

# Transformative Learning and the Awareness of White Supremacy

## Développer une conscience critique

Stephen BROOKFIELD

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[See table of contents](#)

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### Article abstract

*This article describes the development of critical consciousness and the different intellectual traditions that have been influential in framing how this concept is understood. Prime amongst these is analytic philosophy, American pragmatism and Frankfurt School critical theory. Two particular critical moves are analyzed in detail; being willing to subject the assumptions that inform your own, and others' reasoning and actions to regular scrutiny and being open to alternative perspectives and viewpoints. The author examines the critical theory tradition's emphasis on deconstructing power and ideological control and uses his own experience of clinical depression to illustrate this. He argues that his depression could only be understood once he was ready to think critically about the ways that the dominant ideology of patriarchy had blocked a critical analysis of his mental state.*

## Transformative Learning and the Awareness of White Supremacy

Stephen BROOKFIELD

University of St-Thomas  
Minnesota, Etats-Unis  
[sdbrookfield@stthomas.edu](mailto:sdbrookfield@stthomas.edu)

**Keywords:** *Critical thinking, critical consciousness, transformative learning*

**Abstract :** *This article describes the development of critical consciousness and the different intellectual traditions that have been influential in framing how this concept is understood. Prime amongst these is analytic philosophy, American pragmatism and Frankfurt School critical theory. Two particular critical moves are analyzed in detail; being willing to subject the assumptions that inform your own, and others' reasoning and actions to regular scrutiny and being open to alternative perspectives and viewpoints. The author examines the critical theory tradition's emphasis on deconstructing power and ideological control and uses his own experience of clinical depression to illustrate this. He argues that his depression could only be understood once he was ready to think critically about the ways that the dominant ideology of patriarchy had blocked a critical analysis of his mental state.*

**Titre: Développer une conscience critique**

**Mots-clés :** *pensée critique, conscience critique, apprentissage transformateur*

**Résumé :** *Cet article décrit le développement de la conscience critique ainsi que les traditions intellectuelles qui tentent d'expliquer la compréhension du concept. Parmi les plus importantes sont la philosophie analytique, le pragmatisme américain, et la théorie critique de l'École de Francfort. En particulier, deux actions déterminantes sont analysées : la volonté d'examiner nos propres suppositions et celles d'autrui à l'égard de nos pensées et de nos actions et l'ouverture aux autres perspectives et points de vue. L'auteur examine le moyen dont la tradition de la théorie critique souligne la déconstruction du pouvoir et du contrôle idéologique. Il s'appuie sur sa propre expérience de la dépression clinique comme illustration. Avant de comprendre sa propre dépression, il maintient qu'il fallait être prêt à poser un regard critique sur l'idéologie dominante de la patriarchie qui a bloqué une analyse critique de sa condition mentale.*

## Introduction

Throughout my life as an adult educator one scholarly project has remained constant in the field of adult education; namely, to generate a distinctive theory of adult learning. Numerous scholars have sought to develop a discrete and separate theory of learning in adulthood that would focus on exploring the learning tasks and dimensions unique to adult life. When I entered the field in the 1970's two contrasting theoretical thrusts were dominant in North America and Europe. The first was the concept of andragogy, an approach to practice that stood opposed to the authoritarian stance of pedagogy that held that 'teacher knows best'. This was an idea proposed by Malcom Knowles and grew out of his conviction that adult learning was typically conducted in a self-directed manner (Knowles, 1975). If adults were natural autodidacts, then the best thing adult educators could do was stand aside and offer help and guidance on demand. The other thrust drew on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and argued that education was inherently political. Freire clarified that educators chose to work either for people's liberation or for their continued oppression. Avoiding a choice and declaring oneself neutral was viewed as a de-facto choice to support the status quo.

These two theoretical thrusts seemed to have some superficial similarities. Both emphasized learners' agency and the importance of students, peasants, workers and citizens taking control of their learning. Both also critiqued authoritarian, teacher-dominated models of instruction, emphasizing in different ways the notion of teachers as facilitators, as catalysts or animators of learning. But despite apparent surface points of connection these two bodies of work were fundamentally incompatible, even contradictory. Knowles drew on the traditions of American pragmatism and humanistic psychology and emphasized self-actualization and personal growth. Freire drew on Marxism and liberation theology and believed that education was an anti-capitalist practice of collective freedom.

In the 1980's and 1990's a fusion of sorts of these two theoretical standpoints was attempted by American theorist Jack Mezirow. Mezirow had been witnessing what happened to his wife as she went to college as an adult student and had simultaneously been exploring the works of Jurgen Habermas. Habermas' style of critical theory drew on the Frankfurt School's traditional interrogation of Marxism but also incorporated American pragmatism with Habermas prefacing his observations with remarks like "as a good pragmatist" (Habermas 1985, p. 198). Mezirow's appropriation of Habermas introduced the first important theoretical turn in American adult education and marked the start of Mezirow's attempt to develop a comprehensive theory of adult learning. Initially labelled as a theory of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1978), Mezirow began to name the focus of his work as transformative learning.

His intellectual project was to create a comprehensive theory of adult learning that could guide the field of adult education in terms of its practice (Mezirow 1991, 2000). Put very simplistically, Mezirow argued that as people negotiate adulthood the fragmented and contradictory nature of life in post-industrial societies confronts them with a series of disorienting dilemmas. These dilemmas are present in situations where assumptions and expectations are overturned by a (usually traumatic) series of events. Individual examples would be getting fired, suffering bereavement or the breakdown of an intimate relationship. Recent societal examples would be the destruction of the 2001 World Trade Center towers, a unilateral invasion (as with Iraq in 2003), the 2008 collapse of the banking industry and subsequent bailout, race riots and Brexit.

As a result of these disorienting dilemmas we are forced to re-evaluate the ways we have understood the world. In so doing we develop meaning schemes (sets of assumptions related to specific situations) and meaning perspectives (assumptions constituting broad worldviews) to make sense of what we're experiencing. Over time these become increasingly comprehensive (in that they account for a broader range of events) and discriminating (in that they discern differences between different categories of events and phenomena). Adults transform their frames of reference through critical reflection on the assumptions of others (objective reframing) or on their own assumptions (subjective reframing). Mezirow argues that the overall purpose of adult development is to realize one's agency through increasingly expanding awareness and critical reflection. The function of adult educators is to assist this development by helping learners reflect critically on their own, and others', assumptions.

A central element of Mezirow's theory of transformative learning is what he calls «systemic» critical reflection that focuses on probing sociocultural distortions. Systemic reflection describes the process by which people learn to recognize how uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices. Critical reflection as ideology critique focuses

on helping people come to an awareness of how capitalism shapes belief systems and assumptions (i.e. ideologies) that justify and maintain economic and political inequity. This kind of 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).

In building a comprehensive theory of adult learning Mezirow argued that the notion of critique needed broadening from systemic critique to include interpersonal and even intrapersonal domains. He provided numerous elaborations and extensions of his work drawing in an ever-broader range of knowledge, including artificial intelligence, brain chemistry and cognitive science. This widening provoked criticism that he had lost focus on the collective critique of structures and systems and had focused too much attention on individual, internal change. Mezirow and his supporters contended that in building a comprehensive theory of adult learning one could not restrict the focus to investigating systemic critique but had to deal also with adult learning of an intrapersonal spiritual nature or of learning situated within intimate relationships.

Regular reviews of transformative learning document how the scope of transformative learning has itself widened to account for holistic, somatic and emotional dimensions to this process, and to its application within studies of different cultural contexts (Merriam and Niseane, 2008). O' Sullivan and others (2002) have explored the connections between transformation and spirituality, and the importance of connecting transformation to ecological balance. There have been numerous empirical studies documenting what are claimed as examples of transformative learning (Taylor, 2007; Taylor and Snyder, 2012) and vigorous debates concerning whether or not Mezirow's theory is overly individualistic and rational. These debates and critiques, not surprisingly, mirror wider discussions of Habermas' work.

Transformative learning has swept the world of North American adult education in the years since Mezirow he published his first article outlining a critical theory of adult learning (Mezirow, 1981) and his main book on transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). In this paper I intend to argue that the term transformative learning is perilously overused and that its relative rarity means it cannot be the sole focus in building a comprehensive theory adult learning. No one doubts that transformations on every level happen to people and that learning to see the world in a radically new way often results in fundamental, qualitative changes in personal and political spheres. It's just that these transformations are relatively rare and certainly not the empirical marker of what it means to be an adult. I also want to explore how the construct of transformative learning might be applied accurately to the analysis of a very particular phenomenon, the development of racial awareness.

## Evacuating Meaning – The Overuse of the Term

Transformation is a process in which the foundational elements of something are forever radically changed. It's not the same as getting better, becoming more empathic or democratic, or improving as an activist or teacher. Transformation is far more dramatic than that. A transformation of learning means that the tectonic clusters of one's paradigmatic assumptions and most enduring and dependable perspectives one has used to make sense of the world are forever fundamentally altered. Transformation is not a linear expansion or growth, a gradual broadening and incorporating of shadings of meaning and experience. Transformation is foundational, axiomatic. One can never think or live in the same way as before when transformation happens.

War is transformational, a near-death is experience is transformational, a profound spiritual awakening is transformational. In each of these we re-enter the world with forever changed ways of interpreting our experiences. But most of what I hear as examples of transformative learning in the United States are not like that at all. I do a lot of consulting for higher education and in the non-profit world and everywhere I go I am told that the institution concerned either wishes to transform itself or is engaged in a transformation. This is almost always a rhetorical trick. Say, for example, that a university wishes to transform itself into a learner-centered organization, one in which the students' needs, wants and experiences are placed at the center of decision-making. Mostly this means that the institution wants to increase its consumer appeal in a shrinking market by working in ways that attract potential customers. Sometimes it means that there's a desire to move to online learning which is more flexible and accessible.

There is certainly a transformative potential here but for that potential to be realized some foundational processes would need to be thrown out. If you are truly working in a transformational, learner-centered way then you will have to abandon institutional schedules, disciplinary markers, accreditation strictures and standard faculty contracts. Student-centeredness means finding out as much as you can about students' own abilities, identities and experiences and then using this knowledge to create myriad bridges between where students are and where you want them to be in terms of increased skill and ability. This is a highly individualized process and it will look very different, and take vastly different amounts of time to conduct with different students. You can't work this way under a standardized contract and you can't work this way with predefined curricula, standardized measures of learning and shared schedules.

What most universities mean when they say they are transforming into learner or student-centered organizations is that they want a greater degree of flexibility within existing constraints. Control of curricula remains with disciplinary gatekeepers and accreditation bodies, students are charged the same tuition fees irrespective of their situations, and institutional calendars stay within familiar cycles. Working to increase flexibility and widening the options for students and teachers is something I work for myself and wholeheartedly support. But I would never describe it as transformative. I'd reserve that descriptor for universities who re-think the whole notion of a university's purpose and functioning and who break down all existing procedures and start from trying to answer a fundamental question – how do we best serve people who come to us to learn?

But although the term transformative learning is overused I would not go as far as Newman (2012) and argue that it should be abandoned entirely. I do think there are times when people learn something so significant and important that it transforms completely the way they think about the world and their role within it. I want to use myself as a case study here and propose an example of this kind of learning that I have experienced myself - my awareness of my collusion in the ideology of White supremacy.

## Abandoning the Good White Person Identity

I'm a white man who for most of his life has prided myself on my compassion and empathy. In particular, I've always felt that I didn't see race, preferring instead to believe that I saw character and behavior rather than skin color or phenotype. 'Judge people by their actions' has always been a credo of mine. Sure, I've made racial, ethnic, sexist and homophobic jokes, but that's all they were – jokes. I certainly would never act in any overtly racist way. In thinking of myself as a 'good white person' (Sullivan, 2014) I practiced a form of aversive racism (Dovidio and Gaertner, 2005) professing to be anti-racist and condemning racist actions, while being complicit in a system that sanctioned those actions. For decades I engaged in multiple racial micro-aggressions (Sue, 2010), small, covert acts of exclusion and diminishment with no overt racist intent.

In the last three decades I've engaged in learning which has fundamentally and irrevocably altered both my understanding of racism and my own participation in it. From believing that somehow I had abstracted myself out of any racist conditioning and thereby managed to escape the ideology of White supremacy I now realize that racist instincts, inclinations and intuitions live within me and constantly influence how I think and act. To move from a sense of myself as a good White person who has evaded racist conditioning to seeing myself as acting in ways determined by the elements of White supremacy I find within myself has been transformative. It has forever fundamentally changed the way I engage in the world, both in all White contexts as well as multiracial settings.

This learning has happened in several ways. First, through conversations with friends and colleagues of different racial identities I've learned that race is a complex yet all pervasive phenomenon, and that I have far less control over monitoring my own racism than I'd previously imagined. Second, through the study of texts and videos I've learned to improve my ability to recognize when racial micro-aggressions are in play. Third, through participating in formal workshops I've learned to experiment with different ways of combating racist ideology and actions. Fourth, I've learned to apply the insights gained from my conversations, study and participation in workshops to the examination of my own personal conduct and experience. This means that I've learned to acknowledge that I will never lose the elements of White supremacist ideology lodged into my consciousness.

Finally, the biggest project in my career as an educator over the last decade has been learning how to bring racism out into the open so that it can be analyzed and countered. This has involved a lot of development and experimentation with different activities and techniques, and learning when each of these works best to naturalize racism; that is, to make discussion of its pervasiveness and how to combat this a normal and unremarkable part of everyday life. This overarching pedagogic and community project has involved lots of discrete learning tasks; for example, learning how to deal with white shame and guilt, learning what constitutes authentic ally behaviors, and learning how to use narrative disclosure of my own racism as a teaching tool. In that I had never anticipated this being a central focus for the end of my career, that it sprang directly from the experience of re-examining my own White identity, and that it irrevocably and permanently changed what I believed was the ethical practice of adult education I believe this can be called transformative.

## Outlining the Pedagogy of Narrative Disclosure

For the rest of this chapter I will explore in some detail the ways in which my learning about racism has informed an applied learning project; learning to use narrative disclosure as a way of raising people's awareness of the pervasive dynamics of racism.

The appeal of narrative is powerful yet simple. Narrative draws the reader or listener in. The disclosure of personal experience, particularly when told in the form of a story, has far greater effect than the presentation of research data. People remember examples,

metaphors and analogies they hear in a personal story far more than they do a theoretical explanation or a study's empirical findings. So whenever I have a pedagogic aim of teaching about the permeability of racism I always work from a central assumption that before I can ask anyone else to explore how it lives within them I need to engage in a prolonged period of self-disclosure of how it lives within me. I need to show how some constituent elements of the ideology of White supremacy have determined my own behavior for many years.

I define the ideology of White supremacy as the common sense belief that authority looks White; that Whites, because of their presumed superior ability to use logic, reason and objective thought are considered to be naturally fitted to make decisions for the rest of us. Under this ideology Whites are allowed to define what the common good is, and instruct and organize society on how to achieve it. This ideology is enshrined in institutional habit, in social policy, in the way access to opportunities is permanently structured, and in the daily practices of conversations, meetings and so on. It informs the ways cities are designed, schools are funded, medical services are provided and transport routes designated. Environmentally, the siting of power stations disproportionately in communities of color and poverty is an illustration of White supremacy just as much as using a racist epithet or suppressing voter turnout.

In my own use of narrative disclosure I try to show how White supremacy manifests itself in my own life as a college teacher by focusing on three elements: (1) the way that Whites are regarded as the 'natural', de facto gatekeepers in scholarly endeavors, (2) the idea that it's up to Whites to 'take care' or 'fix' the problem of racism, and (3) the blindness of Whites to the commission of racist micro-aggressions.

## Whites are Natural Gatekeepers

This first idea seeps its way insidiously into our consciousness. It does not assert itself as an overt injunction, as in 'you must be White to be editor of this journal, winner of this award, compiler of this handbook'. It's more that the power of the White gatekeeper role is revealed in the moment of astonishment when we discover a gatekeeper who is not White. The instinctive surprise we experience at such moment is the chief indicator of the power of this ideology.

To demonstrate the power of this ideology I will usually start by talking about those who, in a five-decade career, have been my boss. There has only ever been one person of color who has been in a position of direct authority over me, and that was for about three months. For the other 46 years and nine months every dean, department head, principal, president and book editor I have worked with has been White like myself. So I have no model of a person of color who has exercised gatekeeper power or influence over me.

I then talk about my own gatekeeper role. An Endowed Chair is the top of the professorial hierarchy and I now find myself in the role of mentor to junior faculty at the outset of their careers who are trying to get published. Several of these are colleagues of color. So now I'm in the position of the White power broker trying to work as an ally whilst working in an overwhelmingly White field and still being in thrall to learned racist ideology. I talk about how I try to deal with this contradiction. I say that I try not to set any agenda with my mentee but that I always begin any mentoring conversations asking mentees what their agendas and goals are, and how they feel I could be of help. I never agree to a mentoring role unless asked to do so by the mentee, even though superiors have sometimes wanted to foist me on colleagues they see as under-performing.

At the outset I try to acknowledge my own identity as a White, Euro-American, and how the rules of the game have been set up to help me. If a junior colleague wishes to play this game of publish or perish I am more than willing to help them do that. I don't try to pretend that I can in any way draw on my own struggles to get to my position as a way of understanding theirs. Mentoring across racial differences is particularly complex when the mentor is White (and in my case male) and the mentees are colleagues of color. For example, I have twice experienced the situation of a junior woman of color approaching me to ask for some mentoring with regard either to publishing or to teaching. At both times I relished engaging in an authentic conversation with colleagues where my experience and accomplishments would allow me to provide some help.

After spending some years working with these colleagues we co-facilitated a workshop on ways to introduce race into classroom conversations. During the workshop I tried to model some openness to critique by asking these two colleagues to talk publicly about the micro-aggressions they had seen me enact towards them. Turns out that both had been sent to me by their respective Deans to be 'fixed'. They were told that in order to get tenure they 'needed to see Stephen Brookfield'. So the familiar supremacist narrative of the White savior heroically and empathically fixing things for colleagues of color was enacted once again even as I thought an exchange of equals was in place.



## Colleagues of Color Can't Succeed Without a 'White' Ally

I have to admit, whenever I hear White colleagues declare themselves allies I cringe. This is because the designation of ally is not ever ours to make. Yes, I would like to be considered an ally but I understand that the naming of me in that way is not in my hands. But when working with White students or colleagues I try to keep the cringe internal. Displaying it openly is a clear act of disdain in the way the European American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness (2010) identifies. Instead I often begin any discussion of being an ally by declaring my core assumptions of this work. For example, I assume that people of color won't trust me and that this should have no bearing on my readiness to work in anti-racist ways. Being regarded with suspicion is actually nothing to do with me personally, but everything to do with the way White supremacy conditions Whites to avoid thinking of themselves as raced or privileged.

One of the things I try to talk a lot about is my own practice of interacting with colleagues and students of color. I talk about my own withholding behaviors, of not speaking for fear of seeming authoritarian or racist. The European American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness (2010) points out how Whites often say silent in multiracial dialogues because they don't want to be seen as shutting people of color down or reproducing White dominance of conversations. I remember working early in my career with a group containing a single African American woman. Whenever she spoke I would remain studiously silent, congratulating myself on my empathic support. In my head I was 'bringing her into voice', without realizing what a condescending, patriarchal way this was of thinking about my own behavior. One day this student pulled me aside and asked me why I never responded to her comments in classroom discussion. She was visibly upset with what she saw as my disinterest in her views. So the supposed act of an 'ally' actually was actually interpreted as a micro-aggressive dismissal of her whilst simultaneously increasing her perception of the power I held over her.

## "You're Being Way Too Sensitive"; Uncovering Racial Micro-Aggressions

Micro-aggressions are small acts of exclusion and diminishment by members of a dominant group. They are not overt and in their subtlety the recipient of the micro-aggression is often left wondering 'am I right to feel excluded or am I making too much of this, imagining it?' When the enactors of these aggressions are called on them, they strenuously resist any suggestion that any harm was intended, and they are often joined by other members of the dominant group who tell the minority member that they shouldn't be so sensitive. As indicated by Sue (2010) micro-aggressions are typically seen in offhand comments, eye contact (or the lack thereof), who gets called on in class or meetings, how seats are arranged, unchallenged stereotypes and jokes.

I see racial and gender micro-aggressions everywhere and always try to use my own commission of these as the starting point for examining this concept. I will typically begin a class or workshop examining these by sharing my most recent micro-aggressions. Let me give an example here. In a class a couple of years ago I asked all the students in a discussion to give their preliminary 'take' on an issue the course was examining. After hearing from each student I summarized what I felt were the main themes and differences revealed in the discussion. Upon finishing my summary, a student raised her hand and said I'd missed out one member of the group, a young Asian American woman. I was momentarily flustered, apologized, and invited the overlooked student to speak.

During the coffee break I thought the incident over and realized it was a classic example of a micro-aggression. I certainly had no plans to exclude this student. I had not come to class thinking 'I must make certain student A doesn't have the chance to speak'. And, had I been confronted with my behavior in the moment I would have denied any exclusionary intent. So when I returned to class after coffee I began the session by apologizing again and saying that what the students had just witnessed was a classic example of a racial micro-aggression. A representative of the dominant culture had unknowingly and unwittingly marginalized someone from a community of color.

One of the White students told me not to be so hard on myself and said I was reading far too much into a momentary lapse of forgetfulness. I explained that micro-aggressions are never intended. Instead, they are ingrained, seemingly instinctive behaviors that represent years of unconscious assimilation and socialization. They are ideological in the sense that they become part of our daily repertoire, behavioral minutiae that actually represent a socially ordered system of structural inequality. At this point the student I had overlooked spoke up and said that the same thing had happened to her in every class she had taken at the university. Her experience had been that of being repeatedly ignored.

## Conclusion

In this article I have argued for a reappraisal of the assumption that transformative learning is such a common experience in adulthood that it can become the focus of a comprehensive theory of adult learning. In fact, transformative learning in which adults

experience a dramatic, fundamental and irreversible change in how they interpret and act in the world is relatively rare. Certainly a great deal of learning goes on in adult life but I would venture that for most of us a very small part of that could be described as transformative. We are constantly learning adaptively to deal with a changing world. We learn to negotiate situations, improve our skills, communicate better, become more self-aware and develop knowledge in a myriad of ways. But whilst that's all important, necessary and significant, it's not transformative.

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