – because somebody looks different or dresses differently or does something different, that is not normal behaviour.*

For Sienna, however, sharing a recognition of these issues was important and a significant tool in clarifying her thoughts and possibly exploring options.

*Sienna: I do keep in mind that reading is not the be all and end all. It's the talking to the people and getting their story. You can see things written*

*down and what things are supposed to be, but talking to different people then you can find out the real story. You can only read so much in text books, you can't get a real life picture unless you talk to people.*

Social work education seemed to have contributed to changes that were, in Sienna's opinion, irreversible and that involved seeing the world as a more complex place.

*Sienna: I have lived in a little vacuum and thought 'this is what is what mum and dad said this is the way we are supposed to be and this is what we are supposed to believe in and this is what life is'. But everyone else around you has got a completely different story. I don't think it will ever go back to the way it used to be. I am always [saying] 'why do you think that has happened?' You know, 'is there a reason that is underlying [why] that person has hurt that child - why?' Drives my husband mad because I am always asking 'but why?' Do you think there is something else going on there that you know has contributed to this, you need to get the full story before anyone makes any judgements, yeah.*

The new frames of reference that emerged for Sienna were implemented in her placement practice and appear to have been reintegrated into her life more broadly, reflecting the final dimensions of Mezirow's model.

#### **6.4 Group C: Mezirow's ten-phase process**

Mezirow was clear that his theory of transformative learning was not a 'stage theory' with a fixed and prescriptive sequence of steps that needed to be moved through in order for transformation to occur. There are some elements of the process that seem essential, including some element of disorientation, reflection on existing worldview, dialogue and the enacting of new beliefs and attitudes. The group of students in Group C all seem to share these characteristics. However, the degree to which all ten elements of Mezirow's suggested process can be identified in the accounts of transformation offered by these students is

less clear. Given Mezirow's qualifications about the nature of these steps, a learning experience does not need to slavishly adhere to each of these in order to be understood as transformative. However, it is useful to consider briefly the degree to which the accounts offered by students in this research did or didn't reflect the steps. To recap, the steps suggested by Mezirow are:

- 1. A disorienting dilemma*
- 2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame*
- 3. A critical assessment of assumptions*
- 4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared*
- 5. Explorations of options for new roles, relationships and actions*
- 6. Planning a course of action*
- 7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans*
- 8. Provisional trying of new roles*
- 10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.* (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22)

Chloe's account of transformation, for example, touches on some but not all of Mezirow's stages. The disorienting dilemma was clearly present and very specific and it was clear that Chloe felt 'uncomfortable' about some aspects of her experience, but she did not necessarily experience emotions as strong as anger, fear and shame. Her shifts in areas such as an understanding of Indigenous issues and feminism seemed to be part of both specific and broader reflective processes.

While this reflection involved a critical assessment of assumptions, Mezirow's third phase, Chloe didn't place great emphasis on sharing this uncomfortable situation, nor did she talk about exploring new options of planning a particular course of action (phases 4 & 5). She did however, clearly test out new behaviours, based on her altered frame of reference, in the workplace, and to more broadly explore new ways of being in the world.

The account of Ella's learning contains a clear disorienting dilemma that involved encountering difference in the classroom. Self-examination and reflection followed, although, again, without necessarily producing intense feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame. While it is not clear that Ella felt that others shared her discontent, she did talk with others about her situation, which may represent a form of exploration and testing out of new roles, but not necessarily formulating a plan of action.

A clear dilemma, self-examination with powerful emotions attached and a critical assessment of assumptions were all part of Sarah's experience. It wasn't clear however, that she recognised the shared nature of her discontent. In fact, she made a conscious decision not to talk to anybody initially but rather to turn things over in her own mind. However in another example of significant shift, Sarah dramatically changed her views on feminism and gender roles from the beliefs she had internalised from her family. This process involved a less dramatic disorienting experience but did involve a clear process of exploring her discontent with others and acquiring new knowledge and skills.

Marian's account of change seems to short-circuit Mezirow's articulated process. The first three stages are very clear, with an identifiable disorienting dilemma, self-examination with powerful feelings and a critical self-assessment. But Marian appears to then jump straight to phases 7 & 8, by directly implementing a change in her nursing practice and generalising this into her way of understanding all forms of helping practice.

The early stages of Mezirow's process are also obvious in Ava's case, where a clear disorienting dilemma presented itself through watching a video that raised an immediate awareness of her own internalisation of racist beliefs. The self-examination that followed this experience produced significant and challenging feelings, with Ava reporting she was "horrified" to realise the implications of what she had been thinking. However, rather than engaging in a shared recognition of her discomfort (Mezirow's stage 4), Ava was clear about the

reflection and change process being an individual one, involving a commitment to reading and exploring as much information as she could.

Maria had reported two disorienting experiences, one involving encountering information about Indigenous disadvantage and one relating experiencing an ‘unacceptable thought’ about service users with a mental illness. Both instances resulted in self-examination with strong feelings attached, as per Mezirow’s suggested phases, with Maria feeling ‘shocked’ and ‘gob-smacked’.

Both experiences, and particularly the latter, also led to deep critical assessments of existing frames of reference. From the discussion with Maria it wasn’t clear however, that she recognised that her discontent was shared, although her supervisor did normalise her experience, which provided her with some emotional relief. This supervision, along with continued studies, certainly helped to equip Maria with new knowledge and skills, which have been applied in her life.

Zoe also reported two disorienting experiences of a fundamentally different nature. One related to her childhood sexual abuse, where she felt she had been incrementally shifting values through her social work studies but that this was precipitated by contact with other victims of her abuser. There were obvious strong emotions attached to the ensuing self-examination and critical reflection, and some recognition of the shared nature of her discontent through the contact with other victims. The shift in value base resulted in a direct change in behaviour and action, with Zoe reporting her abuser to the police.

Sienna’s experience also seems to correspond with some but not all of Mezirow’s phases. There was a clear disorienting dilemma involving encountering an Indigenous student in a classroom, followed by self-examination and critical assessment of her own assumptions. For Sienna, however, sharing a recognition of these issues was important and a significant tool in clarifying her thoughts and possibly exploring options. The new frames of reference that emerged for Sienna were implemented in her placement practice and appear to have been

reintegrated into her life more broadly, reflecting the last two stages of Mezirow's model.

In Grace's case a number of Mezirow's phases are clearly present. The disorienting dilemma was created by a workplace situation (while on placement) that shocked her and with which she strongly disagreed, despite the fact that her colleagues seemed fine with it. She certainly engaged in a process of self-examination, which produced powerful emotional reactions. For Grace the critical assessment of assumptions involved reflecting on her own beliefs about parenting and gender roles. Grace took her dilemma and spoke about it with other people in her workplace, discovering that this experience wasn't unique to her. The early stages of Mezirow's process appear to exist in Grace's account. However, stages 5, 6 and 7 are less clear, and Grace's account does not seem to include, at least explicitly, stages of 'planning a course of action' and 'acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans'. Rather the process seemed to be that she had a rapid realisation that her existing frame of reference was inadequate and was able to quickly shift to a new frame, without needing to plan or to gain new knowledge or skills.

Grace did however, then act in ways congruent with Mezirow's final stages, testing out her new frame of reference as she encountered a similar situation at work, and recognising that the way she now saw things was different and wouldn't be going backwards, a form of 'integration into one's life'.

The accounts of all nine students in the transformative group illustrated experiences congruent with at least some steps in Mezirow's model. While Grace's account probably aligned most clearly with the ten-phase process none of the accounts offered here could be said to have clearly identified all of the steps suggested by Mezirow. There are a number of possible explanations for this. It could be argued that a lack of conformity to the entire stepped process indicates that these are not coherent examples of transformative learning. However, Mezirow's clear qualification of his phased description – that his model is not a stage-theory and should not be thought of as having fixed and

prescriptive stages that must be experienced in order for learning to be transformative – clearly allows for examples of transformative learning that do not fully conform to the articulated steps. It may be the case that, for these students, certain aspects of the learning process as suggested by the steps in Mezirow's model, were simply not experienced or not significant enough to warrant comment.

Finally, the lack of full compliance with the stepped model in the accounts offered here could be an artefact of the interviewing process itself. The ten phases were not used as specific items in the interview schedule and it may be the case that a more specific focus on each of the individual steps may have allowed interviewees to identify their experiences in greater detail.

As part of the action research orientation of this project one of the research aims is to use participants' experiences of transformative learning to change and shape future teaching practices in social work education. In the following section, the voices of participants reflecting on the impact or significance of particular teaching and learning activities or practices are presented, with a view to identifying where these have been significant in student learning.

In line with the research aims, particular attention is paid to the accounts of students in Group C, identified as those whose experiences of learning reflect a transformation congruent with Mezirow's theory. For students in all groups, particular attention was given to discussing their experience of critical reflection as a dimension of their social work education. This reflects the centrality of critical reflection in both transformative learning theory and in most conceptualisations of social work education.

## **6.5 Groups A & B: Facilitating learning**

Students in Groups A and B, where either no transformation was reported, or where the reported change does not appear to reflect the features of

transformative learning theory, discussed a number of different aspects of educational practice and approaches as being significant for their learning.

Participants were asked if they could identify specific teaching practices that had been particularly effective or influential during their time as a student. Some students immediately identified very specific and practical dimensions of educational practice, for example William, who commented on the lecture as a teaching method.

**William:** *I think maybe two-hour lectures are pretty long. One-hour lectures are good because it gives you that stimulating information and so forth, but there is a lot to be said for flexi mode subjects where you do the readings and then you go and workshop them. So I think both are of value and two-hour lectures with I guess with a break are fine as well.*

However, and interestingly, many of the participants struggled to identify specific practices, often defaulting to descriptions of content rather than pedagogical process, or emphasising the personalities of individual educators.

**Lily:** *It is funny. The teaching methods are so varied, based on personalities. They all worked.*

**Matilda:** *I suppose not learning wise, but what has been a great support has been the staff, all the lecturers here. If they know something is happening they are there to back you up and they know that I am here.*

Despite this situation, a number of themes did emerge from the discussions with participants. These included the ‘passion’ and capacity for engagement of the educators; differences between studying internally and at a distance; the importance of practical or experiential aspects of learning; dialogical and peer-based interactions; and the role of critical reflection.

A significant number of participants noted that the enthusiasm and perceived passion that individual educators brought to their practice was an important and significant factor in their own learning. Often, this was described as a motivating factor that led students to pay attention to the material being taught, to engage, or to work harder to understand the content being discussed.

**Nadia:** *I think it was the stuff they spoke about, the way they spoke about it and just their presence and how much work they had put into their classes, and you could see that they had been, mostly been, in the industry for a while but they had such passion about social work, and they had such motivation for the student to be able to go on and peruse that.*

**Sophie:** *I think if you can see their passion in what they are teaching you and if they are inspiring then you sit up and listen.*

**Olivia:** *In the classroom it depends on the lecturer as well. Some lecturers are so interesting, like yourself. You can sit there and listen to and it is interesting and you can stay engaged.*

**Charlotte:** *I guess it is really inspiring and when someone is passionate and they have conviction in what they are saying, I respond to that and it causes me to think well why are they so passionate and maybe the reason they are so passionate is because it is worth being passionate about.*

Groups A and B included students who had studied both internally and externally. A number of these students spoke about the difficulty associated with studying at a distance and reported finding this a challenging and often less than satisfying experience. Where they had experienced both modes the preference was almost always for internal studies.

**Lily:** *The distance ed subjects I find very like information regurgitation, you are just sitting in a box praying that you finish the article in enough time to*

*catch the end of whatever show you are watching, and then you sit down and you write a thousand words.*

**Matilda:** *When you are external you are learning in a vacuum, and you have got this muddling around in your head and even though you have got access to email and stuff like that it is not the same. And even when you have got workshops it is not the same because you are still being in a vacuum all that way through, whereas in the classroom you can actually bounce ideas.*

The importance of practical or experiential aspects of learning was highlighted by a number of these students. Often, this was expressed in terms of there not being enough of this type of teaching activity in the degree program.

**Sophie:** *I think, I think probably using your class as an example, what we would talk about in class we would actually go out into the community and actually try and experience that, and I think that was an easier way to learn.*

**Leonie:** *I probably have already hinted at it – that I would like a little bit more of the practical stuff.*

**Isabella:** *I am sure that there is a need for more practical experiences in class, I mean other than placement. I have not worked in the sector before, and so I have very little knowledge what this all looks like in practice. I suppose though for me, just sort of turning the tutorials particularly into more practice experience – perhaps it is my way of learning.*

**Ruby:** *Um, yeah well I guess in social work that's [practice experience] crucial isn't it, because how can we learn about working with people just by sitting in a lecture theatre and talking about it.*

**Olivia:** Yeah, even the interview sort of subject when we had to do that fifteen minute fake client/social worker situation. It is the most daunting thing I have ever done because it was the first time I had ever done it and I thought I am going to be horrible at it. I don't even remember how well I did, but that was good, and more of that would have been valuable I think.

Students often raised the importance of discussion with their peers as a significant factor in their learning. These discussions included not only those that happened in a formal classroom setting, but also discussions outside of the classroom and indeed with people from outside of the university.

**Mia:** I think peers had a lot to do with it, who you are in class with, and the lecturer in terms of being flexible to how the class is run to fit with the group of students that there are. I know in my first two years we had a really, really good group, a really good tight-knit group. Yeah, so I don't know, I think it's the person teaching and the group of people that you are there with that was the most important part of my experience.

**Sophie:** I think my best studying is done in groups and smaller groups. It is just easier to be more open and less self-conscious I guess.

**Angela:** It certainly did help you understand the material, no question, because you are listening to other people's ideas and other people's questions and that is all helpful, because other people ask questions that might not have crossed your mind to ask or you hear an answer to something that you were going to ask anyway, or yeah, there is discussions going on around you and you are hearing in the times in between actually being in session you are hearing about other peoples life's and work and experience and [have] the opportunity to talk to staff. So, definitely useful. I would not have missed it for the world.

**Emily:** Particularly from people and fellow students because I really love listening to stories, the story-telling, and I think that is where I learn a lot of

*stuff, create change from listening to people and reflecting on that and how that that sits with me. It sort of starts up a critical reflection of myself in a way.*

## **6.6 Groups A & B: Critical reflection**

As discussed earlier in this thesis, critical reflection has been identified as a crucial dimension of transformative learning and also occupies a central place in social work education. In response to the question asking them to identify particularly significant educational practices or approaches, no students in Group A or B discussed reflective activities *per se*. However, in response to a direct question about the nature and importance of critical reflection in their learning, all of the students were able to discuss their experience of such reflection.

**Matilda:** *Well I think it has because this is one good thing about the degree –it is always saying reflect, reflect, reflect, reflect, and when you are doing your Joe Blow average kind of job, not a social worker job, you don't really think about reflecting, where as this one you do... and that's one important skill that has come through and it has certainly got me. It has forced me to think about what did I do well, what did I not do well, how can I do my job better.*

For some students, their articulation of critical reflection appeared to indicate a fairly instrumental understanding of the nature and purpose of the practice.

**Mia:** *Probably trying to decide which areas I should be working in and which areas I don't fit in with, that I don't want to be working in – that is probably an important one I think.*

**Emily:** *When I critically reflect about something, a situation that has just happened, I think about it and go through the process of what happened you know, just run through it like a story. And I pick out the negative things*

*that I did, what I did do well, what I thought I did well. Before, I never used to do that, I just used to pick at the negatives but now I pick at the positive things and think about how that affected the situation and how I could have done things a bit better and how that might have resulted or I might have, so I think about how I could have got to my desired outcome.*

**Olivia:** *It was because of my lack of confidence in myself. I think that I need to make sure that I wasn't doing things horribly wrong; it made me look at how I was functioning in that role or in anything that I was doing that was related, to make sure I could look at it and go oh well ok I did it this way, how could I have improved on that and did I really need to say those things. Then it can be somewhat destructive too if you overkill it.*

Other participants recognised the value of critical reflection but also related that they found it a challenging or difficult process to engage in.

**Lily:** *Because every time you had to do one of those bloody reflective journals you had to dig deeper, or you actually just cut and paste, I don't like that for some reason.*

**William:** *Critical reflection to me is relatively simple theoretically, but extremely difficult to put into actual practice, it is like what did I do today basically; what is my world view according to what I did how; could I rethink the situation; how could I have done it differently. But it is very difficult to actually depart from your original behaviour, like you can't really.*

**Sophie:** *Its been really hard for me because to me I always think critical reflection should, I always think of it as, easy. 'OK, what did you feel? – I don't know... But then maybe critical reflection has meant, 'how do you apply that to theory?', so I am not entirely sure what they mean by critical reflection I guess.*

**Leonie** - *I think I wrote on the bottom of my file journal, I think I am all reflected out, thanks very much. It is really draining, can be really draining emotionally, and spiritually. Critical reflection for me is about questions, has been about questioning myself, questioning why is it so.*

Some students did include an explicit examination of values and beliefs in their discussion of the importance of critical reflection in their own learning, and the links between this and personal growth.

**Ruby:** *Yeah, I think it has been if not the most significant then one of the most significant, and I think it should be taught in schools for everybody because it is so important to be able to reflect on your values and why we have those values and how are they impacting on other people and how they impact on our interactions with other people and are we imposing our values on other people.*

**Charlotte:** *It has been very important. I am not sure that I could have had the experiences or would have had the experiences that I have had this year if I had not been encouraged to, and been able to, reflect critically on what I am learning and then relating those learnings to my own stuff and my own values and ideas and beliefs, and then in turn reflecting on them and saying 'how do they get that particular value or that particular idea of how I should be and how does it translate into my real life'.*

**Angela:** *That's a really interesting one, right from the beginning of the degree I found the reflection side really, really easy. It just came absolutely naturally to me. I think the reason for that is that I was motivated from quite an early age about personal growth and development and improving yourself as a person, and you can't do that without constant and pretty regular self-reflection.*

## 6.7 Group C: Facilitating transformation

The goal in discussing specific teaching practices with the research participants was to attempt to identify any particular practices or approaches that seemed to have facilitated the experience of transformative learning. Clearly, one starting point for such an exploration is to look at the setting of the initial disorienting dilemma experienced by students in Group C, to see if the setting for this experience was related to a teaching practice or other facilitative condition.

As described in the previous chapter, for two of the Group C students, Grace and Maria, the disorienting dilemma that precipitated reflection and change occurred while on their field placement and involved specific situations that triggered reactions which were experienced as challenging, leading to subsequent reflection and change. For Ella and Sienna, the disorientation arose from their participation in classrooms characterised by diversity, where exposure to difference raised issues of their own values and beliefs. Chloe, Marian and Ava all linked their experience of disorientation to specific stimulus material used in teaching – prescribed subject content, a novel set as a text in a subject and a video shown in class. In each instance, encountering this stimulus material led to the disorientation and subsequent reflection characteristic of transformative learning. Sarah described her 'lightbulb' moment as happening while she was sitting in a class and was triggered by a challenging statement made by the lecturer that was relevant to an issue in her own life. For Zoe, the disorientation stemmed specifically from an experience outside of university that connected back directly to her social work education experiences.

There was therefore no clear consensus amongst the Group C participants about specific teaching practices that seem to have been involved in precipitating disorienting dilemmas. In terms of practices which were directly linked to the disorienting experiences of this group the key issues identified seemed to be the provision of engaging stimulus material, creating opportunities for the identification and discussion of diversity in the classroom and the opportunities for experiential challenge and learning presented by field placements.

However, in all cases the experience seems to have involved an encounter with 'difference', where students were confronted with the realisation that there were other ways of being, other values and beliefs, which were different from their own and which needed to be considered.

More broadly, however, this group of students were able to identify a range of teaching practices or dimensions of their student experience that they found useful or effective in their learning. Chloe, for example, indicated that, despite the reduced amount of direct interaction, she preferred the external mode of study.

**Chloe:** *I have to say that my experience of studying distance ed I actually preferred it. Because I have been working this entire time throughout my studies, it has been much more easier for me to study when I get back home. I am home rather than commuting to university going to a lecture etc.. So I find that it was better for my time management; it really suited me. I didn't find there was any disadvantage at all, in fact I felt like it helped me.*

Ella also did a majority of her degree externally and reported that the most significant aspect of teaching practice for her was being exposed to new content. However, opportunities for interaction, either face-to-face or online, were also seen as significant for her learning.

**Ella:** *The discussion board is a really good tool. I know that I could not always get on and contribute a lot because I would have all of these ideas that I wanted to toss around, but often the discussion board, if not for my own contribution but for looking at what other people were saying. Sometimes I would go, 'oh yeah. that's what I am thinking'.*

Content in the form of readings, as well as the actual process of writing about new issues, was also highlighted by Zoe when considering her learning experiences.

**Zoe:** *Probably the readings, yeah the readings and the writing of the essays [was the most useful] because, for me, writing is a way of, is a learning process for me. It is very much about consolidating the reading that I have done and the ideas that I am formulating, and it helps structure my understanding of what I have read so far. And so I locked myself away for usually two to three days a week throughout the year for two years, just to read and write, and that was the most significant learning for me.*

Interestingly, Zoe identified practical, experiential learning as important for her, but noted that this wasn't always something that she found easy to embrace.

**Zoe:** *I am actually not someone who just gets right in there. I do learn by doing, I do learn by doing and by repetition because I am able to develop that rhythm of practice, that repetition that I like to create a bit. Throwing [me] in the deep end experience is always a stressful but productive experience for me. But if you gave me two options, I would always, just give me an essay or I'll write a thesis. Not the greatest option.*

The opportunity to do practical or interactive exercises was also recognised as important by Ella, who connected this with recognition of her own learning style.

**Ella:** *Interactive stuff. So where you might do some sort of a, maybe a role play or you might take a concept and they might help to really pick and pull it apart, and analyse it. It would help when that sort of thing happened, rather than just somebody standing up the front and lecturing. To me that's kind of like that hands on stuff, where you are really having to engage and use your brain and get it working and looking at the concepts, and I think that, well I know that, that was done also in the workshop with ecosocial justice, and that was a really good one because that is where we really had to apply the stuff that we were learning about, and come up with a framework to meet a particular scenario. I think I have learned that with my learning style, that I do need to be actually doing stuff for it to really cement, but it also not only cement but for it to have a lot of meaning.*

Ava identified two particular dimensions of her educational experience that had been particularly significant for her learning: Subjects where self-exploration and reflection had been central to the content and process, and experiential approaches that involved 'doing' as well as listening.

**Ava:** *The subjects I have loved have all been really subjective. The dimensions of human experience – I loved it, and it really made me think about where I had come from, how it had formed my values, what had happened in my life, what it impacted on me, more or less why I was the way I am, how I thought about other people. It was confrontational in some ways [but I] loved it, just loved that subject.*

**Ava:** *Role plays, I just loved them because I felt like you were actually out there doing it, and, I just loved them. Whether you were the person being counselled or the person with the problem or the person that was acting as a social worker, I just found it great to actually do it and to verbalise it and to feel how it was working with someone.*

Sarah also identified opportunities to engage in self-exploration within the social work course as particularly important and significant for her.

**Sarah:** *It was a fabulous subject. When we first started the subject I will admit that I kind of thought this is useless and this is an airy-fairy subject. The realisation for me that it was really valuable really didn't come until the end of second year, but the subject itself was more about self-discovery I suppose. It was about breaking down, it was about me breaking down my understanding of myself and where my values originally come from, so looking at my family values, how I had been influenced by educators, how I had been influenced by the community that I grew up in. And it was a really good starting point I think for the degree because, as you are going through, there is all the theory that you have got to do but unless you know yourself I*

*don't think you really get the benefit of all the other material that is provided.*

In contrast to Chloe and Ella, Grace explained that, for her, content presented through reading was not a particularly important influence on her learning.

**Grace:** *Probably not from what I read, not from what I read. I learned probably more from my lectures more than anything I think, my first two years definitely my lectures, my tuts. Reading definitely not, I hate reading so I didn't do very much.*

Grace did, however, find opportunities for talking with other students and practical experiences, particularly field placements, as highly significant in her learning experiences. These were also themes identified by Sienna, who also indicated that the material encountered through reading was useful, but not, in itself, enough.

**Sienna:** *Yes, and although I do keep in mind that reading is not the be all and end all, it's the talking to the people and getting their story, you can see things written down and what things are supposed to be but talking to different people then you can find out the real story. I'm probably not explaining myself very well, but you can only read so much in text books, you can't get a real life picture unless you talk to people.*

Sienna also made particular mention of experiential learning activities and field placements as significant for her.

**Sienna:** *OK, the interpersonal skills subjects, where the people skills that most of us possess but need you to work on – like the paraphrasing and clarifying and all that sort of stuff. I found they were really good because there was lots of role play, lots of case studies, lots of discussion. The placements, yeah well people grumble and groan a bit at placements, but you know they are the best thing to be able to go and do because you are*

*still a student and you can go out and learn and you have got that student status to fall back on but you are also validating what you have been learning in the classroom.*

Maria had studied both internally on-campus and as an external student, and it was clear that, for her, the realities of external study were very challenging.

**Maria:** *Then I did an external one and I found that incredibly difficult. I think with the external subjects and doing it via computers I found that I was really isolated. I didn't understand the material. I am a person that is very visual. I like to actually see a demonstration of what people are trying to talk about or do diagrams around what they are talking about.*

In a similar vein, Marian identified some of the features of on-campus, face-to-face teaching as being particularly significant for her learning.

**Marian:** *To me I really enjoyed the experience of being an internal student, I like the interaction between the lecturer and myself and the others in the class, that was really important to me. Some of the subjects I did very well in and I think I did well in those because of the study groups, so I would always encourage people to join study groups. Sometimes it is hard to keep motivated and on track with study groups but it became quite easy for us.*

For this group of students a range of teaching approaches and activities seem to have been significant in shaping their overall experience of learning during their social work education.

## **6.8 Group C: Critical reflection**

All of the Group C participants indicated very clearly that critical reflection had been a significant dimension of their learning while studying social work. For two of these students, the practical or instrumental aspect of reflection was noted as important.

**Zoe:** *I understand critical reflection to be about thinking about the reasons behind why I have done something a certain way.*

**Zoe:** *You attempt something, you make a mistake, you try again and then in order to avoid insanity by trying the same thing over and over again and expecting the same result, you reflect on it and change something, tweak something, you know. And it could be something really little or it could be something quite huge.*

**Maria:** *Critical reflection is like I am on placement and whatever I am doing I am kind of sitting down at the end of the week and if I have not got it right you need to tell me.*

However, both of these students unpacked these ideas further to reveal a concern with understanding self, in the sense of considering their own values, beliefs and backgrounds.

**Zoe:** *Yeah, very much so. It is all about me, because I just bring, you know, I think everyone brings so much of themselves to their practice, and I have noticed in myself lately I can be very irritable when I am busy, and I am not great at relationship-building. That is probably my down point, and I am learning from that already.*

**Maria:** *What was it about me that got stuck there? If I tried, if I had looked at it from this perspective would it have made a difference to how that unfolded? Why did I pick up on that and not on something else?*

This focus on the use of reflection to examine and understand aspects of self, and of values in particular, was a feature of the way other members in this group discussed the experience of critical reflection in the social work studies.

**Sarah:** *OK, I suppose for me critical reflection has been really important in my study. For me critical reflection is more than just stopping and taking the time to think about something, it's really about challenging myself more than anything.*

Sarah spoke in detail about an experience of using critical reflection while on placement. In this process, she was interrogating herself about feeling comfortable with a difficult decision that was being made in relation to a child protection issue.

**Sarah:** *[There was a] decision that was being made. I was extremely comfortable with and that I discussed it in supervision with my supervisor and we were talking about why I was comfortable with it. And when I started delving into it, it was because it went back to the values of my childhood. And I suppose from there I was then able to work out what was influencing me the most I suppose, and it actually made me accept the decision that was being made was the right one, but that I just had to be cautious next time about why I was choosing to accept what was happening.*

Chloe's comments are illustrative of the ideas of members of this group in discussing how she saw this reflection on values and beliefs as being an integral and valuable part of social work and social work education, an idea echoed by Grace.

**Chloe:** *I think it is very relevant to all of us in counselling and social work. There has been an emphasis on being able to understand oneself and your own values and beliefs because, ultimately, that is bought to the table, and whether or not you may react to it outwardly, when you are interacting with clients, there may be some kind of internal trigger or just being aware of your processes. I think it is about trying to be a conscious worker and it is very difficult, in fact it is impossible, to be conscious if you are not aware of what's going on as far as your values and beliefs.*

**Grace:** *That's probably my biggest learning curve in uni full stop because I mean life just gets so busy. Who has time to look back and look back, look back properly, look back and sometimes it is not the easiest thing to do. People's pasts are very broad and different and mine, you know, I did some really silly things, but I understand them now, looking back on them. For the learning side of it, it is probably the biggest thing I have learned – to be able to accept that reflecting and understand why you do, why I did things.*

This group of students articulated a process of reflection that was conscious and purposeful. Recognising the value of classroom or assessment practices that encouraged or required reflection, a number of this group also suggested that a commitment to critical reflection required a deeper personal commitment to self-exploration.

**Ava:** *I found what was very influential for me was when we had essays like the race racism one. I found what really helped me was to go well beyond the readings that were set and do my own exploration and try to get my own spin on it. And the more I read the more I felt like I understood and it made me think about, alright why I am thinking about it this way, and how was this person's culture impacting on this problem, and would it be different if it was from a different culture, and how as an Australian with my culture am I feeling?*

For students in Group C, critical reflection appears to have been conceptualised and practiced in a way that integrates the examination of existing beliefs and values, or in Mezirow's terminology, meaning perspectives, into the reflective process.

## 6.9 Conclusion

Unsurprisingly, all of the participants in this research reported significant learning and growth as part of their experience of social work education. For

many of the students, this learning was reported as an incremental, developmental process. Students reported coming to social work education from a range of backgrounds and with a diverse set of worldviews. For a significant proportion, this pre-existing worldview was one that had been shaped by earlier exposure to ideas of social justice or by experiences working in or being in contact with the human services sector.

Through discussion of their learning experiences in social work education and the ways in which these might relate to Mezirow's notion of transformative learning, three groups emerge from the data. The first of these is a group of students who self-reported no significant 'shift' in meaning perspective or worldview and whose accounts seem to confirm this assessment. The second is a group who self-assessed as having such shifts, but through their account appear to be describing a process that is more developmental and incremental than Mezirow's articulation. The third group are those with learning experiences that align most closely with Mezirow's articulation of a transformative learning experience, involving a disorienting dilemma; subsequent reflection on self, values and assumptions; recognition of the inadequacy of existing perspectives; a shift in perspective, often associated with a dialogical process involving others; and subsequent enacting of a changed meaning perspective or worldview.

None of these accounts of transformation appears to reflect a full alignment with the ten phases described by Mezirow in his articulation of the transformative process. However, given that Mezirow himself was at pains to emphasise that transformative learning is not a prescriptively staged theory, this may not be an unexpected finding.

The 'action research' aspect of this research project relates to the capacity to use the findings of the research to shape future teaching practice. It is important, therefore, to hear from participants about what they experienced as the most significant and effective dimensions of their social work education, and in particular to hear if there were specific teaching practices or approaches that seemed to be involved in learning and change.

While some participants struggled to identify specific practices that they experienced as influential, many were able to describe various significant aspects of their educational experience. These included things like the perceived passion of teaching staff, the actual content of university subjects, opportunities for engaging in discussion with peers, and experiential or practical exercises within their degree program.

For those students in Group C, for whom Mezirowian transformative learning appears to have occurred, the disorienting dilemma associated with precipitating the transformative process was interrogated to uncover any relationships with specific teaching practices. However, what students reported was a diverse range of settings in which such disorienting experiences occurred, and which do not appear to have been linked to specific teaching practices in a technical, pedagogical sense. Rather these disorientations seem to have been precipitated by encounters with 'difference'.

Critical reflection was given particular attention as an aspect of students' social work education. While all students saw such reflection as important, the process itself was understood and described in a range of ways. For some students critical reflection meant a process used in practice to improve their work and avoid repeating mistakes or misjudgements. For others, and for all of the students in Group C, critical reflection was extended to include an essential component of reflecting on one's own values and beliefs, both as a tool for personal growth but also as a way of recognising the impact of these on practice.

The following chapters draw on these findings to discuss the meaning and implications of the data provided by research participants.

## **Chapter 7. Discussion**

As noted in the introduction to this thesis, this research seeks to explore the experiences of students engaged in social work education and to document the degree to which their experiences reflect the features of Mezirow's transformative learning theory. Furthermore, it also aims to generate suggestions as to how transformative approaches to learning might be effectively and purposefully incorporated into the practice of social work education. In this manner, transformative learning theory is explored both for its explanatory power and for its potential to be enacted in the service of social justice and social change oriented social work education.

Based on the findings presented in the previous chapter, the first section of this chapter discusses the utility of transformative learning theory as an explanatory construct in understanding participants' experiences of social work education and, in particular, aspects of social work education that have led to shifts in students' worldviews or meaning perspectives.

The learning experiences of students in this study are then brought into focus, comparing those accounts with the tenets of transformative learning theory. First discussing those participants who have reported instances of transformative learning, an assessment is made of the degree to which such accounts are congruent with the elements and processes described in Mezirow's theoretical articulation of transformation. The non-transforming group of students is then discussed, and explanations for their difference of experience suggested. A conclusion is then reached regarding the utility of transformative learning theory as a way of understanding the students' experience of social work education.

The second section of the chapter turns its attention to the second key aim of the research – to assess the potential for transformative approaches to learning to promote social justice and social change oriented social work education. This section begins by discussing the nature of the transformative learning

experiences described in the study, before going on to explore the links between transformative learning and critical theory. This relationship is explored in light of critiques of transformative learning theory that have argued that its perceived individualised focus does not pay sufficient attention to political and ideological context or action for change (see, for example, Brookfield, 2012). Viewed from such a critical theory perspective, the nature of the transformations that students experienced and the degree to which these then translated into changed behaviour and action is then discussed. In particular, the nature of the transformations is explored in terms of a shift towards a more socially just orientated frame of reference and the relationship of this shift to broader social action and change.

The discussion then shifts to the broader question of the contribution that transformative learning theory might play in social work education as a whole. The nature of social work as a ‘normative’ profession with a vision that is articulated and promulgated through foundation documents, such as codes of ethics, is described, with an argument advanced that the social work ‘vision’ is one that is inherently aligned with a socially transformative agenda. Social work education has a significant role to play in movement towards this vision, and it is argued that transformative learning theory, while limited in some respects, holds the potential to make a meaningful contribution in this area.

The final section of the chapter discusses the practical facilitation of transformative learning in social work education. While the findings of the research do not point to specific pedagogical practices as being universally effective in promoting transformative learning experiences, a number of broad but significant factors can be identified from students’ accounts and these are discussed. Particular emphasis is given to discussing the facilitation of a critical approach to transformative learning in social work education.

## **7.1 The utility of transformative learning theory as an explanatory construct**

From the findings presented in the previous chapters it is evident that meaningful and significant learning occurred for all of the research participants during their experience of social work education. From participants' reports there is clear evidence of the incremental accumulation of knowledge, the development of specific skills and, to varying degrees, the development of reflective capacities. What is also clear is that amongst these 25 participants there is a diversity of experience, including both the processes by which learning occurred and the outcomes of those processes. In other words, all participants learned, but they learned different things and in different ways.

### **7.1.1 The learners**

For the purposes of this research, the primary difference under consideration is the degree to which students' learning experiences did or did not correspond with the type of learning outlined in Mezirow's theory. Out of the 25 participants, a majority ( $N=16$ ) was identified as having reported learning experiences that were not highly correspondent with transformative learning theory. For this group, a disorienting dilemma followed by the dramatic 'shift' in meaning perspective and worldview that is generally seen as characteristic of transformative learning was not part of their educational experience. Rather, they reported learning that represented a more incremental and developmental experience. This in no way devalues this learning, or suggests that it was in any way less significant or meaningful for the students, it simply notes that it did not appear to conform to the attributes of transformative learning.

The smaller group of students (Group 'C' in the findings chapters) reported learning experiences that more closely resembled the processes and outcomes suggested by Mezirow's theory. For these students a more dramatic and singular learning experience was identified, one triggered by a challenging situation leading to reflection, evaluation of existing worldviews, and a purposeful re-appraisal resulting in altered meaning perspectives which were subsequently put into action in the social world.

Amongst the 25 research participants two qualitatively different types of learning experiences have therefore been documented – one which does not appear to align closely with Mezirow's articulation and one which appears strongly congruent with that theoretical description. In response to the aims of this research, the following discussion explores the degree to which the experiences of both groups of students can be explained and understood using transformative learning theory.

### **7.1.2 The explanatory power of transformative learning theory**

The words 'transformation' and 'transformative' have, arguably, become grossly overused in the past decade (Witkin, 2014). One need not read very far in the media or social literature to find myriad examples of things being identified as transformative (Magister, 2016; Rodin, 2013). Essentially, the term has been used to replace the word 'change' so that every change, regardless of nature or scale is seen as a transformation. Whether this synonymous application is accurate or not is an issue for linguists to debate. However, in discussions of educational theory, and transformative learning theory in particular, it is clear that not all change is transformation: and while all learning involves change, not all learning is transformative learning (Schugurensky, 2002).

This returns us to Mezirow's articulation of transformative learning. For Mezirow, transformative learning is defined as "learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open and emotionally able to change" (2009, p. 23). Key to this definition is the notion of 'problematic' frames of reference – referring to frames of reference that are limited and distorted, epistemologically, socio-culturally or psychologically. These structures of meaning are built up over time and represent filters through which sense perceptions are passed and which influence, shape and delimit "perceptions, cognition, and feelings by predisposing our intentions, purposes and expectations" (Mezirow, 2009, p. 22). The transformative learning process begins when, as a result of a disorienting experience or experiences, a person becomes conscious of the problematic nature of their previously taken-for-granted frames of reference. For some

learners, this recognition leads to critical reflection and reframing. This can be either objective reframing, where the content of a problem or the process of problem solving is the focus, and/or subjective reframing, where a learner's own beliefs and expectations are called into question and learners "become coauthors of the cultural narratives with which we have been inscribed" (Mezirow, 2009, p.23). As a result of this reframing a new frame of reference, which is more open and inclusive, is generated. In Mezirow's theory, true transformative learning must then see this new frame of reference 'tested out' in the social world, leading to new roles, relationships and reintegration (Mezirow, 2012).

As detailed in the Literature Review chapters, Mezirow's original research led him to describe a process with a number of phases that represented the unfolding or development of a transformative learning experience. While he noted that he did not consider transformative learning a 'stage' theory, he felt that these phases represented a consistent pattern of transformation, but one that might vary in differing contexts. Given that we will discuss the relationship between student accounts and this process, it is worth reiterating Mezirow's ten phases:

- 1. A disorienting dilemma*
- 2. Self-examination*
- 3. A critical assessment of assumptions*
- 4. Recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation*
- 5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and action*
- 6. Planning a course of action*
- 7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan*
- 8. Provisional trying of new roles*
- 9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships*
- 10. Reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.* (Mezirow, 2009, p. 19)

### **7.1.3 Transforming learners**

The data presented and analysed in this research indicates clearly that some participants in the study described transformative learning experiences that align closely with Mezirow's theory. These students described 'disorienting dilemmas' in the form of a variety of challenging or unsettling experiences that acted as a catalyst for reflection. They described a process of reflection on their existing assumptions and, on the basis of that reflection, arriving at recognition of the limitations of their existing frame of reference. They subsequently took action to change or expand this frame of reference and to test the new meaning structures in the social world.

For this group of students the disorientating dilemma that precipitated transformative learning took a number of different forms. For example, in the case of Grace it was being confronted with the details of a client's situation, and her agency's response to this, while on placement. In the case of Chloe and Maria it was an encounter with new information about the realities of the colonial experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, while Sienna was shocked to find an Aboriginal student in one of her university classes. Ella was unsettled by the diversity of socio-economic backgrounds that she encountered in a social work classroom, while for Marian reading a piece of social literature set as stimulus material in class led to a distressing realization. For all nine of the students who fell into group 'C', there was a clear event or chain of events which stood out for them as a significant unsettling moment and which initiated a subsequent set of actions. While the specific nature of the experiences differed significantly, this echoes Cranton's observation that a disorienting dilemma could be "...as traumatic as losing a job or as ordinary as an unexpected question" (2002, p. 64).

In terms of the aims of this research, the significance of the presence of a disorienting dilemma in the accounts of these social work students is that it a) corresponds with the description of transformative learning as advanced by Mezirow and others and, b) it precipitated a series of actions that, to varying

degrees, also align with the phases of transformation described by Mezirow (2009).

One of the subsequent actions, discernible in all nine participants' reports, is self-examination and reflection on their existing assumptions and worldview. Chloe, for example, described this process of being confronted with an unsettling new idea and needing to "...figure out or fish through it, how does that sit with me or why doesn't it sit with me...does it speak any truth to me?". Similarly, Sarah talked about a process where she was "... going over things in my head a little bit and pretty much staying inside my head, probably for about a week...just trying to get things out, trying to work them out...". For some students this was an emotionally difficult process, and a number reported powerful emotional reactions to the disorienting dilemma, including Grace who "...cracked the shits and threw stuff and cried and threw more stuff...". This reflects Mezirow's observation that such disorienting experiences can often be accompanied by feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame (Mezirow, 2000).

The experience being described by these students goes well beyond the straightforward recognition that information that they have been exposed to illuminates a gap in their own existing knowledge. For this group of students it was not simply a matter of knowing something new or thinking about something in a new way – both of which are situations where new information can be relatively easily incorporated into existing frames of reference. On the contrary, these disorienting dilemmas not only exposed the students to new information but that new information caused them to question, at a profound level, significant aspects of their existing frames of reference. Rather than being able to simply say that they now know something that they didn't know before, these dilemmas led students to recognise that this 'coming to know something' has also led them to question their own sense of self - their beliefs, values and assumptions. This is a significant observation as it points to these students beginning a reframing process that is focused both on content (objective reframing) and on their personal assumptions and epistemology (subjective reframing).

A number of the students came to realisations during this reflective process about some aspects of the origins of their existing worldviews or the influencing factors that had shaped these. Transmission of ideas and attitudes through familial situations was a common theme, with several students indicating that they were raised in family environments characterised by closed and limited attitudes around race, gender and other issues. However, reflection on the processes of acculturation and socialization were not solely restricted to the impact of family. Maria, for example, felt angry at the education system for failing to tell her the truth about Aboriginal history, while both Ella and Ava discerned a broader influence, including people with whom they socialised. They also indicated the influence of social class in shaping attitudes. Ava spoke about racist views in the sense of more broadly held social attitudes or, as she described them, “popular beliefs” which she “absorbed”. In this sense, these previous frames of reference can be seen to represent dimensions of hegemonic assumptions (Brookfield, 2012; McGarr & McCormack, 2014; Schwarzmantel, 2005), although the degree to which these learners discussed such dynamics was minimal. Regardless, this exploration of the origins of their existing frames of reference, now identified as problematic or inadequate, was an important part of the transformative process and aligned closely with Mezirow’s proposed phases of transformative learning.

While the accounts of this group of students appear to match closely the first three phases of Mezirow’s description of the transformative learning process, alignment with a number of the following phases is less clear. For example, no students spoke specifically or in a very focused manner about recognising the shared nature of their discontent (Mezirow phase 4), exploring options for new roles, relationships and actions (Mezirow phase 5), or planning a course of action (Mezirow phase 6). This does not necessarily mean that these phases were not part of these students’ experiences, as they may simply not have been fully identified and articulated as part of the interview process. Alternatively, the lack of discussion of these specific phases may simply indicate the type of variability

that Mezirow discussed as possible, based on the specific context of the learning experience (Mezirow, 2009).

Closer alignment occurs again in the latter phases of Mezirow's process, where students in the study describe acquiring new knowledge that relates to their new frame of reference, testing out new attitudes and beliefs, and enacting the new frame of reference in various aspects of their life and practice (Mezirow phases 8-10). This enacting, or reintegration, is a highly significant aspect of the students' accounts as it represents the practical outcome of the transformative process. For this group, this reintegration took a variety of forms, from simply behaving in a more accepting way towards others (Ava); inculcating a critical, questioning attitude (Sienna, Zoe), becoming an activist within her family where she challenges others' attitudes (Ella); through to significant changes in approaches to professional practice (Chloe, Marian). Maria is an interesting outlier in this respect as she expresses disappointment that her new frame of reference hasn't led to her taking more direct political action. However, even for Maria there have been practical outcomes from the transformative process, as she reports "dropping off" previous friends who don't possess similar worldviews.

A key aim of this research project is to explore the utility of transformative learning theory as an explanatory construct in developing an understanding of students' experience of social work education. A deductive analysis, using Mezirow's definition and explanation of transformative learning, including his suggested phases of the transformative process, indicates that for this particular sub-group of research participants, the theory does have strong explanatory power. The presence and significance in the accounts of these students of a disorienting dilemma; subsequent self-examination and reflection on pre-existing frames of reference; the replacement of limited, distorted frames of reference with more open and inclusive meaning structures; and the reintegration through action of the new frame of reference, all speak to a close alignment with transformative learning theory.

However, this sub-group of learners represented less than half of the students who took part in the research. In assessing the utility of transformative learning theory, it is important to explore the degree to which the theory can also support better understanding of the experience of those students who did not report such transformative experiences.

#### **7.1.4 Learning without transforming**

Of the 25 participants in this research, 16 reported experiences of learning that, upon close analysis, do not appear to represent clear examples of transformative learning as described by Mezirow. A number of these students initially answered positively to the question of whether they had experienced a significant shift in worldview as a consequence of their social work education, but discussion revealed the absence of a disorienting dilemma and the presence of a process of learning that could be described as incremental and developmental rather than transformative. This is despite, in many cases, being embedded in the same learning environments, and coming into contact with the same educators, information and stimulus material as those students who did report transformative learning experiences.

In terms of the tenets of transformative learning theory, the absence of a disorienting dilemma is a key point in understanding these students' experiences. In Mezirow's theory, all transformation begins with this type of unsettling experience. It acts as the experiential catalyst that then precipitates the reflection and reframing characteristic of the transformative process. This group of students was clear in identifying that their experience of social work education had not included such a disorienting experience. What they described instead was a steady, developmental process whereby they encountered new information, engaged in new experiences, developed new skills, but did so in an incremental fashion, building upon previous knowledge and enhancing or expanding their worldviews.

Such descriptions lack the dramatic sense of shift or the profound self-examination that is seen in the accounts of the transformative learning examples.

There are, of course, similarities in some aspects of learning experiences within the total group of participants. All students, for example, noted the value and importance of reflection as part of learning and practice. However, the absence of this initial disorienting experience would lead the theory to predict that transformative learning – in the sense of a profound reframing of an existing frame of reference or meaning structure – would not occur. In this sense the theory also has significant explanatory power in helping to make sense of the experience of these non-transforming students. This then leads to the question of why some students experienced disorienting dilemmas, and the subsequent transformative process, and some did not.

#### **7.1.5 Transforming or not: The role of values congruence**

The findings of this study suggest that the key factor in terms of which students experienced transformative learning and which students did not relates to the issue of what students brought with them into social work education, and in particular the nature of students' existing frames of reference and worldviews – including their values, beliefs and assumptions about the social world.

The findings suggest that participants who had previously been exposed to the types of information presented in the social work course, and who had been exposed to and/or internalised values and beliefs which were congruent with those that they were presented with in social work education were unlikely to experience a profound disorientation as part of their learning experience. Many of the non-transforming students reported growing up in family environments where values of social justice and human rights (in a variety of manifestations) were present. Mia, Louise and Angela, for example, talk about parents who were 'into' social justice, engaged in activism and involved in service within the community.

Family was not, however, the only source of these pre-existing value orientations. Matilda, for example, discussed her discovery of feminism outside of her family and the way it had shaped her values prior to coming into social work education. Other participants discussed the development of their

knowledge and values base as being related to employment in the social welfare field (e.g. Angela), previous encounters with social workers (e.g. Lily and Matilda), and previous studies in the social sciences which had exposed them to ideas and values congruent with those encountered in social work education (e.g. William).

The important point here is that, through various means, these students had already acquired and developed a worldview that included a foundation of knowledge and a set of values, beliefs and attitudes that aligned with the content that they encountered once they entered social work education. Given this pre-existing level of congruence, and particularly values congruence, it is not surprising that this group of students was less likely to be profoundly unsettled by the content of their social work education, i.e. less likely to experience a disorienting dilemma, and more likely to experience the learning process as one where their existing knowledge and values were expanded, enhanced and confirmed.

Conversely, participants with less exposure to such values and beliefs, or who had not encountered the type of information commonly presented in social work education, were more likely to experience disorientation as a result of the material they encountered or experiences they had as part of social work education. It is therefore this 'gap' between students' pre-existing knowledge, values, beliefs and assumptions, i.e. their existing frames of reference, and the material being encountered as part of social work education, which emerges as the key to understanding the differences in reported learning experiences between the transforming and non-transforming students.

The findings of this research indicate a clear alignment between the experiences of Group 'C', the transforming learners, and Mezirow's theory. This alignment is clear in terms of the general definition and description of transformative learning and in terms of the degree to which learner's accounts were congruent with Mezirow's ten phases of transformation. For those students whose accounts did not seem to represent transformative learning, the theory provided an

explanation of this difference by highlighting the absence of a disorienting dilemma and subsequent reframing of meaning perspectives. The explanation for the difference between the two groups appears to lie in the degree of pre-existing knowledge and values congruence, where learners with existing knowledge and values reflective of the content taught in social work education were unlikely to experience disorientation. Transformative learning theory therefore has significant value as an explanatory concept when exploring the learning experiences of this group of social work students.

## **7.2 Transformative learning: Promoting social justice and social change in social work education**

This section of the Discussion chapter brings a focus to the second major aim of the study – to assess the potential for transformative approaches to learning to promote social justice and social change oriented social work education. In framing such a discussion, it is worthwhile considering what such a ‘promotion’ or contribution might entail and what it might look like. This can be considered from the perspective of both learners and educators. As previously noted, transformative learning leads to profoundly changed frames of reference in learners. The shift is away from narrow, closed and distorted assumptions towards frames of reference that are more open, inclusive and discriminating. Theoretically, such a shift on the part of individual learners could contribute to promoting a socially just and social change oriented social work education in a number of ways.

The way in which this might happen lies in those circumstances where such a shift is characterised as an individualised experience, and where this individual shift manifests in attitudinal change and behavioural change in social settings, with family or friends. A number of the learners in this study appeared to experience this type of transformation. In the social work education setting, students with such a reintegrated frame of reference would be likely to be less judgmental of fellow students, more open to a diversity of perspectives and opinions and likely to align comfortably with core social work values. In this

sense they would make a contribution to the social justice orientation of social work education by reinforcing the defining features of the profession and contributing to the creation of an educational environment characterized by respect and acceptance of difference.

A second way is that learners might experience transformation as an individualised experience, and enact that experience in the social world, but this time moving beyond familial and social circles to explore the enactment in practice settings, as nascent professionals. Again, a number of the learners in this study related accounts of transformation of this nature. The contribution to social work education in this instance includes those aspects mentioned for the previous group, but extends this impact more clearly into the realm of social justice oriented action. In doing so, students do not simply internalise core social work values but demonstrate the implementation of these in practice, particularly during field placement experiences. This then establishes the foundation for continuing critical reflection on this practice and the modeling of socially just forms of practice.

The final option includes all of the aspects discussed above, but extends the experience of transformative learning further by integrating aspects of ideology critique and social change. For such students their individual experience is linked to broader social dynamics. They internalize core social work values, and look for ways to manifest these in practice, but are also concerned with addressing the causes of social injustice and recognise that full realisation of those values will require broader social change. In a social work education setting, this group would contribute a critical, questioning approach and a commitment to modeling action as well as dialogue.

For social work educators, the potential for transformative learning to promote a social justice and social change approach hangs on two issues: the utility of the theory as an explanatory concept; and the degree to which the theory provides practical guidance for facilitating learning and change. The first of these issues has been discussed above and the second is the focus of section 3 of this chapter.

### **7.2.1 The learners and change: Individual and/or social**

To understand the degree to which students' transformative learning experiences might contribute to the promotion of socially just and social change oriented social work education, the actual nature of those experiences needs to be explored. In particular, the degree to which the reported transformations translated into action for social change or remained relatively individualised is significant.

It is instructive to note that the disorienting dilemmas experienced by the transforming group of students in this study all revolved around issues of hegemonic ideology. For Grace, the issue was social expectations around traditional gender roles and the capacity for both women and men to be nurturing parents. In the cases of Chloe, Ava, Sienna and Maria the prevalence and power of racist beliefs and stereotyping was the issue that became the focus of their dilemmas, while Maria also identified the stigma attached to mental illness as another key factor. Social class was central to Ella's dilemma as she became aware of normative assumptions relating to her own class position. Questions of self-determination and paternalism, particularly in relation to the recipients of welfare, were the precipitating issues for Sarah, while related issues of client self-determination and human dignity were central to Marian's dilemma. In Zoe's account, issues of child sexual assault, patriarchal assumptions and the silencing of victims were powerful factors as were issues of cultural diversity, consumerism and tolerance.

In all of these accounts the story of transformation represents a shift from the holding of a limited or distorted view towards a more open inclusive and discriminating view. In Mezirow's terminology, this is a shift towards a more 'dependable' frame of reference (Mezirow, 2009). This was not an easy or smooth transition for most students. Many recounted how upset they felt upon realising the limitations of their existing frame of reference, including feeling embarrassed (e.g. Ella), guilty (e.g. Marian) shocked (e.g. Maria) and horrified (e.g. Ava).

Sienna's account of her transformative learning experience is a good illustration of this process of shifting towards a more open and inclusive frame of reference. Sienna came to a realisation that she was holding a very distorted view of Aboriginal people, one that she had internalised while growing up within a racist family context. This realisation flowed from a disorienting encounter with an Aboriginal man who was a fellow student in her class, eventually leading Sienna to question her existing frame of reference and, in particular, her assumptions about Australian Indigenous people. She reconstituted her frame of reference to better reflect an understanding of the reality of Indigenous people, and was driven to learn more and to use her new knowledge to bring a more critical and questioning approach to her social world. Importantly, Sienna notes that having undergone this transformation, "I don't think it will ever go back to the way it used to be".

These transformations, from limited and distorted to more open, inclusive and differentiating frames of reference also reflect a shift away from limited and oppressive social values towards values that are more progressive and oriented towards justice and respect for human rights (Sayre & Sar, 2015). In this way they can be thought of as liberating in the sense of consciousness-raising (Wahler, 2012) or the recognition and rejection of hegemonic assumptions (Garrett, 2008). Indeed, the transformations could be described as moving clearly in the direction of the core values promulgated by the social work profession itself as described in policy documents such as the AASW Code of Ethics (AASW, 2010) and in the work of social work authors (see, for example, Bisman, 2004; Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015). Put simply, all of the examples of transformative learning in this study describe a move towards more open inclusive frames of reference that reject oppressive hegemonic assumptions and are congruent with progressive social values and with the core values of the social work profession.

In this sense, it can be argued that the experience of transformative learning clearly led to the individualised outcome of students with a much stronger social

justice orientation. This then poses the question of whether or not such individual outcomes might, in turn, make a contribution to broader social change (and a social change oriented social work education) in a way also congruent with broadly progressive values, and with those values espoused specifically by the social work profession.

Transformative learning theory as articulated by Mezirow, would hold that such an extension (of personal change into social action) is possible but not guaranteed by the experience of transformative learning. Based on Mezirow's theory it can be argued that such individual transformation may not necessarily be linked to broader social action or emancipatory practice (i.e. it can remain a solely individualised experience), but that a transformed frame of reference increases the likelihood, or at least the potential, for engaging in such social action. The findings of this research confirm this potential, as the actions of learners post-transformation are considered.

Grace, who found her limiting assumptions around gender roles and parenting so challenging, described, post-transformation, engaging in social work practice (while on placement) that reflected her transformed frame of reference, aligning her practice more closely with core social work values of respect for persons, social justice, valuing humanity, valuing difference, valuing choice etc. (AASW, 2010; Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015). Similarly Chloe, whose transformation revolved around issues of racism, details how she has been applying her transformed frame of reference in her practice while on placement in an Indigenous community, while Sarah also spoke about changing her actual practice while on placement as a result of her learning experience. Ella's realisations about a limited frame of reference relating to social class resulted in a transformation that has led her to action in the form of involvement in a range of voluntary and community-based activities, while Marian dramatically changed her practice as a nurse to be more patient-centred in her approach.

In each of these examples, there is a clear and direct link between action taken in the social world, and in particular action taken in professional practice, and the

transformative learning experience that the students described. While none of these accounts describe action which would fall into the category of social activism, an argument could be made that they could be conceptualised as making an individualised contribution to progressive social change through the impact of their practice and through the process of prefiguring the types of attitudes and behaviours characteristic of a more socially just and equitable world. However, given the relatively minor scale of these actions and the lack of a broader social and ideological critique in the accounts of these learners, this may be something of a stretch. More speculatively, an argument could be made that the transformed frames of reference described by these learners, and their subsequent enacting of change at some level, must increase the potential that they would become engaged in broader social change and social action activities at some stage in their lives.

The link between transformation and action was not as clear in the cases of Ava, Maria, Zoe and Sienna. For these students the shift in their frames of reference resulted in reports of attitudinal and behavioural change, but at the micro or familial social level. Ava for example, describes how her transformation has changed the way she behaves in conversations with family and friends, and Maria notes that she has now changed the people that she associates with, gravitating towards those with similar worldviews. Similarly, Sienna described the changed role that she has adopted within family and social settings, where her newfound critical capacity finds her constantly questioning the status quo (and driving her husband mad). Zoe reported that the transformation had been significant in both her personal and professional life, but was vague on specific actions that reflected this significance.

The findings of this research therefore confirm both possibilities suggested by the transformative learning literature (see, for example, Ettling, 2012) – that transformation could remain as an individual experience, while still increasing the potential for that experience to be collectivised and translated into action, and that, in some instances, such transformation will lead to action that directly contributes to broader processes of social change, in these cases through

progressive professional practice. What is not demonstrated in any of the participants' accounts is the translation of the transformative learning experience into more direct, collective social action based on a structural analysis of society and a critique of ideology. A longitudinal study following these transformed learners to explore whether these potentials toward action, and social activism in particular, have been realised would be an interesting and valuable extension of the current research.

### **7.2.2 Critical transformations**

The individualised nature of the transformative learning described by the transforming students in this study can therefore be seen in at least two ways. First, as suggested above, it may simply be the initial stage of a longer and more encompassing transformation that involves subsequently taking individual shifts in frames of reference and enacting these in the social world in pursuit of broader social emancipatory goals. There is some evidence in the findings of this research that suggests that for some students this was occurring as they enacted their new frames of reference in practice situations as developing professionals. However, this was not the case for all of the transforming students, some of whom had transformed their frames of reference, but had restricted the social enactment of their new worldviews to their own internal selves and to micro realms of family and friends. This is the second way of interpreting these accounts – that transformative learning theory is describing, in this instance and more broadly, what is essentially an individualised, inward focused change process. This poses a challenge to the broader emancipatory potential of transformative learning theory.

The relationship between Mezirow's articulation of transformative learning theory and broader social issues of ideology critique, emancipation and social change is not straightforward. As noted in earlier chapters, in his early writing, Mezirow clearly identified the influence of Freire's (1970) work and its links to his own theoretical formulation. He noted that Freire had identified "the development of critical consciousness as a prerequisite for liberating personal and social action" (Mezirow, 1978, p. 103) and referred to perspective

transformation as an “emancipatory process” (1981, p. 6). Despite these acknowledgements, Mezirow’s early articulations of the theory were critiqued, most notably by Collard & Law (1989), on the grounds that they did not have enough to say about social change. Mezirow’s response to this criticism was to note that social action was only one of many goals of education and that social action may indeed come from individual transformation (Mezirow, 1989; Baumgartner, 2012).

Similar critiques emerged over the years, on the general theme of Mezirow’s perceived lack of attention to ideological critique, socio-political context and social change. In response the theory was further developed to clarify many of these issues, and Mezirow responded directly to several of these critiques. Addressing criticisms by Cunningham (1992) for example, Mezirow (1992) pointed out that his theory did indeed discuss issues of hegemonic ideology and false consciousness, but noted that the relationship between socio-cultural expressions of power and epistemic and psychological factors was complex and seldom direct (Baumgartner, 2012). From these and other responses to similar criticisms, it seems clear that Mezirow regarded social action as a possible but not necessary outcome of transformative learning. In other words, as Baumgartner notes, “transformative learning theory is a foundation for learning how to take social action” (p. 110).

Transformative learning theory does argue that perspective transformation leads to the adoption of more open and inclusive frames of reference. They are normatively ‘better’ frames of reference because they “generate opinions and interpretations that are more justified” (Mezirow, 2012, p. 85). It can be argued that a more dependable frame of reference is therefore one that is liberating for the learner and that greatly enhances the potential for the learner to subsequently engage in social action and social change, without necessarily guaranteeing that such engagement will occur.

The challenge presented by the individual vs. social transformation debate has been recognised in the literature by a number of writers who, over decades, have

raised concerns about the place of transformative learning theory in terms of ideology critique and social change (see, for example, Clark & Wilson, 1991; Collard & Law, 1989; Cunningham, 1992; Newman, 1994). Brookfield has been a particularly significant and influential critic of, and contributor to, transformative learning theory, with a specific interest in its relation to critical theory (Brookfield, 2003, 2009, 2012). He argues that, according to critical theory, any meaningful transformation of the self must be linked to the transformation of political and social systems. De-coupling these aspects of change is therefore highly problematic:

*I argue that critical theory's focus on how adults learn to challenge dominant ideology, uncover power, and contest hegemony is crucial for scholars of transformative learning to consider if transformative learning is to avoid sliding into an unproblematised focus on the self... If the self is understood as politically sculpted, then learning to transform the self is a political project requiring political transformation. (Brookfield, 2012, pp. 131-132)*

Part of critical theory's potential contribution to transformative learning theory, according to Brookfield, is an understanding of ideological hegemony, both in terms of how the elements of dominant hegemony are learned and an understanding of why the limitations which such hegemonic assumptions place on people's lives and life choices are so often not recognised or understood (Brookfield, 2012). This is a significant observation in terms of the findings of this research. One analysis of the accounts of the transforming students is that they represent a 'coming to awareness' of the limiting impacts of hegemonic assumptions. Ava, for example reported having "absorbed some very racist ideas..." while Sienna "...assumed they [Aboriginal people] were uneducated as well". In all of the accounts of transforming students, the operation of hegemonic assumptions can be identified, and in all accounts the disorienting dilemma led to a self-challenging of those assumptions and an eventual replacement of them with a frame of reference that was, in Mezirow's terms, more dependable.

While critical theorists would undoubtedly see this consciousness raising as both encouraging and necessary, it is doubtful that many would see it as sufficient. Such coming to awareness of hegemonic assumptions and their limiting impact could easily remain an individualised change, altering in a profound manner the way in which a learner thinks about and understands the world around them, but not necessarily leading to any changes in behaviour or action. For true transformation as articulated by Mezirow, such action must, indeed, occur – the learner must re-integrate their altered frame of reference into their social world through changed behaviours and actions. Yet even such changes in behaviour may not be directed towards the transformations advocated by critical theorists such as Brookfield, that is, “transforming society into a democratic socialist form” (2012, p.143).

This appears to have been the situation in the case of the transformed learners discussed in this study. While evidence of the uncovering, rejection and replacement of hegemonic assumptions exists, there is less in the learner’s accounts to suggest that, as a result of this process, they were then put on a path of action to critique and transform society as a whole – and no evidence at all of a desire for, or even the consideration of, Brookfield’s goals of democratic socialism. For some of the students in this study, the transformative learning experience that they reported had changed not only the way they thought about and understood the world around them but also how they actually ‘did’ their practice as developing social workers. This speaks to a successful inculcation into a social justice oriented profession, and may represent a useful pre-figuring of a more just and equitable world, but it leaves the question of the contribution of these learners, the social work profession and indeed transformative learning, to a transformed society largely unanswered.

### **7.2.3 Transformative learning’s potential**

These findings support the argument that transformative learning can facilitate, support and enhance the promotion of socially just and social change oriented attitudes and actions amongst social work students. The degree to which these shifted frames of reference translate into meaningful action, and in particular

action taken with the intent of producing social change, remains less clear, but potentially possible. However, this individual level change and potential is not necessarily the same as promoting a socially just and social change oriented approach to social work education itself. To assess the potential for transformative learning approaches to make such a contribution in this broader sense, the degree to which transformative learning experiences can or should be intentionally and purposefully facilitated in social work education must be considered. This is the focus of the third section of this chapter.

What can be stated at this point is that, if individual transformation is a necessary precursor to participation in emancipatory action (at micro, mezzo or macro levels) then, yes, transformative learning approaches should prove a useful tool in facilitating individual change towards frames of reference with inherently greater potential for engagement in social justice and social change action. However, in making this point it must be conceded that, while transformative learning leads students to hold more open and inclusive frames of reference, and that in turn creates a potential or predisposition towards action, it does not guarantee that such participation or action will ensue.

In continuing to develop an assessment of the contribution that transformative learning might make to a socially just and social change oriented social work education, one of the interesting factors to consider is the relationship between the nature of transformative learning and that of social work as a normative profession.

#### **7.2.4 Social work as a normative profession**

Social work can be thought of as a ‘normative’ profession in the sense that it explicitly promulgates a vision of the way the world ‘ought’ to be (Bisman, 2004). This vision, grounded in a particular socio-historical context and drawing on dimensions of moral philosophy (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015), is given expression in a range of foundation documents developed by national and international professional bodies. The International Federation of Social Work (IFSW), for example, states in its definition of social work that it is a “discipline

that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people" (IFSW, 2016). Similarly the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) states that the profession aims "to achieve human rights and social justice through social development, social and systemic change, advocacy and the ethical conduct of research" (AASW, 2010, p.7). The AASW goes on to state that social workers will be involved in "raising awareness of structural and systemic inequities; promoting policies and practices that achieve a fair allocation of social resources; and, acting to bring about social or systemic change to reduce social barriers, inequality and injustice" (p.8).

Similar statements of the goals, aims or vision of social work can be found in the foundation documents of most national professional bodies. Along with the explicit articulation of core values and ethical guidelines, these statements outline a picture of the type of world that social work as a profession would like to see come into being, i.e. a more socially just world characterised by respect for human rights, freedom from oppression, and an equitable distribution of opportunities and resources. There are also signs that this vision is being expanded to include issues of environmental justice and sustainability (Bowles et al., 2016). Given the current state of global human rights, levels of discrimination and oppression, inequality and the ecological crisis (Climate Council, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2016; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2015), it would be difficult to argue that achieving such a vision would require anything less than a dramatic social transformation.

Despite the apparently emancipatory underpinning of statements from national and international professional bodies, and the inclusion of values such as social justice in professional codes of ethics, a significant critique has developed around the espoused commitments of these professional bodies and social work more generally. Morley & Mcfarlane (2014) and Holscher & Sewpaul (2006) for example, mount strong arguments that these professional bodies and the codes of ethics which they generate have been captured by the forces of neoliberalism and managerialism. This critique views codes of ethics, for example, as

increasingly regulating and controlling social work activities to align them with the interests of managerialist and neoliberal discourses. As Morley and Macfarlane note

*The push for social workers to become 'narrowly problem-oriented' professional technicians who privilege positivism and individualise social problems means that mainstream social work is no longer just being influenced by neoliberalism and managerialism, but that it has become managerial practice (Morley & Macfarlane, 2014, p. 4).*

However, if we accept the assumption embedded in such vision statements (that social work as a profession actually has the capacity to make a contribution to efforts to bring about such a transformation), or alternatively if we accept the critique of the vision statements and accept the goals of a critical orientation, then the question of how this contribution is facilitated arises. While the answer to this question would, of necessity, be multifaceted and include dimensions of practice and policy development, social work education would also presumably be seen as playing a significant part. Indeed, it can be argued that social work education should play a role in developing the desire and capacity of students to contribute to such social change and transformation and that part of the process for achieving this goal is to help students to become aware of false consciousness and distorted or limiting worldviews (Macfarlane, 2016).

One of the clearly accepted roles of social work education, apart from simply equipping students with knowledge and skills required for practice, is to inculcate students into a professional identity (Gitterman, 2014; Shlomo, Levy & Itzhaky, 2012). This inculcation presumably includes acceptance of and adherence to the core values and aims of the profession, values which, according to the profession's statements as detailed above, have a clear and inherent, emancipatory, social justice and social change orientation. The tenets of transformative learning theory, and the findings of this research, indicate that transformative learning leads people towards more open, inclusive and discriminating frames of reference, frames of reference that are clearly aligned

and congruent with such an orientation. The transforming learners in this study reported moving from limiting and distorted worldviews towards frames of reference that were much more closely aligned with social work values and goals, particularly in relation to issues such as racism, class oppression and client self-determination. Transformative learning theory would therefore appear to be a useful tool in achieving the desired integration of students into a social justice oriented professional identity, and in supporting them as individual learners to make a contribution to the profession's broader goals of social transformation.

Of course, as highlighted by the findings of this research, it is highly unlikely that transformative learning experiences would, or could, be part of the social work education experience for all or even most social work students. It is clear from the accounts of students presented here that many people enter social work education with a pre-existing disposition towards the content, values and goals being presented in social work programs. Given the nature of the profession, it is hardly surprising that many if not most students would be motivated to study social work on the basis of such pre-existing orientations. However, such orientations are not the only motivations for entering social work education. Students may be motivated by charitable impulses, by a 'people' orientation, as a result of religious beliefs, or simply because they like the thought of helping others (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015). In such cases, the potential for disorientation when encountering the content of social work education programs is likely to be increased, and hence the potential for transformative learning to occur enhanced.

From this discussion, it seems clear that transformative learning, as an approach to adult education, has a significant contribution to make in promoting a positive and progressive approach to social work education. Students who have had transformative learning experiences are likely to possess more dependable frames of reference, liberating themselves from ideologically distorted beliefs and assumptions. For some learners this will manifest as attitudinal change and an openness to diversity and difference. For others the transformed frame of reference will be enacted in practice and in individual efforts to embody a social

justice orientation. For some, there is the potential for such transformation to lead them to engage in a more collectivised and critical analysis of society and to subsequently take action to produce social change. In all these possibilities, the processes of transformation experienced by students would serve to reinforce and develop core social work values and the potential for social change.

### **7.3 Facilitating transformation**

Transformative learning, with its reliance on the catalyst of a disorienting dilemma can appear as an almost unpredictable, *ad hoc* experience. For the most part, the precipitating experiences described by transforming students in this study were not planned or intended by educators to produce disorientation, but rather appear to have been somewhat serendipitous. Yet the transformative learning literature has emphasised the potential for transformative learning to be facilitated in an intentional and purposeful manner, using a range of pedagogic techniques and approaches (see, for example, Baily, Stribling & McGowan, 2014; Blake, Sterling & Goodson, 2013; Chen & Martin, 2015).

Participants in this study were asked to describe learning and teaching practices that they had found particularly influential or effective for their learning, or which had been directly involved in their transformative experience. Learner's responses to these questions identified a wide range of approaches and practices that were meaningful and useful for them. These included the actual content of social work programs (that is the information transmitted by whatever means as part of the educational program); material set as required reading; lectures; group discussions; online interactions; stimulus material such as videos; peer learning; experiential activities; and the attitude and accessibility of social work educators. None of these factors emerged as particularly dominant in terms of their universality, impact or influence in student learning.

Because of its centrality in both transformative learning theory and social work education, the use of critical reflection as an educational technique was addressed directly with participants. While this may be an artefact of such a

direct approach, all of the students in the study indicated that critical reflection had been a significant aspect of, and contribution to, their learning as social work students. As noted in the findings chapter, students' understanding of the nature and role of critical reflection varied from basic and instrumental through to sophisticated and conceptual, although most lacked a thoroughly 'critical' dimension in their conceptualisations (Brookfield, 2009).

For the students in Group 'C' – the transforming learners – there did not appear to be any specific links between the disorienting dilemma that they experienced and a particular teaching practice or set of practices. However, there was a difference in the way in which they conceptualised critical reflection in that all members of this group indicated the purposeful use of reflection to self-examine their own values and beliefs.

Based on these findings it is not possible to say that social work educators seeking to foster transformative learning should employ a specific teaching practice. As Taylor (2009) notes:

*... the practice of fostering transformative learning is illusive and an ever-shifting approach to teaching, and much about it remains unknown or poorly understood. Like any other educational approach, it is rooted in ideals, and when the realities of practice are explored, it becomes difficult to get a handle on how it plays out in the classroom. (Taylor, 2009, p. 3)*

However, the accounts of transforming learners presented in this study, while not pointing to the efficacy of a single specific practice, do suggest the value of some broader aspects of the process of fostering such transformation.

### **7.3.1 Guidance for transformation**

A reasonable starting point for such a discussion is to return to the 'ideal conditions' that Mezirow (2000) suggested were necessary in order for people to engage in rational discourse, an essential element of transformation. Mezirow argued that:

*To more freely and fully participate in discourse, participants must have the following:*

- *More accurate and complete information*
- *Freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception*
- *Openness to alternative points of view; empathy and concern about how others think and feel*
- *The ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively*
- *Greater awareness of the context of ideas and, more critically, reflectiveness of assumptions, including their own*
- *An equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse*
- *Willingness to seek understanding and agreement and to accept a resulting best judgment as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence, or arguments are encountered and validated through discourse as yielding a better judgment.* (Mezirow, 2000, p. 13-14)

Mezirow recognised that this was an ‘ideal’ set of conditions and that full achievement of these was not necessary for transformation and that, indeed, there were many obstacles that might prevent people from being able to reach these conditions, including poverty and oppression.

Some of these ideal conditions appear to relate to the experiences and circumstances of the transforming learners in this study. A number of students, for example, spoke about encountering information regarding the experience of Indigenous Australians, including historical accounts of oppression, which they had not previously been aware of or which hadn’t been presented to them in their formal education. This certainly represents an example of having access to more accurate and complete information regarding this issue. Had students not been open to alternative points of view and willing to consider these, then it is highly unlikely that any shift in frame of reference would have occurred. Rather, students may simply have ignored the new information, dismissed it as wrong or

untruthful, or incorporated it into existing frames of reference as ‘exceptional’ to their existing assumptions and beliefs.

University study is supposed to equip students with the capacity to better assess the context of ideas and to adopt a critical approach to examining assumptions (Danvers, 2016). Importantly, in social work education, this often also entails a critical examination of self-assumptions. It is likely that the transforming students described here were in this way ‘primed’ for the experience through their course of study. Some of the students, for example, make specific mention of the importance for them of a subject that they had taken (‘Dimensions of Human Experience’) which has as one of its learning goals the exploration and understanding of self and the use of self in practice. Similarly, social work classrooms usually aim to be egalitarian spaces, where students act as equal participants with an opportunity to listen to others as well as have their own voices heard. Leaving aside the criticism that such approaches may actually act to mask power relations in the classroom (Brookfield, 2012), this at least allows students to approach the condition of having an equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse. Several of the transforming students spoke about the importance of having opportunities to talk with and listen to their peers, particularly, as for example in the case of Sarah, who dropped-in to conversations about feminism, when self-exploring new ideas and perspectives.

So, while it would be inaccurate to argue that the transforming students in this study achieved transformation because the ideal conditions for participation in rational discourse had been established, it can be argued that their location within a higher education setting, along with some of the predispositions of social work classrooms, allowed many of these conditions to be approached if not fully realised. For educators seeking to foster transformative learning, or seeking to establish the potential for such learning to be facilitated, Mezirow’s ideal conditions may then provide an aspirational goal that could guide practice.

In seeking to understand how social work educators might approach facilitating or fostering transformative learning, there is no shortage of accounts in the

literature that provide examples of specific practices that claim transformative learning as an outcome (see for example, Clark, 2012; Crawley, 1997; Forte & Blouin, 2016; Greene, 1990; King, 2005; Langan, Sheese & Davidson, 2009; Mannion, 2001; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006). However, the diversity of practices contained in such literature, ranging from spontaneous painting (e.g. Lipsett, 2002) to Jungian soul work (Dirkx, 2012), suggests that attempts to extract from this diversity some core themes or principles for fostering transformation may be a useful process. A number of writers have attempted this and the work of Taylor (2009) in particular is relevant for the discussion of learning in this project.

Taylor (2009) has drawn from the empirical literature a set of ‘core elements’ that he argues are “the essential components that frame a transformative approach to teaching. These elements, based on the literature, seem to be a part of most transformative educational experiences” (p. 4). The first element suggested by Taylor is ‘individual experience’ – including not just the learner’s experience in the classroom, but what the learner brings with her to their experience of education, i.e. prior experience. Significantly, Taylor argues that the degree of life experience is a significant factor, with more life experience increasing the potential for internalising new points of view. All of the transforming students in this study were mature age students, and social work education as a whole tends to be characterised by a higher percentage of such students compared with other disciplines. Of course, experience also relates to specific practices within the classroom, and Taylor notes that “value-laden course content and intense experiential activities, offer experiences that can be a catalyst for critical reflection and can provide an opportunity to promote transformative learning” (2009, p.6). There are clear congruencies between this observation and the nature of social work education, as well as the nature of the transformative experiences described by learners in this study.

The second and third of Taylor’s core elements are ‘critical reflection’ and ‘dialogue’. Both of these elements have been discussed in some detail in earlier chapters of this thesis and as important parts of the learning experiences of the

research participants. Both critical reflection and dialogue are also recognised as core dimensions of social work education and it would be anticipated that most if not all social work students would have been exposed to strategies designed to teach and promote these skills.

Taylor's fourth core element relates to the need for a 'holistic orientation' when attempting to foster transformative learning. Such an orientation involves moving beyond the rational-cognitive and attempting to teach in ways that include the affective and relational in students' learning experiences. In a practical sense this may mean, for example, engaging students through use of art, music, and storytelling, as well as exploring and engaging emotions in the classroom (see, for example, Davis-Manigualte, Yorks & Kasl, 2006; Dirkx, 2006). Both affective and relational approaches should not seem unfamiliar to social work educators, but this is an area where greater scope for exploring the integration of these into classroom activities may exist.

'Awareness of context' is the penultimate of Taylor's core elements. By this he is referring to a deeper understanding of the learners themselves, their background and previous experiences, and to a critical awareness of the broader social context. Interestingly, Taylor notes temporal constraints as an important contextual issue:

*Fostering transformative learning is time consuming, particularly when an effort is being made to provide access to all participants' voices as well as coming to consensus around various group decisions. Furthermore, working with rigid time periods poses additional challenges when engaging intense personal experiences that cannot be resolved by the time class is over.*

(Taylor, 2009, p. 12)

Given the pressures on university education in a time of neoliberal and managerial dominance (Ewan, 2015; Lawson, Sanders & Smith, 2015), and increasing moves towards blended and online learning environments, this may

present a challenge for social work educators seeking to foster transformative learning.

The last of Taylor's core elements is 'authentic relationships'. Here he is referring to the importance of the nature of relationships between educators and learners, where authenticity allows for open and meaningful discussion and shared understanding. This echoes work reviewed in a previous chapter where Cranton (2006) set out a model for developing authenticity in learning relationships.

Educators seeking to facilitate transformative learning through the establishment of such authentic relationship must also grapple with the inherent power imbalances present between students and teachers. This is particularly pertinent where transformative techniques, such as critical reflection, are being used as assessable material in courses (Morley & Macfarlane, 2014).

On a common-sense level, it would be hoped that all of these elements would be found in most social work education settings and approaches. However, the degree to which this is actually true would require further and more focused investigation. Some of the elements appear to have been particularly significant for the transforming learners in this study. Most obvious amongst these is the degree to which the focus on learning about critical reflection and engaging in dialogue with peers and teachers, as part of their social work studies, seems to have equipped these learners with skills and opportunities important for their transformative experiences. In the case of other elements, such as the degree to which learners experienced authentic relationships with educators, the significance to the experiences of this group of learners is less clear but worthy of further investigation. For social work educators interested in fostering transformative learning, Taylor's core elements may provide a useful checklist of issues to consider when designing learning environments and strategies.

### **7.3.2 Issues emerging from the learners**

Mezirow's list of ideal conditions and Taylor's core elements provide educators with some general guidance on fostering transformative learning. The many and varied examples of specific strategies discussed as part of the literature review

may also suggest ideas for activities or techniques that can be employed in the social work classroom. Some of these broad elements and specific strategies seemed to relate to the experiences of the research participants. Some significant issues relating to facilitation elements also emerged from the discussions with transforming and non-transforming students in this study, and are worthy of consideration.

One such consideration is recognising the degree to which students' learning, and their processes for dealing with disorienting experiences, occurs outside of the formal classroom setting. In the case of a number of the transforming learners in this study, either disorientation or reintegration occurred whilst on field placement. While this may be considered a formal educational setting, it also represents students' experience of a workplace, somewhat divorced from the university itself. For several of the learners, while the initial disorienting experience might have occurred in the classroom, the subsequent dialogical exploration of the issue took place outside of the university, with family and friends, in social settings. For Zoe, while her transformative learning experience happened while she was undertaking social work education, and she described how it was significantly influenced by what was happening in that educational setting, the dilemma, dialogic process and reintegration all occurred outside of a formal educational context. Recognition of the varied sites wherein aspects of transformative learning may be enacted speaks to the need for social work educators both to value those external dynamics and to create space within formal educational settings for the 'outside' to come in.

An obvious issue of concern for social work educators hoping to foster transformative learning relates to critical reflection. While all participants in this study responded in the positive to questions about the importance of critical reflection, their responses revealed a range of ideas and understanding about the nature and role of reflection. Mia, for example, talked about the utility of reflection as helping her to decide "which areas I should be working in and which areas I don't fit in with"; Olivia notes that when reflecting she thinks "ok I did it this way, how could I have improved on that?"; while William stated that

reflection was easy in theory but hard in practice, concluding that even after reflection "...it is very difficult to actually depart from your original behaviour, like you can't really". Such conceptualisations point to a relatively instrumental understanding and use of reflection and seem to demonstrate little concern for reflection on one's own taken-for-granted assumptions, values and beliefs.

Other participants did, however, bring this self-examination into their accounts of the reflective process. Ruby, for example, stated that "...it is so important to be able to reflect on your values and why we have those values and how they are impacting on other people...", echoing the thoughts of a number of other participants. Among the transforming students in Group C, this role of critical reflection in developing deeper understanding of self and, in particular, developing an understanding of one's own values and where they came from, was universal. It seems certain this conceptualisation and use of reflective processes probably predisposed these students to transformative learning experiences and certainly facilitated the process following the disorienting dilemma (Bay & Macfarlane, 2011).

Again, however, this brings us up against the critiques that have flowed from critical theory and those advocating an emancipatory approach to transformative learning. In discussing the nature and role of critical reflection, few of the participants, including those who reported transformative learning, extended their account of reflection to include examinations of ideology, hegemony, power, oppression or politics. In other words, even where the issues around which transformation had happened, such as racism and social class, were inherently political and dealt directly with issues of power and oppression, the process of reflection and the subsequent reintegrated frame of reference appear to have remain largely individualised. While this still allows for personal action, for example, to practice in more socially just ways, or to bring a changed attitude to social settings, it is unlikely to result in challenging the political and ideological status quo.

It is not possible to say, from the findings of this research, why the students' understanding or use of critical reflection was limited in this manner, but this should be a concern for social work educators, particularly those with a critical orientation. Regardless, it seems very clear that fostering transformative learning should involve the teaching of knowledge and skills around critical reflection, and supported opportunities for such reflection to occur as a core part of social work education.

The third element emerging from the findings of this research in relation to fostering or facilitating transformative learning was the importance of what could be termed 'encounters with difference'. In many of the accounts of the transforming students, the disorienting dilemma that precipitated the transformative process involved an encounter with a person, a situation or an idea about others where the salient aspect was the difference between self and other. For some learners this was a direct encounter with an individual where 'otherness' was a primary consideration (for example Sienna who as a non-Indigenous woman encountered an Aboriginal man in the classroom). For others, such as Ella, the encounter was broader – recognising that there were entire classes of people who had not shared the same kind of lifestyle and experiences that she had. It seems clear from the learners' accounts that the disorientation reported by most of this group involved, in some sense, an encounter with difference.

This seems to have significant implications. What many learners found disorienting and unsettling was having to grapple with the diversity of human expression and experience and the ways in which such encounters pushed them to recognise that their own experience and assumptions were not universally representative and were in fact limiting their ability to appreciate the social world in a more inclusive and open manner. In fostering transformative learning social work educators may therefore want to look for opportunities to challenge learners' existing assumptions by bringing them into direct contact with difference. In doing so, a deep understanding of the nature and backgrounds of

learning cohorts will be essential, as will opportunities for students to explore and share their own social positioning and individual experiences.

### **7.3.3 Fostering transformation**

As Taylor (2009) has noted, the process of fostering or facilitating transformative learning remains somewhat unclear. In some respects this is unsurprising. The findings of this study show learners with different backgrounds and experiences, who were unsettled by a range of different experiences. There is, therefore, a strong sense of the way in which such transformative learning experiences are individual experiences, linked to the unique biographies and socio-cultural position of the individual learners. This would appear to make the design of teaching practices intended to facilitate transformative learning in a classroom or a social work program a rather 'hit or miss' affair.

However, despite these individual differences amongst learners and their experiences, there are also common elements identified from this study and from the broader literature on fostering transformative learning. Most of the transforming learners in this study experienced disorienting dilemmas relating to an encounter with difference. All of the transforming learners' disorientations involved challenging ideologically hegemonic assumptions. For all of these learners the capacity to engage in critical reflection, and particularly critical reflection on self, was essential to the transformative process, and for many of them, the opportunity to then engage in dialogue with others about their shifting perspectives was also important. As these transforming students undertook the process of shifting frames of reference, access to fuller, more accurate information was also an important factor, as was having opportunities to put new frames of reference to the test, whether in conversations with family and friends or through changes to their approach to practice.

All of these observations align, at least to some degree, with the suggestions for fostering transformative learning inherent in the work of Mezirow (2000), Taylor (2009) and others. Taken together, they suggest a list of factors and

practices for social work educators or designers of a social work program looking to foster transformative learning may need to consider. These include the need to:

- Understand the characteristics of the student cohort
- Create an environment and opportunities for students to share their own background and experiences and to encounter and listen to those of others
- Support students in developing knowledge about critical reflection, and the skills for practicing this
- Create opportunities for students to employ the skills of critical reflection in reflecting on their own unique set of beliefs, values, assumptions
- Provide opportunities for students to engage in dialogue with peers and educators, including facilitated dialogue on challenging topics
- Provide content and experiences that present knowledge and perspectives that are alternative to the dominant social discourses
- Engage a range of practices, techniques and materials in order both to cater for different learning styles and to tap into the 'extrarational' aspects of students' learning
- Provide support for students to explore 'new' ideas and perspectives in a safe environment.

Based on the accounts of the learners who participated in this study, and the literature around fostering transformation, this 'checklist' would appear to address the core requirements for an environment that fosters transformative learning. There is, of course, no guarantee that such an environment will provide for students the disorienting dilemmas that are central to the transformative process. The occurrence of such disorientation remains relatively unpredictable, but it can be argued that the potential is enhanced by these conditions. However, echoing the concerns raised by the critical theorist critiques of transformative learning (for example, Brookfield, 2012) there is a sense in which this checklist may foster a particularly individualised form of transformative learning.

These suggestions, if employed, may indeed create the potential for a student to encounter difference, reflect on their own pre-existing values and beliefs, recognise the limiting nature of their frame of reference, engage in dialogue and the acquisition of new knowledge in the process of establishing a transformed frame of reference, and to test out this new frame of reference in their social world. However, there is little here that speaks to the potential for this transformed frame of reference to translate into broader ideology critique and action for the kind of social change that is promoted by critical social workers, and appears as inherent in the goals of the social work profession (AASW, 2010; Fook, 2016; Macfarlane, 2016). To extend the facilitative conditions in such a way that the potential for *critical* transformative learning is increased will involve adding a number of elements to the checklist suggested above. These would include:

- The need for educators to recognise the experiences of power and oppression that exist within diverse student cohorts, and to be aware of power in their own relationships with students, particularly with respect to assessment processes
- Equipping students with structural analyses of society, including the processes by which particular discourses become dominant while others are silenced
- Supporting students in identifying and challenging privilege in its varied forms
- Supporting students in exploring the links between dominant ideologies and their own sense of self, including the hegemonic internalisation of values beliefs and assumptions
- Promoting the centrality of ideological critique and social action as a necessary process to manifest the core values and achieve the normative goals of the social work profession
- As educators, prefigure authentic, just, equitable relationships and model engagement in social change activities.

The emerging development of pedagogies of the privileged and oppressors (see, for example, Allen & Rossatto, 2009; Flynn, 2012; Nurenberg, 2011; van Gorder, 2007) may represent particularly useful approaches for educator's seeking to foster transformation around issues of power and privilege. Curry-Stevens (2007) has, for example, detailed the transformation of privileged learners through a process of confidence shaking and confidence building. Her description of the transformative process is particularly valuable in the development of a sequential method for working with privileged students that addresses issues of resistance.

Transformative learning of an individualised nature remains a valuable and desirable educational outcome. For the learner, it equips them with a new frame of reference that is qualitatively 'better' than the old – more open, inclusive and discriminating – and which is therefore likely to be enacted in the social world, whether in professional practice or in social and familial settings. In terms of social work students, this is likely to produce workers who are more socially just in their orientation to practice, more inclusive of diversity, and more reflective of the role of their own values and beliefs. They will also therefore be more closely aligned with core social work values and reflect a successful inculcation into a progressive vision for social work as a profession. These are all good and desirable things. Furthermore, such individualised transformations should also greatly increase the likelihood that such learners may, at some stage in the future, translate such individual change and shifted frames of reference into a more focused critique of existing social and ideological arrangements and subsequent action towards broader social change.

It is this potential that is the focus of a more critically oriented approach to fostering transformative learning. The relative absence of a broader social critique as part of the accounts of the transformed learners in this study represents a concern for critically oriented social work educators. While it can be argued that transformative learning in general creates the potential for learners to go on and develop such a critique (i.e. it positions them in the early stages of a critical consciousness), this potential appears relatively weak. For individual

learners, now equipped with a more open and inclusive frame of reference, it may be possible to enact this shifted perspective in ways which represent a social justice orientation while not calling into question the very sources of injustice, oppression and abusive power. The critical considerations for fostering transformative learning listed above may help to increase the likelihood that learners will connect their individually shifted frames of reference with broader social and ideological conditions, and thereby be motivated to take action to produce change.

#### **7.3.4 The ethics of teaching with intent**

There is a somewhat obvious element which is missing from both of the ‘checklists’ above and which is worthy of a brief but separate discussion. As previously noted, transformative learning as described in Mezirow’s theory begins with a disorienting dilemma – an unsettling, sometimes distressing, experience which leads a person to reflect upon and call into question their existing frame of reference. Such disorienting experiences can take many forms, but they appear to be essential catalysts for the transformative process. In this study, the disorienting experiences described by learners arose within the context of social work education, but there was no evidence to suggest that they were experiences intentionally designed by educators to be particularly unsettling or disruptive. If transformative learning is seen as a desirable educational outcome within social work education, then the question arises as to whether or not educators should be attempting to intentionally precipitate such disorienting experiences.

For some educators, the answer to this question is clearly yes. Langan, Oliver & Atkinson (2007), for example, discuss their approach to teaching in sociology, where the intentional use of challenging situations forms a core part of their philosophy and practice. They state their belief that ““disruptions” are integral impositions that must be orchestrated periodically during a course in order to assist effective teaching and learning – ultimately, the application of critical discourses to social relations and phenomena” (p. 4). Their approach echoes the work of Boler (2005), who argues against attempting to create educational

spaces free of hostility, arguing instead for spaces characterised by challenging and critical analysis. Similarly Gravett & Peterson (2009) note that, in their experience, transformative learning occurs when students are intentionally pushed “toward their learning edge” (p.107) and hence out of their comfort zones.

What is being described here is the intentional and purposeful design of discomfort into the educational experience of learners. The “purpose of such disruptions is to encourage students to bring their views out for examination and reflection” (Langan, Sheese & Davidson, 2009, p. 52) and in doing so create the conditions whereby reflection on existing ideological assumptions can begin. This approach is clearly not without its risks. Pushed too far, students may become hostile and resistant, and discussions following such disruptive experiences may be characterized as angry, combative and emotionally charged (Langan, Oliver & Atkinson, 2007).

As well as the practical challenges involved in such intentional disorientation, there may also be a question of the ethics of teaching to transform. This issue has been effectively surveyed by Ettling (2012) who draws on a wide body of literature to explore the ethics of transformative learning. She notes the importance of the emancipatory, social change approach to transformative learning, but connects this to the personal change approach, arguing that the two are inherently linked. Ettling suggests a number of aspects of transformative learning that may involve ethical issues, including expectations around sharing experiences; provoking disorienting dilemmas and unveiling conflict; evoking the unconscious; and expecting collaboration (Ettling, 2012). While many of these will be familiar to social work educators outside of a transformative perspective, the issue of unveiling conflict is particularly pertinent to this discussion. Ettling acknowledges the challenges, and indeed dangers, involved in intentionally introducing disruptive experiences. Offering no definitive answer to this challenge, however, her suggestion is that the “... educator needs keen self-awareness for both intention and skill in leading learners through this rocky terrain. Experience may be the only teacher, and willingness to risk and humility

to learn are likely two of the best companions" (p. 542).

Perhaps the key to navigating this rocky terrain lies in the intentional design not just of a disruptive experience but of the context within which that experience occurs and the provision of purposeful support and facilitation for the subsequent consequences. In other words, the ethically acceptable and pedagogically effective use of such disruption must recognise the discomfort and even offence that such disruption may cause students and plan for how those feelings and reactions can be appropriately ventilated and managed within the classroom. From a critical educator's viewpoint, the possibility of such difficult feelings arising is not, in itself, an argument against the intentional use of disruptive strategies.

Cunningham (1988) argued that the "ethical role of educators is to provide environments that allow people to examine critically the water in which they swim" (p.135). The accounts of transformative learning provided in this study show learners who transform their frames of reference, particularly in relation to problematic issues of hegemonic ideology, and who are therefore better placed to act in ways that reflect a social justice orientation. They also suggest that such learners may have an increased potential for involvement in social change efforts, although for these learners this was as yet largely unrealised. A critically oriented approach to facilitating transformation would be likely to increase this potential and, in some cases at least, activate it. Both of these forms of transformation – personal and social – are desirable and congruent with the nature and aims of social work education and social work as a profession. Given the ways in which intentionally disruptive experiences may serve to challenge students and make them aware of both personal and ideological assumptions, their ethical and thoughtful use should be promoted and they should therefore be added to both of the checklists presented above.

#### **7.4 Conclusion**

Drawing on the findings presented in previous chapters, this chapter presented a discussion of the accounts provided by the participants, and the issues that these accounts raised. In particular the discussion addressed the core aims of the research project, that is, to assess the utility of Mezirow's transformative learning theory as a way of explaining the experiences of social work students; assessing the degree to which transformative learning approaches could make a contribution to a socially just and social change oriented social work; and exploring any insights which emerged into how such transformative learning might be fostered and facilitated within social work education.

The discussion presented in this chapter led to a number of specific conclusions. These are that:

- Transformative learning theory does provide a strong explanatory tool when exploring the experiences of social work students
- the degree to which students did or did not experience transformative learning related to the presence or absence of a disorienting dilemma which was itself related to the level of pre-existing knowledge and values congruence
- the nature of the transformative experience varied among transforming learners, in terms of the degree to which it resulted in action in the social world a key variable
- there is a risk that transformative learning may be experienced as an individualised change with little attention paid to broader social dynamics, ideology critique and social change
- regardless of the degree to which it manifests in action for social change, transformative learning has strong potential for contributing to socially just social work education
- there are general guidelines and specific actions which can be taken to facilitate transformative learning
- given the nature and vision of social work, a critical approach to transformative learning is highly desirable.

The final chapter of the thesis draws together the preceding chapters and explores some specific implications and recommendations for social work education.

## **Chapter 8. Conclusion**

This final chapter of the thesis draws together the threads from the preceding chapters, makes some concluding summations and articulates a number of specific implications and recommendations. The first section of the chapter begins by reiterating a rationale for the choice of transformative learning theory as a theoretical approach worthy of consideration in relation to social work education. The points of congruence between this theory and the concerns of social work education (and by extension the social work profession) are also reiterated. A brief recap is presented on the nature of transformation and how transformation is conceptualised in Mezirow's articulation of transformative learning theory, along with some observations about the body of literature representing research and scholarship around transformative learning.

A short summary of the findings is then presented, with a number of concluding observations made, before looking specifically at implications and recommendations that flow from this research. These are targeted towards professional bodies, schools of social work, educators and students. Some ideas for future research directions are also canvassed. The chapter concludes with a section on (re)positioning the researcher at the end of this research process.

### **8.1 A theory among theories**

In exploring students' experiences of social work education, and in particular in exploring the power of pedagogical theory to explain or illuminate such experiences, a number of different paths and theoretical approaches might have been chosen. Where such choices exist, a legitimate question arises as to why a particular path is chosen above others. This research has focused on transformative learning theory, as developed by Mezirow, for a number of reasons, including the fact that this theoretical conceptualization of adult learning has been claimed by some to have become one of the most generative and dominant discourses in adult learning over the last 30 years (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Kokkos et al., 2015; Taylor & Laros, 2014). This interest and

dominance in itself suggests that there is value in exploring its applicability to social work education.

However, beyond this theoretical prominence, other significant reasons exist for a focus on Mezirow's approach. As outlined in previous chapters, there is a striking level of congruence between the central features of this theoretical perspective and a number of the core concerns, values and practices within social work and social work education. This is particularly the case when looking at the progressive, radical or critical end of the social work ideological spectrum (see, for example, Fook, 2016; Pease, Goldingay, Hosken & Nipperess, 2016). The points of congruence include recognition of the importance and efficacy of experiential learning; the centrality of critical reflection and reflective processes for both education and effective practice; the role of dialogue and rational discourse in helping students and practitioners to understand and account for their own worldviews and the worldviews of others; and, overarchingly, recognition of the goals of emancipation and liberation – at both personal and societal levels – as important aspects of education and practice. These significant points of congruence set transformative learning as a theoretical approach apart from many other educational theories, suggesting the potential for both its explanatory power and as a guide for practice.

Given both its dominance as a theoretical approach and its congruence with social work values and practices, it is somewhat surprising that the body of literature directly exploring the connections between social work education and transformative learning theory remains relatively small. Mezirow's writing on critical reflection has entered the social work literature via the significant body of work discussing the nature, importance and practice of reflection, but as a theory of learning it has not received the attention that it merits. This is another reason for choosing this theoretical approach as the focus for this research.

Finally, and anecdotally, I suggest that there would be few social work educators who have not come across instances where students report dramatic shifts in their worldviews as a consequence of their social work education – either in

totality or relating to a specific learning event. This has certainly been my experience. While such shifts are almost certainly the result of a complex set of variables, developing a better understanding of the process by which these occur is a desirable goal. Such understanding is even more desirable when considered from a critical or progressive standpoint, as these shifts often seem to entail moving from a limited or distorted worldview, towards one that is more open and inclusive, and more congruent with social work values. Importantly, for critical educators, this speaks to the potential for social work education to act as an emancipatory process at the level of the individual student, but also to contribute, through such individuals, to the broader potential for progressive social change.

Taken together, these factors present a strong rationale for the choice of transformative learning theory as the focus of this research project and as a topic worthy of further exploration beyond the concerns of this thesis.

## **8.2 Transformative learning**

The development of transformative learning theory has been a complex and exciting process. From Mezirow's original theorising, based on research on the experiences of women returning to study (Mezirow, 1975, 1978), the theory has been the subject of continuous development and critique, with researchers, scholars and practitioners seeking to apply, extend, refine or take the theoretical foundation in different and novel directions. Mezirow himself was engaged in a continuous process of revising and refining the theory, often in response to specific criticisms, and his large body of work in this area is testament to that effort (see Baumgartner, 2012; Kitchenham, 2008; Kokkos et al., 2015 for reviews of the scope of Mezirow's work). Critiques of Mezirow's theory have tended to focus on the charge that the theory is overly individual and rational-cognitive in orientation and therefore a) doesn't give enough attention to affective or unconscious dimensions of learning, or b) doesn't pay enough attention to emancipation and social change as desirable and necessary educational outcomes. As noted earlier, Mezirow has responded directly to many

of these criticisms, either pointing out misreadings of his work or refining and revising the theory to be more inclusive and holistic (Kitchenham, 2008).

Fundamentally, transformative learning theory refers to the process whereby a learner transforms a problematic frame of reference into a frame of reference that is more open, inclusive and dependable. This transformation is precipitated by a disorienting dilemma, an unsettling experience that drives the learner to reflect on their existing frame of reference and to recognise the degree to which it is distorted, limiting or false. Through this process of objective and subjective reflection, the learner comes to a new, more dependable, frame of reference, which is then tested through discourse and dialogue and eventually reintegrated and enacted in the social world (Mezirow, 1990b, 2000, 2009, 2012). For social work education, such a process is of significant interest, because such transformation leads to frames of reference more likely to reflect the core values and aims of social work, both in educational settings and as a profession, and therefore more likely to lead to practitioners with a strong social justice and social change orientation.

### **8.3 The literature**

The literature relating to transformative learning is vast, with many thousands of publications discussing, researching, critiquing, expanding, applying or referring to this theoretical perspective. Setting out to review this literature was therefore a daunting prospect. The starting point for the review was in the work of Mezirow himself, where an attempt was made to give a clear sense of the theory itself as well as of its refinement and development over time. Key concepts that are particularly relevant to social work, such as critical reflection and rational discourse, were highlighted. The antecedent foundations of the theory, and in particular the work of Freire (1970, 1973) and Habermas (1971, 1984), were described, not least of all because of the fact that these early theorists have also been influential in social work and social work education and therefore represent a theoretical bridge between the profession and transformative learning.

The work of researchers, theorists and practitioners who have sought to further develop or extend Mezirow's theory was then reviewed. The approach taken here was not to be exhaustive or even comprehensive, given the volume of published work, but to provide a representative selection of literature, developed over time, which gives a sense of the ways in which Mezirow's work has stimulated thinking about adult learning. While many of these alternative developments of transformative learning theory have been interesting and significant (see, for example, Dirkx, 2012; Illeris, 2014b; Willis, 2012) it can be argued that none have had the level of impact and influence as Mezirow's own work. In a similar fashion, the review also captured a range of the literature discussing the application of transformative learning in a range of formal and informal educational settings. The selection of literature here reflected a concern to both give a sense of the development over time of such applications, and also to highlight particularly good examples, or examples of particular significance for social work education.

The final parts of the literature review turned the focus to social work and social work education. Through reviewing some of the core features of the profession, alongside important debates and tensions, this section sought to establish some clear points of congruence between the concerns of social work, social work education and transformative learning theory. Particular attention was paid to the small body of existing literature that specifically links these areas together.

Overall, the literature reveals transformative learning as a vibrant, dynamic theoretical perspective that has generated considerable research and scholarship over four decades. The literature also points to very significant congruencies between the concerns of the theory and the concerns and values of social work and social work education. This striking alignment points to the potential for transformative learning to make a significant contribution to educational processes within social work. The body of work demonstrating the application of transformative learning in a wide range of settings and utilising a very diverse range of strategies and techniques can provide social work

educators with ideas and guidance for their own practice in this area. In this way the literature review conducted for this project and presented in this thesis, based on a selection of illustrative and relevant work, should provide a pathway for social work educators, researchers and practitioners seeking to develop an understanding of this theoretical perspective and to integrate it into their practice.

#### **8.4 Findings and conclusions**

The first aim of this research project, was to:

*Explore the utility of transformative learning theory as an explanatory construct in developing an understanding of students' experience of social work education.*

Based on the findings presented in this thesis, and integrating insights from the literature, it can be concluded that Mezirow's theory has considerable explanatory power in relation to the experiences of the research participants. For those students identified as having transformative learning experiences congruent with Mezirow's definition, their accounts proved to be highly aligned with the general descriptions and some of the specific phases of transformation appearing in the literature. For those participants judged to be non-transforming, their lack of transformation was explained by the absence of a disorienting dilemma, which in turn seemed to be the result of a higher level of knowledge and values congruence with the content encountered in their social work education. In this way, Mezirow's theory also provided an explanation for these students' experience. Overall, transformative learning theory, as developed by Mezirow, appears to be a useful explanatory construct when seeking to understand the educational experiences of social work students.

The second and third aims of this research project were to:

*Assess the potential for transformative approaches to learning to promote social justice and social change oriented social work education, and*

*Develop practical suggestions regarding the implementation of transformative approaches into social work education.*

Assessing the potential for transformative learning approaches to contribute to a social justice and social change oriented social work education necessitated an examination of the nature of the transformations reported in this study. It was clear that, for the group of transforming students, the nature of the shift in their frame of reference was toward more open, inclusive and discriminating perspectives, congruent with the core values of social work (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015; IFSW, 2016). In this sense, a transformative learning approach could clearly be said to make a contribution to social work education in that it supports the inculcation of students into the professional social work identity as espoused in documents such as codes of ethics (AASW, 2010). This seemed particularly positive in the sense of promoting socially just practice, with a number of participants noting how the transformative learning experience had been translated into their nascent professional practice.

However, also noteworthy in learners' accounts of transformation was the lack of broader social critique and analysis. In other words despite coming to recognise that they held limiting views and distorted assumptions, little consideration seemed to have been given by the learners to the ideological, hegemonic nature of those views. Hence the transformed frames of reference remained relatively individualised, often leading to shifts in individual behaviour, but uncoupled from structural analysis or a desire to take action to produce broader social change. This reflects a clear division within the transformative learning literature between approaches with an emphasis on either personal or social change. On this basis it was noted that writers with a critical theory orientation had been critical of Mezirow's approach, while still maintaining the potential for transformative learning to contribute to social change (Brookfield, 2012).

Through discussion of the findings and literature presented in this thesis, the conclusion reached in regard to the second of the research aims is that transformative learning approaches are, indeed, in a position to make a significant contribution to social work education. However, for critically oriented educators, this represents a problematic contribution if the nature of the transformation desired and facilitated remains individualised. If social work education seeks to honor its critical tradition (Fook, 2016; Macfarlane, 2016) and pursue the social transformation necessary to enact its core values in a meaningful and authentic manner, then a truly meaningful contribution will only be made if a *critical* approach to transformative learning is embraced.

The final research aim entailed considering the application of transformative learning theory. The previous chapter discussed the ways in which the findings of the research, linked with the existing literature, suggested transformative learning might be actively fostered or facilitated in social work education. Mezirow's (2000) ideal conditions and Taylor's (2009) core elements were both discussed as appropriate starting points for a discussion of such facilitation. The findings themselves suggested the importance of recognising the place of both formal and informal educational settings in the transformative process; the centrality of critical reflection, both on self and on social dynamics; and the role of encounters with difference in precipitating disorienting dilemmas and subsequent transformation.

Based on this discussion, two checklists were proposed, suggesting factors to consider when designing education processes with transformative intent. It was suggested that the conditions for individualised transformative experiences needed to be further augmented if a more critical and social change oriented outcome was to be achieved. Finally, the intentional and purposeful introduction of disruptive experiences, with the aim of producing disorienting dilemmas, was discussed. Despite some ethical concerns (Ettling, 2012), it was concluded that such a practice was both desirable and necessary in helping students to recognise the operation of distorting ideologies and to bring their own existing

frames of reference into the open for reflective examination. However, given the potential for such disruptive experiences to provoke both strong emotions and resistance, the importance of purposefully designed activities and appropriate levels of support and facilitation was emphasized.

### **8.5 Implications and recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, combined with the subsequent discussion of issues and the consideration of the body of literature reviewed, a number of implications and recommendations were identified.

The primary implication of this research relates to the relatively small amount of attention that has been paid to transformative learning theory in the broader realm of theory and practice in social work education. While Mezirow is often cited in social work literature relating to critical reflection (see, for example, Bay & Macfarlane, 2011; Morley, 2011) less attention has been paid to Mezirow's work as a theory of learning and as a guide for practice. Given the significant congruence that has been demonstrated between the tenets of transformative learning and the features and values of social work and social work education, it is hoped that this research will contribute to greater interest in examining the ways in which this theoretical approach can be used to understand and facilitate student learning. Given the chilling effect of the dominant neoliberal discourse, a transformative approach offers a powerful tool for assisting in the inculcation of students into a more socially just worldview, concerned with justice, equity and sustainability. Furthermore, if a more thoroughly critical approach to transformative learning is adopted, this individual worldview may be expanded to incorporate a structural analysis, the critique of ideology and active involvement in efforts to produce social change.

Following the significance of this implication, a number of specific recommendations can be offered. These recommendations take as their starting point the utility of transformative learning as both an explanatory concept and as a guide to practice. They also take as a given, based on the arguments made in

this thesis, the desirability of a critically oriented approach to transformative learning and to social work education as a whole.

### **8.6 Professional bodies (e.g. AASW)**

In Australia, the national professional body, the Australian Association of Social Workers, through the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS), sets the content and standards for social work education (AASW, 2012). In its Preamble, the ASWEAS provides a definition of social work and a description of how social workers might pursue the goals inherent in that definition. Despite the definition (which itself flows from the IFSW) including specific mention of ‘social change’ as something that social workers should promote, the term ‘social change’ does not appear elsewhere in the entire ASWEAS document. The closest that the ASWEAS comes to recognising that the core values of social work, as articulated by the AASW (AASW, 2010) and others (See for example, Bisman, 2004; Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015), cannot be fully realised without significant social change is in noting that social workers “work towards the elimination of social inequalities in society to facilitate a more equitable distribution of resources” (AASW, 2012, p. 8).

Given the fact that the current and almost unquestioned dominance of neoliberal ideology (Monbiot, 2016) has led to significantly increasing inequality (OECD, 2015), it is self evident that the ‘elimination of social inequalities’ will not be achieved without profound social change. Foundation documents such as the ASWEAS and codes of ethics are important statements regarding the nature and concerns of social work (Bowles, et al., 2016), and help to delineate social work identity. The explicit inclusion of a social change orientation is therefore both desirable and necessary. Such a social change orientation was notable by its relative absence in the group of transforming students interviewed for this project. Critically transformative approaches to social work education can help equip students with the potential to understand the need for such change and to actively engage in efforts to produce it. It is therefore recommended that:

- The ASWEAS be amended to include explicit mention of social change as a core social work activity in the Preamble, and that the development of the ability to facilitate social change appear in the Principles for social work education (section 2), the section listing Attributes of Australian social work graduates (section 3.1), and as a core element in the Content of social work programs (section 3.3).

The ASWEAS notes that social work students should be “self-initiating, critically reflective, innovative and able to solve problems...” (AASW, 2012, p. 9). They also note that in terms of content, students are expected to be able to demonstrate knowledge of the individual, including a range of factors such as personality development, life-cycle stages, and ability/disability. While these are important and desirable factors, the standards do not identify self-awareness as an important attribute, goal, or type of knowledge required by social work students. Transformative learning theory, and the findings of this research, highlights the centrality of such self-awareness in the transformation process. Such self-awareness is an essential part of the process of identifying limited and distorted worldviews, and transforming these into more dependable frames of reference, congruent with core social work values. It is therefore recommended that:

- The ASWEAS be amended to include a critical awareness of ‘self’, including assumptions, beliefs and values as an attribute of Australian social work graduates (section 3.1), and as a core element in the Content of social work programs (section 3.3).

The education and accreditation standards reflect a strong commitment to the importance of critical reflection. This aligns clearly with the importance that reflective practice is awarded in the social work education literature (see, for example, Adamson, 2011; Askeland & Fook, 2009; Milne & Adams, 2015). However, as seen in the findings of this research, unless specific attention is given to the ‘critical’ dimension of such reflection, there is a danger that students will understand it as simply an instrumental process in the service of quality assurance. As Brookfield notes:

*Reflection is useful and necessary in the terms it sets itself; that is, to make a set of practices work more smoothly and achieve the consequences intended for them. But this is not critical reflection; critical reflection calls into question the power relationships that allow, or promote, one particular set of practices over others. What also makes reflection critical is its foregrounding of power dynamics and relationships and its determination to uncover hegemonic dimensions to practice.* (Brookfield, 2009, p. 294)

The ASWEAS already contains a clear endorsement of the development of knowledge and skills for structural analysis and critical thinking as a principle of social work education. Reinforcing the ‘critical’ aspect of critical reflection, and linking this clearly to the issue of self-awareness would further help to ensure that students were equipped for engagement in critically informed action for social change. It is therefore recommended that:

- The ASWEAS be amended to include the use of critical reflection to recognise, evaluate and critique dominant ideologies and discourses and their potential internalization by students, as an attribute of Australian social work graduates (section 3.1), and as a core element in the Content of social work programs (section 3.3).

## **8.7 Social work educators**

The findings of this research, and the body of literature examining accounts of transformative learning, suggest that such transformative learning experiences may happen in both formal and informal education settings regardless of the specific actions of educators. These transformative experiences can be precipitated by students’ encounters with disorienting dilemmas, not necessarily designed or facilitated by educators. However, given what is known from research, including the experiences reported in this study, it is possible to design environments and implement strategies that are more likely to foster transformative learning. For social work educators interested in personal change

and the inculcation of students into a social work worldview, these environments and strategies should be of some interest. For critically oriented social work educators, they should be essential aspects of their teaching practice. It is therefore recommended that:

- Social work educators familiarise themselves with the tenets and practice of transformative learning as a method of a) inculcating students into the core values and worldview of the profession, and b) increasing the potential for students to engage in action for social change.
- Social work educators explore the use of intentionally disruptive experiences as part of a transformative pedagogy, and do so while providing appropriate support for, and facilitation for expressing, challenging emotions that may arise as a consequence of these.
- Social work educators emphasise, and provide opportunities to practice, the use of critical reflection to recognise, evaluate and critique dominant ideologies and discourses and their potential internalisation by students.
- Social work educators consciously address issues of power in their own relationships with students, including in relation to assessment practices, and recognise the impact that these may have on the transformative process

Effective social work educators draw on a wide range of knowledge, including pedagogical theories, skills, values and emotional reserves in undertaking their work (Agbim & Ozanne, 2007; East & Chambers, 2007; Grant, Kinman & Baker, 2015). What occurs in the classroom can be expected to reflect the educator's understanding of adult learning as much as their knowledge of social work content. Yet there is little evidence to suggest that this pedagogical knowledge is shared with or transmitted to learners themselves. An argument can be made that exposing students to theory and knowledge relating to learning can support them in becoming more aware of, and reflective about, their own educational experiences, thereby increasing their capacity to be self-aware and self-initiating in their learning. Transformative learning theory offers a particular approach to

adult learning that is highly congruent with social work values and concerns. It is therefore recommended that:

- Social work educators introduce students to transformative learning theory early in their education, as a tool for understanding and reflecting on their own learning experiences and as a model for reflecting on self and society.

## **8.8 Recommendations for future research**

As the literature indicates, the field of transformative learning is the subject of a wide range of research foci, projects and approaches. Taylor, in particular, has documented the directions in which this body of research has headed over the years (Taylor, 1997, 2007, 2012). As Witkin (2014) notes, there are signs of increasing interest in transformative approaches in social work and a small body of work reflects the direct application and assessment of transformative approaches in social work education (see, for example, Bay & Macfarlane, 2011; Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014; Gelman, 2012; McCusker, 2013; Morley, 2011). Within this field there is ample scope for a range of research foci related to transformative learning. The recommendations below reflect the findings of this research project and some of the broader questions posed by these findings and the existing literature on transformative learning and social work.

Recommendations for future research therefore include, but should not be limited to:

- Studies examining social work educator's knowledge and application of adult learning and pedagogical theories
- Longitudinal studies to examine the longer-term impacts of transformative learning experiences, particularly the persistence of reintegrated frames of reference and the degree to which the potential for engagement in action for social change is realised in 'transformed' students

- Studies examining the efficacy of specific teaching strategies and techniques in facilitating transformative learning in the social work education setting
- Studies exploring the capacity of social work students to engage in critical and structural analyses of society, to recognise and critique hegemonic assumptions, and to relate these assumptions and ideologies to their own worldview
- Studies examining the implications for transformative learning of the shift towards blended and online modes of delivery in social work education.
- Conceptual and practical explorations of the relationship between transformative learning theory and the manifestations of power and privilege.

Taken together, these recommendations would help to embed transformative learning theory and transformative educational practices as a core feature of social work education, and in doing so enhance the learning outcomes for students while reinforcing the centrality of a social justice and social change orientation within the profession.

## **8.9 Summary of recommendations**

<b>Target of Recommendations</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
<b>Professional Bodies (AASW)</b>	The ASWEAS be amended to include explicit mention of social change as a core social work activity in the Preamble, and that the development of the ability to facilitate social change appear in the Principles for social work education (section 2), the section listing Attributes of Australian social work graduates (section 3.1), and as a core element in the Content of social work programs (section 3.3).
	The ASWEAS be amended to include a critical awareness of 'self', including assumptions, beliefs and values as an attribute of Australian social work graduates (section 3.1), and as a core element in the Content of social work programs (section 3.3).

	<p>The ASWEAS be amended to include the use of critical reflection to recognise, evaluate and critique dominant ideologies and discourses and their potential internalisation by students, an attribute of Australian social work graduates (section 3.1), and as a core element in the Content of social work programs (section 3.3).</p>
<b>Social Work Educators</b>	<p>Social work educators familiarise themselves with the tenets and practice of transformative learning as a method of a) inculcating students into the core values and worldview of the profession, and b) increasing the potential for students to engage in action for social change.</p> <p>Social work educators explore the use of intentionally disruptive experiences as part of a transformative pedagogy, and do so while providing appropriate support for, and facilitation for expressing, challenging emotions that may arise as a consequence of these.</p> <p>Social work educators emphasise, and provide opportunities to practice, the use of critical reflection to recognise, evaluate and critique dominant ideologies and discourses and their potential internalization by students.</p> <p>Social work educators introduce students to transformative learning theory early in their education, as a tool for understanding and reflecting on their own learning experiences and as a model for reflecting on self and society.</p>
<b>Future Research</b>	<p>Studies examining social work educator's knowledge and application of adult learning and pedagogical theories</p> <p>Longitudinal studies to examine the longer-term impacts of transformative learning experiences, particularly the degree to which the potential for engagement in action for social change is realised in 'transformed' students.</p> <p>Studies examining the efficacy of specific teaching strategies and techniques in facilitating transformative learning in the social work education setting</p> <p>Studies exploring the capacity of social work students to engage in critical and structural analyses of society, to recognise and critique hegemonic</p>

	assumptions, and to relate these assumptions and ideologies to their own worldview.
	Studies examining the implications for transformative learning of the shift towards blended and online modes of delivery in social work education.

## 8.10 (Re)positioning the researcher

Chapter 1 included a ‘statement of researcher position’. This was an attempt to clearly identify for the reader the ways in which my own biographical experiences, values, political beliefs and understanding of education contributed to my worldview, alerting the reader to the fundamental assumptions and predispositions of the researcher as author. While it is commonplace to advise scholars to write such introductory material last in the thesis development process, this statement was actually one of the first things that I committed to paper when beginning this process. The PhD journey has not been a smooth one for me, and I acknowledge that this is the case for many others as well. Caring responsibilities, including those associated with two children with serious health issues, the loss of close family members, the ending of a long-term relationship, the stresses associated with a demanding full-time job and a number of other factors have delayed, suspended and slowed down progress on this project. To be honest, at times it fell a long (long) way down my list of life priorities. Now, as I approach the end of the process, it is instructive to look back at that initial positioning and see if anything has shifted or changed, or if this research project has yielded insights for me at a personal as well as professional level.

When I read again that positioning statement, I am first struck by what remains the same. My political position has remained relatively stable, although I am increasing drawn to deep green critiques of democracy as the ecological crisis unfolds around us. I still believe that profound and dramatic social change is required if we are to move to a world characterised by social and ecological justice in all their forms, although the urgency for such a shift seems to increase daily as we see rising levels of global inequality and the impacts of climate

change. I continue to see all education as political activity, but admit to feeling somewhat disheartened by the levels of political awareness demonstrated by students who pass through my classes, who seem to manifest the situation described by Monbiot:

*So pervasive has neoliberalism become that we seldom even recognise it as an ideology. We appear to accept the proposition that this utopian, millenarian faith describes a neutral force; a kind of biological law, like Darwin's theory of evolution.* (Monbiot, 2016)

I remain committed to reflexive practice and to a critically informed approach as an educator, and continuously aware of the position of privilege that I hold in society as a consequence of my gender, race, education and social class. I am also aware that I too am subject to, and influenced by, distorting hegemonic assumptions and the effects of dominant ideologies.

While many of these factors remain stable or shift in increments, some areas of awareness have arisen or grown as a result of conducting this research and writing this thesis.

In listening to the accounts of the learners who participated in this study, and in writing at length about the nature and facilitation of transformative learning, I am now struck by the degree to which I have integrated many aspects of this theory into both my thinking and my educational practice during the years since this PhD process began. As someone who began their academic career knowing nothing about adult learning or pedagogy, this feels like a positive realisation – there has been learning and that learning has translated into action. In this praxis, it is confirming for me that the theoretical path that has so engaged me is deeply congruent with my own social justice and social change orientation. Such congruence is a source of reaffirmation and reinforcement.

Writing this last chapter, however, I am also very conscious of how my experience and understanding of the higher education system, and my

awareness of the threats to social work education in particular, has been deeply affected by the enactment of neoliberalism and managerialism, whether through national government policies or specific workplace practices. Back in 2007, Wehbi & Turcotte warned that:

*... a specific form of social work education based on the values of social justice, community engagement, freedom of thought and creativity is under attack. This attack is not only being waged by university administrators, but also by social work educators themselves. Administrators who have no understanding of social work are often in positions of authority to make decisions that can affect the mandate and direction of a school of social work. Colleagues who have bought into the neoliberal dream have also created an intolerable situation for those of us who resist this nightmarish vision. (Wehbi & Turcotte, 2007, p. 1)*

This impact of neoliberal ideology on higher education has been explored by many authors, either in a broad or specific sense (see, for example, Dunn & Faison, 2015; Lopes & Dewan, 2014; Lucal, 2015). This impact is not simply a matter of educational policy or institutional practice. I increasingly see students overwhelmed with the responsibilities of care and work, struggling economically and unsupported by the state, who have, understandably, bought into the message of education as a vocational commodity. Such students are willing to take on huge student debts in the hope that a degree will buy a better life for themselves and their families. For many it seems like learning, and particularly critical learning, is hardly on the agenda.

And of course I experience, and witness my colleagues struggling with, higher workloads, fewer resources and increasing amounts of administrative work and institutional surveillance, all of which have a grindingly accumulative and negative effect on our abilities to do the kind of work we would like to be doing.

At the individual level, and looking back on my original positioning statement, this situation appears to have had a paradoxical effect. On the one hand I am

conscious of often feeling worn down, even defeated, by these ideological impacts. But, simultaneously, I am reminded of how important, especially at times like these, the task of critical and emancipatory education is. This is particularly true for social work. Macfarlane summarises this challenge very effectively when she notes that:

*... neoliberal discourses, currently predominant in Western societies like Australia, have the potential to reduce social work education to acquiring competency-based skills rather than critically reflective, transformative learning. Such uncritical promotion of a form of practice aimed at maintaining the status quo, rather than critically analysing and challenging inequitable social structures and power relations, reshapes social work education towards conservative, market-led demands. This is aimed at producing technically proficient practitioners who conform to existing systems, who are unable to see the broader (moral and political) implications of their work.* (Macfarlane, 2016, p. 326)

Despite the weariness and the multiple challenges of working in the current ideological environment, the process of writing this thesis has helped confirm for me my commitment to educational practice that is individually and socially emancipatory; an educational practice that develops the skills for recognising and critiquing inequality and oppression while laying the foundation for action for social change. It has also helped confirm for me that transformative learning, as a theoretical approach, has a significant role to play in achieving these goals.

## **8.11 Conclusion**

This final chapter has drawn together the threads from the various parts of the thesis and presented a set of specific recommendations. Drawing on the findings of the research project reported here, as well as a wide body of literature, the final conclusions of the thesis are that transformative learning represents a powerful theoretical tool for use in understanding the experiences of social work students. As a theoretical approach with an emancipatory orientation,

transformative learning also has the potential to contribute to the promotion of social justice and social change as core features of social work education, particularly if the critical aspects of the theory are given greater emphasis. The transformative learning suggested by this theory can be fostered and facilitated in social work education through a process of creating appropriate conditions and promoting specific practices. In this way, transformative learning theory offers social work educators a way of understanding student learning and of supporting students in developing a critical awareness and desire for change that is congruent with a critical, progressive and social justice oriented professional vision.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Information Sheet

### Project Information Sheet

*"Transformative Learning in Social Work Education"*

My name is Peter Jones and I am a postgraduate student in the Department of Social Work and Community Welfare at James Cook University. I am currently conducting research into transformative learning in social work education as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree.

This project aims to explore the relationship between transformative learning theory and the experience of social work students who are completing, or have completed, the Bachelor of Social Work degree at James Cook University. The research will involve interviewing current and past students, asking them to reflect on their experience of study and, in particular, any changes to their worldview (beliefs, values, attitudes etc.) that may have occurred during that period.

Participation will involve consenting to being interviewed at least once, and possibly twice, either in person or by phone, with each interview lasting approximately 1-1.5 hrs. Interviews will be audio-taped and subsequently transcribed. Participants will receive copies of interview transcripts and have the opportunity to correct and/or clarify material contained in those transcripts. Participants' contributions will be confidential and all identifying information will be removed from transcripts and from any other outputs (thesis, journal articles, presentations etc.) resulting from the research.

I am also employed as a lecturer in the Department of Social Work and Community Welfare. To guard against any potential conflicts of interest, arrangements have been made to ensure that in this role I will not be teaching or grading the assessable material of any students participating in this project

If you have any questions or concerns about this project please contact either myself or the project supervisors, Dr Debra Miles and Dr Joanne Baker, using the contact details below. Any concerns regarding the ethical conduct of the research should be addressed to Tina Langford (The Ethics Officer). Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

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## **Appendix 2: Informed Consent Form**

This administrative form  
has been removed

### **Appendix 3: Indicative Interview Schedule**

Dear research participant,

Thanks for agreeing to be a part of my PhD study looking at Transformative Learning and Social Work Education. Below you will find the interview schedule that I will be using to guide our discussion. I am providing this to you ahead of time because I think it might be quite useful for you to be able to think a little bit about the topic ahead of the interview.

Please note that this 'schedule' is only a guide, and we don't need to stick to these questions or topics in a slavish manner. The interview is only intended to be 'semi-structured' and I am hoping that our conversation can be quite relaxed and casual, and that you will find it a useful and interesting experience.

If you have any questions or concerns ahead of our meeting, please don't hesitate to contact me by phone on (07) 47815075 or email at [peter.jones1@jcu.edu.au](mailto:peter.jones1@jcu.edu.au). Looking forward to catching up with you and having this chat!

### **Interview Schedule**

#### ***Some Background***

Age:     20-25     26-35     36-45     46-55     56-65     over 65

Gender:     Male     Female

Do you indentify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?     Yes      
No

- Are you a BSW or Grad BSW student?
- If Grad BSW, what discipline was your previous degree in?
- Can you tell me a little bit about what you were doing before you started studying social work?
- What lead to you decide to study social work?
- Looking back, is there anything interesting or significant about your family or social background – the kinds of values and beliefs or social environment that you grew up in or that surrounded you before you started studying? How would you describe your background?

*(Note: Transformative learning theorists suggest that we all have a particular 'worldview' – a collection of our attitudes, beliefs, values, assumptions, expectations and ways of understanding and making sense of the world around us. These theorists sometimes use the terms 'meaning perspectives' or 'meaning structures' to describe this, but the term 'worldview' seems pretty useful too. Other terms that have been used are our 'frames of reference' or our 'personal paradigm'. This worldview is thought of as being built up, or constructed, over time – through processes of socialisation and acculturation.)*

- Looking back across the length of your social work studies, do you think the way you see and understand the world now – your worldview – has changed from what it was before you started studying?

*If NO (ie it has not changed):*

- Can you tell me a little more about that? Why do you think your worldview has been so enduring? Do you feel like your existing worldview was confirmed by your studies? Can you give me any examples of the congruence between what you studied and your existing worldview? Was there anything in your studies that challenged your worldview, or caused you to think about them?

*If YES (ie you feel your worldview has changed)*

*(Note: I am really interested in trying to tease out and understand what contributed to this change or shift in worldview. In particular, I'm interested to discuss whether there were particular aspects of your social work studies that lead to these changes.)*

- Can you tell me about the ways in which your worldview (values, beliefs, attitudes, expectations etc) has changed compared to the way it was before you began your social work studies?
- If we think about social work education as including a number of different aspects or components, I wonder if we can explore the role that some of these may have played in contributing to this change in worldview? Can you tell me your thoughts about the link between this shift and the following aspects of social work education?
  - Subject and course content (including the focus of subjects, readings etc)
  - The educator-student interaction (in classrooms, lectures, tutorials, workshops etc)
  - The impact of particular teaching practices or particular educators
  - Interactions with your peers and fellow students

- Field Placements
- Things that happened in your life while you were studying, but which weren't part of your formal social work studies

*(Note: Transformative Learning theory suggests that critical reflection is an important process in learning. In particular, these theorists argue that an important form of reflection occurs when we critically reflect on our previously taken for granted assumptions and expectations about the world. The theory also suggests that the process of reflecting on our existing assumptions, values and beliefs, often usefully involves engaging in 'rational discourse' or dialogue, with others)*

- I know that critical reflection is promoted and used quite a bit in social work education – do you think that this process has been a factor in the changes that you've described?
- Can you think of any specific examples where you have ended up thinking about or reflecting upon your previous assumptions, values or beliefs?
- Has engaging in dialogue with other people (fellow students, family, friends etc) been an important part of your learning and of the change in your worldview?
- Can you think of any specific examples where this might be the case?

*(Note: Some accounts of transformative learning seem to involve what has been referred to as a 'disorienting dilemma'. This is where a person might have a particular experience, or series of experiences, that causes them to question their existing worldview. It might be a specific incident (something that happens in class, a question that was asked, something you read, a person that you met etc) or it might be a cumulative process, but in either case, according to this theory, something happens that causes you to reflect on your own values, beliefs attitudes etc)*

- Can you recall any experiences during your studies that might be thought of as disorienting dilemmas?
- What happened? How did you feel? What did you do then?

*(Note: I am also really interested in what the practical impacts of a change in your worldview might be.)*

- Do you think that the change in worldview that you have described has resulted in changes to the way you act/behave or practice in the world?
- Can you describe or give examples of any of these practical changes?
- Is there anything else about your experience of social work education that you would like to share with me, or that you think might be important for me to know about?

Thanks for participating in this project. I will have the audio recording of this interview transcribed and will then provide you with a copy of the transcript, with some of my thoughts and notes attached. It would be great if you could have a look at this transcript and see if there are any corrections or clarifications that you would like to make, or anything that you would like to add.

A sub-sample of participants may be asked to engage in a second interview. If you are in this group I will contact you again at some stage in the future and I hope that you will then consider giving a little bit more of your time and experience to the project.

Cheers,  
Peter Jones