



DOI: 10.15804/tner.2022.70.4.05

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Transformative Learning of Educationally Active Women in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Abstract

Objective: The study aims to determine whether educationally active women present signs of transformative learning in their own experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus of the study is the relationship between experiencing transformative learning in a pandemic and the sense of loneliness, received social support, sense of life satisfaction and age.

Methods: The study was conducted among 258 educationally active women – part-time students, as well as students of the Universities of the Third Age. Age of the surveyed women: from 19 to 87 years. Data were collected using the online test method. A statistical significance of differences was tested with the U Mann-Whitney test and the two proportion z-test.

Results: Most of the surveyed women manifested elements of transformative learning in their experience of the pandemic. Those scoring high on the Transformative Learning in a Pandemic Situation scale have had their life satisfaction decrease to a greater extent than those scoring low.

The group scoring high on the Transformative Learning in a Pandemic Situation scale is characterised by a higher sense of loneliness. No relationship was found between perceived manifestations of transformative learning and age, social support, place of residence and education.

Discussion: The transformative potential of learning can be seen in a pandemic situation. The obtained data provide arguments supporting the supposition that the feeling of loneliness, influencing the lowering of satisfaction from life, is a factor triggering learning and leading to the change of habits of thinking and acting of educationally active women.

Keywords: *transformative learning, learning in a crisis, adult learning, educational activity, learning during the COVID-19 pandemic*

Introduction

At the beginning of 2020, the number of COVID-19 infections worldwide increased rapidly. The inhabitants of all countries faced a previously unknown situation which came to dominate their daily lives. The introduction of restrictions concerning many aspects of life was primarily associated with difficulty coping with the new conditions. The necessity of limiting social contacts, the change in how work is done, in some cases, the loss of one's employment, and changes in the ways studies are organised – these were all novelties on a global scale. In some cases, these changes constituted an impulse to seek new, better solutions in various areas of human functioning (Pituła & Grzyb, 2021; Gałązka & Jarosz, 2021; Błajet & Przyborowska, 2021; Sepúlveda-Loyola et al., 2020; Wright, 2021).

From the perspective of research on adult education, it seems important to consider the ways of dealing with such a new, previously unknown situation. Jack Mezirow's (1991) works introduce the concept of "*critical reflection*". Critical reflection concerns the assessment of the truthfulness of assumptions that a given person previously adopted when interpreting the surrounding world. That could be a source of learning for the individual. It is a specific type of learning that Mezirow describes as transformative learning. The later works of Peter Jarvis (2012) introduce the concept of disjuncture – the discrepancy between what one expected, considering previous experiences and what happens. Jarvis saw disjuncture, not cognitive dilemmas, as the source of learning. Disjuncture can occur in the cognitive dimension but also in the emotional or operational dimension. The process of learning, according to Jarvis, is the interpretation of one's own life experiences by assigning meaning to them. People usually strive to act routinely in the world in which they live. They strive to harmonise their relationship with the world (Jarvis, 2012). It allows them to easily use the behavioural strategies they have developed. The emergence of a crisis can disrupt this harmony. There is ample evidence that the pandemic has become such a crisis at the societal and individual levels (Szarota, 2021; Wright, 2021; Bjursell, 2020). It means that people can no longer use the ways they know how to cope with the world because they have become ineffective, and there is a need to develop a new behavioural repertoire to regain harmony with the world around them.

Adult Learning in a Crisis

Mezirow's concept of transformative learning and Jarvis's existential learning are founded on the notion of learning as a consequence of a crisis (Mezirow, 1998;

Jarvis, 2012). This type of learning occurs in a situation of cognitive conflict, which can be solved by overcoming the premises of the problem or situation (Illeris, 2002). According to Mezirow, transformative learning takes place in ten stages:

Phase 1. A disorienting dilemma

Phase 2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame

Phase 3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions

Phase 4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change

Phase 5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions

Phase 6. Planning of a course of action

Phase 7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans

Phase 8. Provisional trying of new roles

Phase 9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships

Phase 10. A reintegration into one's life based on conditions dictated by one's perspective

(Kitchenham, 2008, p. 105)

These stages describe the course of personal transformation manifested in a change in the ways of perceiving and interpreting reality due to reflective thinking. A reflective subject changes the perspective of cognition in confronting themselves with new experiences. The transformation of thinking occurs through the subject's departure from the previous ways of interpreting reality. Transformative learning is often considered in conjunction with the concept of human identity development and with the assumption that this learning is progressive. However, it is worth noting that transformative learning does not always have to be associated with human progress. Changes resulting from such learning are not always something positive for the learner. It may also be regressive or defensive (Illeris, 2014).

A similar understanding of adult learning can be found in the works of Jarvis (Jarvis, 2012; Cornu, 2005; Illeris, 2017). This author, influenced by the works of scholars such as Freire, Knowles, Mezirow, and Kolb; and inspired by the philosophy of existentialism, reflects on learning from the learner's perspective. For Jarvis, the foundation of human learning is the phenomenological experience of their life-world. The main category in Jarvis's concept is *experience*. Learning is considered a construct of existential nature. In his understanding, learning is the "combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or

more experienced) person” (Jarvis, 2009, p. 25). It is a concept that expands on Mezirow’s perspective by adding an emotional and operational dimension. Jarvis also introduces to his theory a phenomenon that he calls “*disjuncture*”. It is the “gap between biography and my current experience” (Jarvis, 2009, p. 22). According to him, all adult learning begins with the realisation that there is a discrepancy between what the learner knew before and what they are currently experiencing. He treats adult learning as an aspiration. “It is therefore clear that, according to Jarvis, the disharmony caused by a disjuncture, regardless of its nature as an individual or a social phenomenon, justifies the innate human tendency to learn and thus to participate in learning activities” (Koulaouzides, 2020, p. 5).

A traumatic change in life experience may be particularly significant in women caring for family members and the home. In the situation of a pandemic, especially educationally active women – who are in the process of subjectively conditioned life changes – may present an attitude of openness to the novelty that it brings.

In the research presented in this article, educationally active women are women who work and study part-time, as well as women who are already retired but actively participate in the activities of the Universities of the Third Age and similar institutions of lifelong learning. The undertaken research attempted to determine whether a pandemic can be seen as a starting point for transformative learning of educationally active women. In other words: whether in the case of educationally active women, the experiences associated with the pandemic led to attempts to change their habits related to functioning in the surrounding world?

Research Methodology

The research aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. Do educationally active women see in their own experiences related to the pandemic any elements that can be interpreted as manifestations of transformative learning?
2. Is there any relationship between experiencing transformative learning in a pandemic and the sense of loneliness, obtained social support, sense of life satisfaction, or age?

In order to answer the research questions, data collected from 258 women living in north-western Poland were analysed. The study was conducted between February and April 2021. The research sample consists of educationally active women: part-time students and students of Universities of the Third Age. The age of the surveyed women ranges from 19 to 87 years. Arithmetic mean and standard

deviation for the variable “Age”: $M=36.1$ years, $s=15.6$ years, median $Me=30$ years. The data was collected using the online test method.

Applied Research Tools

1. *Pandemic Transformative Learning Questionnaire (TL)*

The *Pandemic Transformative Learning Questionnaire* was constructed considering the assumptions of the Transformative Learning Theory. Additionally, the questionnaire development was, to some extent, inspired by a tool constructed by Walker (2018) and intended for research in the school environment. The *Pandemic Transformative Learning Questionnaire* consists of 7 items. The examined person is asked to indicate on a scale from -2 to 2 the degree to which they observe in themselves the occurrence of TL symptoms during the pandemic. The total score that can be obtained in the applied research tool ranges from -14 to 14 points. The questionnaire items represent the following components (Table 1): *A disorienting dilemma*, *Seeing new points of view*, *Change of perspective*, *Creation of new semantic schemes*, and *Making changes in one’s life with a new frame of reference*. If the respondent chooses the value of -2 on the provided scale, the symptom described in a given item of the questionnaire definitely did not appear in a given person during the pandemic. If the value of 2 is selected, the given symptom appears. A value of 0 means they have no opinion on the given item.

Table 1. Transformative learning stages included in the applied research tool

Transformative learning stages described in the literature	Items of the Pandemic Transformative Learning Questionnaire
A disorienting dilemma	1. During the pandemic, I had to rethink my position on some important topics.
Seeing new points of view	2. During the pandemic, I realised that others may interpret current events differently than I do. 3. During the pandemic, I was able to look at some important problems from the perspective of another person.
Change of perspective; Creation of new semantic schemes	4. During the pandemic, I adopted new ways of thinking about specific issues. 5. During the pandemic, different things than before became the most important for me.
Action; Making changes in one’s life with a new frame of reference	6. During the pandemic, I changed some of my beliefs concerning the reality in which I live. 7. During the pandemic, I made decisions associated with changes in my daily life.

Cronbach's alpha coefficient calculated based on the collected data for all 7 items of the questionnaire is 0.82. Considering the result, it can be determined that the obtained scale is characterised by an acceptable level of reliability required for group research.

2. SWLS – Satisfaction with Life Scale

Test authors: E. Diener, R. A. Emmons, R. J. Larson, and S. Griffin (1985). Polish adaptation: Z. Juczyński (2001)

3. Scale for measuring Loneliness

Test author: J. De Jong Gierveld, T. G. van Tilburg, and P.A. Dykstra (2006)
Polish adaptation: P. Grygiel, G. Humenny, S. Rębisz, P. Świtaj, and J. Sikorska (2013)

4. Scale for measuring Perceived Social Support

Test author: G. Zimet, N. Dahlem, S. Zimet, and G. Farley Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support. Polish adaptation: K. Buszman and H. Przybyła-Basista (2017).

Research Results

Analysing the descriptive statistics presented in Table 2, we can say that the symptoms of transformative learning in the experience of a pandemic are noticed in most surveyed women. The median value for each analysed questionnaire item is at least 1. It means that each of the items was rated 1 (“agree”) or 2 (“definitely agree”) by at least half of the respondents. The calculated percentage of persons choosing positive values on the provided scale is more than 60% for each questionnaire item. For each of them, the upper quartile is 2, meaning that at least one-quarter of the respondents definitely agrees with the statement constituting the item. The studied persons most strongly agree that *during the pandemic, they realised that others may interpret current events differently than they do*. In this case, at least half of the respondents chose the highest value of 2 on the provided scale (I definitely agree).

In the next stage of the analysis, the studied group was divided into two subgroups:

- Group 1. Individuals with high scores on the *Pandemic Transformative Learning* (TL) scale (above median scores; Me=6);

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for individual items of the *Pandemic Transformative Learning Questionnaire*

Transformative Learning Stages	Item number	Mean	Median	The Lower Quartile	The Upper Quartile	Std Dev	Min	Max	Percentage of results >0
A disorienting dilemma	1	0.7	1	0	2	1.21	-2	2	63.6%
Seeing new points of view	2	1.2	2	1	2	1.02	-2	2	79.46%
	3	0.7	1	0	2	1.13	-2	2	62.4%
Change of perspective; creation of new semantic schemes	4	0.7	1	0	2	1.09	-2	2	60.5%
	5	0.8	1	0	2	1.27	-2	2	66.3%
Action; Making changes in one's life with a new frame of reference	6	0.8	1	0	2	1.24	-2	2	65.1%
	7	0.7	1	0	2	1.09	-2	2	62.4%
Aggregate result		5.6	6	2	9	5.6	-12	14	82.95%

- Group 2. Individuals with low scores on the *Pandemic Transformative Learning* scale (scores below median or equal to median; Me=6).

In group 1, there were 128 people (50.4%); in group 2, there were 130 people (49.6%).

The data in Table 2 show that the groups with high and low scores on the TL scale statistically significantly differ in terms of such variables as: *life satisfaction*, *sense of loneliness*. In group 1, the difference between the current level of life satisfaction and the level before the pandemic is greater. More specifically: in group 1, the level of satisfaction with life decreased to a greater extent. Arithmetic mean for group 1: $M_1=-2.7$, standard deviation $s_1=4.6$; for group 2: $M_2=-1.5$, $s_2=4.3$. Mann-Whitney U test result $U=6792$, $Z=2.54$, $p<0.5$. Group 1 is also characterised by a higher degree of sense of loneliness. The arithmetic mean of the scores on the loneliness scale for group 1: $M_1=27.9$, standard deviation $s_1=9.2$; for group 2: $M_2=25.6$, $s_2=8$. Mann-Whitney U test result $U=6708$, $Z=-2.02$, $p<0.5$. The level of education and place of residence are not related to the dependent variable.

Table 3. Characteristics of the distinguished groups achieving low and high results on the *Pandemic Transformative Learning (TL)* scale

TL Level	1. TL test score in points	2. Social Support	3. Change in life satisfaction (difference between the current state and before the pandemic) (M ± s)	4. Age (M ± s)	5. Sense of loneliness (M ± s)	6. Place of residence			7. Education	
						City N (%)	Village or small town N (%)	Higher education N (%)	Secondary education or lower N (%)	
Group 1. (High scores); N=128	9.9±2.3	69.4.0±18.2	-2.7±4.6	36.9±16.3	27.9±9.2	83 (55%)	45(42.5%)	74(50.7%)	54(48.2%)	
Group 2. (Low scores); N=130	1.4±4.6	68.5.0±17.3	-1.5±4.3	35.2±14.7	25.6±8.0	69 (45%)	61(57.5%)	72(49.3%)	58(51.8%)	
Total N=258	5.6±5.6	68.9±17.7	-2.1±4.5	36.1±15.6	26.8±8.7	152 (100%)	106 (100%)	146 (100%)	112 (100%)	
Significance of differences	p<0,05	n.s.	p<0,05	n.s.	p<0,05	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	

Note: The significance of the differences was examined: 1. for variables 1-5 using the Mann-Whitney U test, 2. for variables 6 and 7, using the two proportion z-test.

Discussion

The obtained results provide arguments confirming the hypothesis that for educationally active women, the pandemic constitutes a learning situation. Most of the studied persons have manifestations of transformative learning in their life experiences related to the pandemic. The respondents associated the situation of the pandemic with experiencing disorienting dilemmas, consisting of the fact that they had to rethink their own position on some important topic. Most of the studied women admitted that during the pandemic, they noticed new points of view and realised that others might interpret current events differently. More than half of the respondents agreed that during the pandemic, they adopted new ways of thinking regarding specific issues and different things than previously became the most important to them. Finally, a majority acknowledged that they had attempted to change their lives with a new frame of reference in mind.

The analyses show that educationally active women, for whom the pandemic is significantly a situation of transformative learning, experienced a sense of loneliness during the pandemic. Their sense of satisfaction with life decreased. The results can be interpreted from the perspective of Jarvis's theory of learning (2012). A reduction in life satisfaction may indicate that educationally active women experience disjuncture – a gap between what they currently encounter and what they expect based on their previous biography. The sense of loneliness and reduced life satisfaction may indicate that the gap is inconvenient and problematic for the respondents.

Conclusions

The data analysis provides evidence that educationally active women, regardless of age, place of residence or education, are not passive in this situation and do not adopt an attitude of withdrawal. They respond to perceived difficulties by taking measures to effectively reduce these difficulties. They treat the difficulties associated with the pandemic as a challenge, attempting to consciously learn new behaviours. On the other hand, educationally active women, who do not experience the feeling of loneliness during the pandemic and do not feel a decrease in life satisfaction, are characterised by lower results on the Pandemic Transformative Learning scale.

Therefore, in a pandemic, one can see the transformative potential of learning. The obtained data provide arguments confirming the assumption that the sense

of loneliness, which causes a reduction in life satisfaction, is a factor triggering the process of learning, which in turn leads to a change in the mental and behavioural habits of educationally active women.

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