

Research Article

Donna M. Mertens

Transformative research: personal and societal

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ijtr-2017-0001>

received 6 September, 2017; accepted 12 October, 2017

Abstract: Transformative researchers have the potential to contribute to both personal and societal transformation. In this article, I argue that the two are intertwined and that personal transformation is a necessary component of research that is designed to support change at the societal level in the form of furthering human rights and social justice. I describe a transformative framework that examines assumptions related to ethics, the nature of reality, epistemology, and methodology that can guide researchers who choose to address both the personal and societal levels of transformation. Ethically, researchers need to examine who they are and who they are in relation to the community in which they are working. This process goes beyond self-examination to a critical analysis of the cultural blinders that might obscure our ability to contribute to positive impacts. I put forth the hypothesis that if we design our research so that it explicitly addresses issues of discrimination and oppression that the probability of personal and social transformation increases.

Keywords: Transformation; Ethics; Indigenous; Deafness; Discrimination

1 Transformative research

In this article, I argue that framing this as an either/or question will not lead to the desired goal of transformation. Rather, the question would be more helpfully framed as a both/and question. To wit: What is the nature of research that has a transformative goal for the participant, researcher, and society? And, if we accept that the transformative goal is multi-leveled, then what are the impli-

cations for the methodologies that we use to conduct this research?

Two of my personal experiences stand out for me when I contemplate the idea that transformation necessitates the intertwining of the personal and the societal. First, my family moved from Washington State to Kentucky in the early 1960's when I was just entering seventh grade. When I lived in Washington State, I never saw any Black people, but their presence was immediately apparent to me upon arriving in Kentucky. What I noticed was that the Black people did not live in my neighborhood or go to my school or swimming pool. The highest concentration of Black people that I saw lived in the inner city without air conditioning in the sweltering humidity found in Kentucky. I asked my teacher why Black people did not go to my school. She patted me on the head and said "Honey, they just prefer to be with their own kind." I did not know the word cognitive dissonance at that time, but that is what I felt. That was a transformative moment for me as I sensed that there was something wrong with this picture. Without being fully consciously aware, it was at that moment that I decided that my life course would be to find out what was wrong with this picture and what could be done to eliminate discrimination that limited the life chances of Black people and members of other marginalized communities. This was a personal transformation that led to a commitment to societal change.

The second personal experience occurred many years later at a conference in Amsterdam. I finished a presentation about transformative research that focused on societal transformation; it was followed by a question and answer period. Dr. Bagele Chilisa, then an Associate Professor at the University of Botswana, asked me if I had considered the transformation of the researcher themselves. Her question took me by surprise; we agreed to meet to talk about it over dinner that evening. At that time, I was in the process of writing *Transformative Research and Evaluation* (Mertens, 2009) and our conversation led me to reconsider the book outline. I realized that I needed to add a chapter between the introduction and philosophical framing for transformative research and the chapter on the development of the focus of the research study. This added chapter is titled: Self, Partnerships, and Relationships and it focuses on how the researcher can come to

*Corresponding author: Donna M. Mertens, Gallaudet University, USA; E-mail: Donna.mertens@gallaudet.edu

understand themselves in the research context in a way that facilitates building trusting relationships with the members of the community in which the research occurs. Thus, the intertwining of personal transformation with the goal of societal transformation was a critical element to further understanding of how to conduct research that addresses discrimination and oppression.

I present these two experiences in part as a response to Walton's (2014) discussion of the transformative paradigm in which she describes my work and those of other transformative methodologists as follows: "These writers are seeing transformative research as a means of achieving change at a community and institutional level. However, transformation can also take place on a personal level; and indeed the argument can be made that transformation at any level has to begin with transformation of the individual (p. 30)." We see an emphasis on transformation of the individual in studies such as those conducted by Pratt and Peat (2014) that focuses on the transformation of a student and thesis supervisor or by Farren, Crotty and Kilboy (2015) in which they studied the transformation of teachers through the use of information and communications technology in a second language classroom.

This emphasis on the transformation at an individual level is appropriate and necessary. However, it does not necessarily engage with issues that are integral to transformation at a societal level. This is an issue raised by Walton who suggests a linkage between engagement in research that can lead to personal transformation and wider political, social, and cultural transformations.

Walton and I may share more common ground than is evident in the quotation I provided from her 2014 article. We both call for a change in the understanding of how to frame and conduct research that leads to a more just world. We both recognize that traditional approaches to research have not

produced a sustainable world or a stable and fair global economy where everyone is fed, cared for and educated...So, while the achievements that are a consequence of the progress of science can be commended by those living in material comfort, it is important to remain aware that the suffering of countless numbers of people continues, and the problems of mental health, exploitation, drug addiction and poverty exist in wealthy countries. There is an urgent need to radically evaluate the research methods we use, and to create new and transformed research methods which will address, at an individual and collective level, the urgent social, ecological and economic crises that threaten our human existence (Walton, 2014, p. 40-41).

My work on the transformative paradigm as a philosophical framing for research is based on the premise that if we

are to contribute to transformative change, then we must conscientiously design our research to incorporate that goal into the research. I hypothesize that the probability of transformative change increases when we explicitly acknowledge that this is our goal and we include mechanisms in the research to support that change. Therefore, I offer the transformative paradigm as a framework for designing research that is inclusive of both personal and societal transformation.

2 Personal research experiences that led to the development of the transformative paradigm

Early in my research career, I coordinated research efforts for the College of Medicine at the University of Kentucky. In that position, I published a paper that questioned the use of high science scores as the main criteria for admitting students to the program. I suggested that other criteria might be considered such as ability to relate to people and representation of diverse racial/ethnic groups and gender. I moved from that position to coordinating the evaluation of a project that focused on areas of high poverty in the United States. I struggled to accurately represent the concerns of the people in those areas and sought methods to insure that their interests were heard and acted upon. From there I went to the Ohio State University to support policy decisions related to vocational education. I was able to conduct research studies on the experiences of people with disabilities, high school drop outs, students in isolated rural areas and inner city areas, women in the workforce, and people in prison. Throughout all of these experiences, I had a deep feeling of discomfort because most of my research was conducted at a distance using extant data bases or survey instruments. I knew that I needed to find a position that would allow me to work with marginalized populations, rather than "on" them.

To this end, I accepted a teaching position at Gallaudet University, the only university in the world with a mission to serve the Deaf community. I began my work there with the idea that I wanted to figure out how to enter this marginalized community in a respectful way and how to conduct research with this community. Of course, I had to learn American Sign Language and Deaf culture. What I did not anticipate, and what I am very grateful for, is the learning that occurred in me about how to respectfully conduct research with Deaf people. Those experiences led me to develop the transformative paradigm as a way

to incorporate the cultural aspects, as well as to address issues of discrimination and oppression in ways that led to personal and societal transformation.

As I immersed myself in the scant literature available at that time (the early 1980's), I came to realize that there is a uniqueness to the experiences of Deaf people, but they also shared characteristics with other marginalized communities. Not only that, the Deaf community itself was heterogeneous and represented a microcosm of the world in terms of privilege based on a variety of dimensions of diversity. In other words, Deaf people come from different countries, racial/ethnic groups, genders, sexual identities, and economic backgrounds. Therefore, I sought a way of understanding how to frame research that would be responsive to the full range of characteristics that are used as a basis of discrimination and oppression across the globe. Thus, the transformative paradigm arose because of concerns raised by members of marginalized communities and their advocates that research was not accurately representing their experiences, nor was it adequately contributing to the improvement of their living conditions (Mertens, 2015b; Mertens & Tarsilla, 2015; Mertens & Wilson, 2012). The impetus came from marginalized communities who saw a great deal of evaluation being done "on" them, yet they noted that "little has changed in the quality of the lives of people who are poor and/or discriminated against based on race/ethnicity, disability, deafness, gender, Indigeneity and other relevant dimensions of diversity" (Cram & Mertens, 2015, p. 94) (cited in Mertens, 2018, p. 21)

The Transformative Paradigm's Philosophical Assumptions and Methodological Implications

The transformative paradigm offers a meta-physical umbrella that brings together philosophical strands associated with feminism, critical theory, Indigenous and post-colonial theories, as well as disability and deafness rights theories. "It is applicable to people who experience discrimination and oppression on whatever basis, including (but not limited to) race/ethnicity, disability, immigrant status, political conflicts, sexual orientation, poverty, gender, age, or the multitude of other characteristics that are associated with less access to social justice. In addition, the transformative paradigm is applicable to the study of the power structures that perpetuate social inequities (Mertens, 2009, p. 4)."

Four philosophical assumptions constitute the essential elements of the transformative paradigm:

- Axiology or the nature of ethics and values
- Ontology or the nature of reality

- Epistemology or the nature of knowledge and the relationship between the researchers and those who participate in or are affected by the research
- Methodology or the nature of systematic inquiry

These four elements were identified by Guba and Lincoln (2005) as the core assumptions that guide researchers in their inquiry process. The following section highlights the meaning of these assumptions in a transformative paradigm and integrates the personal and social levels of transformation that are relevant for each assumption.

3 Transformative axiological assumption

The transformative axiological assumption holds that ethical research needs to be designed so that it promotes social justice and furthers human rights. The starting point for ethical research is to understand the meaning of being culturally respectful in the communities in which we work, consciously addressing inequities, recognizing a community's strengths and resilience, and providing for reciprocity to the community members.

The concept of cultural respect provides a platform for examining the intertwining of the personal and societal aspects of transformation. Researchers occupy a position of privilege because their "roles typically confer social powers to define reality and make impactful judgments about others...Researchers have an ethical responsibility to proactively assess and address the ways in which our personal repertoire of perceptual and interpretive resources may ignore, obscure, or distort more than illuminate" (Symonette, 2009, p. 280). Privilege is a societally determined position, thus the researcher needs to be cognizant of the dimensions of diversity that are used as a basis of both privilege and marginalization. In order to engage in culturally respectful research, researchers also need to critically examine their own values, beliefs, and assumptions to get beyond the cultural lens that they bring with them into the research context. Self-awareness is necessary but not sufficient; researchers must also make efforts to find out how they are viewed by the study participants. Symonette asks the critical question: "Who do the persons that you seek to communicate with and engage perceive you as being? (p. 289)." The participants' perceptions of the researcher is a crucial piece of the puzzle and will determine the quality of relationships that are developed, as well as the data that will be collected.

Walton (2014) supports the importance of researchers moving beyond the cultural lens of scientific materialism that has dominated in the West in order to be open to meanings of ethics that come from spiritual, religious, and Indigenous traditions. The intertwining of the concepts of cultural respect and spirituality became evident to me when I was working with two Indigenous researchers on identifying the pathways that Indigenous researchers negotiate to become professionals in their fields. The challenges they encountered did not arise from a lack of desire for research, but rather from a frustration that their cultural beliefs were not recognized or accepted as valid by many external researchers, as is captured in this quote:

The ways of Indigenous research are as old as the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the seas, and the deserts and the lakes that Indigenous people bind themselves to as their places of belonging. It is not that Indigenous peoples are anti-research...the "bad name" that research has within Indigenous communities is not about the notion of research itself; rather it is about how that research has been practiced, by whom, and for what purpose that has created ill-feelings (Cram, Chilisa, & Mertens, 2013, p. 11).

One example of a spiritual values from the African Indigenous community is described by Chilisa (2012). *Ubuntu* calls upon researchers to conduct their studies with an awareness of the effects of the research on all living and nonliving things – those that come before us, those who are with us now, and those who will come in the future. With this as a guiding ethical principle, how would researchers change the way they design and conduct their research? What does this ethical imperative imply for our research methods if we want to insure that we not only addresses personal transformation, but also contribute to action for transformative purposes at the societal level?

4 Transformative ontological assumption

The transformative ontological assumption holds that there are multiple versions of what is believed to be real and that these beliefs are generated based on multiple factors. The versions of reality come from different societal positionalities associated with more or less privilege, such as gender, sexual identity, race, ethnicity, religion, economic status, disability, and deafness (Mertens, 2015). There are consequences associated with accepting one version of reality over another. The vignette that I used to open this chapter gives an example of a version of reality

that was determined by White people with middle income status. They explained segregation as a matter of preference on the part of Black people to stay with "people of their own kind". When Black people and advocates for racial equity are asked about the reasons for segregation, they describe a society that discriminates on the basis of a person's skin color and country of origin. The consequence of accepting one of these versions of reality over the other should be clear to the reader. In order to support societal transformation, researchers also need to engage in personal transformation in their understandings of the origins of different versions of reality and consequences of accepting one version of reality over another.

In the early days of social scientific research, reality was defined in terms of what could be observed and measured, thus distancing the notion of personal qualities from the collection of data. Walton (2014) calls upon us to be more open to possibilities about the nature of reality in the form of considering the reality that comes from recognizing inner feelings, intentions, feelings of meaningfulness and spirituality. She proposes that social science researchers pay attention to the work of quantum physics and their conceptualization of an underlying unity to reality. "An implication is that reality exists ultimately as a unity in which everything is intrinsically interconnected; and our sensual perception of 'separateness' in the external world is an illusion" (Walton, 2014, p. 34) This depiction of reality aligns with the African concept of Ubuntu described earlier in this article and holds implications for the connection between personal and societal levels of understandings.

This exploration of the meaning of reality and their sources leads us to consider the meaning of transformation itself. What is accepted as the reality of transformation? This question has different answers depending on who you ask. In the context of transformational learning, Smith (2016) described transformation in the classroom by describing the way lecturers transformed their approach to teaching through creative uses of technology. Jones (2015) described transformation in the lives of disenfranchised youth so they can transform their lives from being victims of neglect and abuse, to one where they are able to flourish as a trusting young person with a positive sense of identity and self-esteem. And, Hammond (2016) described transformation of teachers through engagement in blogging that emphasized critical reflexivity. These transformations focus on the individual level while at the same time having wider social implications.

When Indigenous people are asked about transformation, they describe the need for decolonization in terms of research methods, as well as in the form of the return of

their land, resources, and freedoms that were taken from them (Cram & Mertens, 2015). This is a transformation that is clearly focused at the societal level, but Indigenous people emphasize that such a transformation needs to come through building relationships amongst themselves and with non-Indigenous people. When people with intellectual disabilities were asked about their priorities for transformation, they replied that they wanted to live in a world where they can live “ordinary” lives (National Health Committee, 2003). This definition of transformation has societal and personal level implications. Societal attitudes and barriers that limit life chances for people with disabilities must be part of the transformation, along with personal transformation of those in power and those with disabilities.

5 Transformative epistemological assumption

The transformative epistemological assumption centers on the meaning of knowledge as it is seen through multiple cultural lenses and the importance of power inequities in the recognition of what is considered to be legitimate knowledge (Mertens, 2015). This means that researchers need to be cognizant of their own power and cultural lenses and how they influence their relationships with research participants. As Indigenous researchers and members of other marginalized communities have taught me, it is all about the relationship. At a personal level, researchers need to experience a transformation in the way they enter communities respectfully in order to build relationships that recognize the knowledge that community members bring to the context. For example, as a non-Deaf person conducting research with the Deaf community for over 30 years, I needed to shift my self-perception as the expert in research contexts to recognize that in matters of deafness, I am not the expert. People who have lived experience of deafness are the experts in that regard and this knowledge has to be acknowledged and valued. The researcher has a responsibility to design strategies that allow those with traditional power and those who have been excluded from power to be engaged in respectful ways. This calls upon researchers to transform their roles to support the expertise that exists in the communities in which they work in meaningful ways.

This transformation might also involve a growing awareness of and appreciation for the types of transpersonal knowledge that Anderson and Ball (2011) associate with transformative outcomes, but are not typically

included in social science research. These include (1) intuitive knowledge that we have without waiting for the rational mind to come into consciousness; and (2) integral knowledge that integrates discipline-based knowledge with tacit, intuitive, body-based, and feeling-based knowledge to support psycho-spiritual growth. This is in keeping with the transformative paradigm’s assumption about knowledge in that these are types of knowledge that are valued by different cultural groups. For example, Indigenous researchers value knowledge that is rooted in a spirituality manifest by connectedness with all that has come before, all that is here now, and all that will be. Such knowledge may come to community members in many forms, even in the form of dreams (Cram, Chilisa, & Mertens, 2013).

6 Transformative methodological assumption

The transformative methodological assumption does not dictate any specific methodological approach. Rather, it aligns with the previously discussed transformative assumptions in that the voices of those marginalized in society need to be brought into the research planning and implementation in meaningful ways. This means that an analysis of power relations needs to be conducted as part of the process of bringing focus to the research, as well as throughout the entire research process. Very importantly, a conscious part of the design is to incorporate pathways to action for personal and societal transformation. This is not left to chance.

To this end, transformative researchers often adopt a cyclical mixed methods approach, using the earliest stages of the research study to identify who needs to be included and how they can be included (Mertens, 2018). This also entails a transformative process at the individual level that supports the development of trusting relationships and working with members of marginalized and powerful communities to understand the cultural complexities and their implications for transformation. The relationship building phase can be followed by a phase for contextual analysis during which existing data and literature can be reviewed. It might also include group process strategies to bring to light the types of tacit and integral knowledge that form the basis for transformation. The information collected from these phases are used to develop an intervention that has potential for transforming individuals and society. This intervention is usually pilot tested with a small group so that it can be adjusted as necessary. The

research on implementation can use a variety of designs from case study to participatory action research to randomized controlled trials. These have to be conducted with a full sense of the meaning of ethics within the research context. While the implementation phase is occurring, data are collected about processes and outcomes of the intervention. When the final data are collected about the effects of the intervention, these are brought back to the community using a variety of strategies for interpretation and use of the findings. The use might be for transformative changes within a particular school or classroom or for a change in policy that could affect a wider constituency.

The transformative methodological assumption aligns with Walton's (2014) recommendation to collect data from diverse sources in diverse ways that honor the intuitive and integral knowledge needed for transformation. Walton suggests the value of transpersonal methods to train researchers and participants in recognizing intuitive knowledge. This can include engaging in imaginal dialogue when developing the research topic, using an expansive literature review strategy that allows for challenges to personal values and assumptions, combining intuitive research methods with conventional quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, and integrating the results of all the data collection with the literature and sharing it in meaningful ways with diverse audiences. "Intuitive perception can help achieve richer forms of understanding when used to complement processes such as analytic reasoning and information gained from the conventional five senses (p. 37)."

7 Conclusions

The transformative paradigm provides a philosophical framework for designing research that has the potential for changes at the individual and societal level. For me, this framing prompts me to engage differently with study participants, ask different kinds of research questions, and design studies that are focused on supporting changes that challenge an oppressive status quo. The inclusion of knowledge that is based on intuition and dreams does not eliminate the importance of knowledge that comes from more traditional methods of data collection. It provides an opportunity to be responsive to differences in cultural understandings of what knowledge is and provides an opportunity to come to richer understandings about the meaning of experiences and changes.

I agree with Walton (2014) and Anderson and Braud (2011) about the need for a different conceptualization

of research methodology in order to be responsive to cultural diversity and different ways of knowing. I add to their thinking the need to design studies that explicitly address issues of discrimination and oppression. Individual change is a desirable goal; however, individuals who experience systemic discrimination find that their life chances are limited by an oppressive system. Thus, there is a need to address both the individual and societal in transformative research.

I also agree with Walton (2014) and Anderson and Braud (2011) that the proposed use of inclusive transformative strategies in research does not negate the importance of what is known about good research practice. Transformative strategies can complement and enhance traditional research approaches. Transformative researchers support the use of multiple methods for the conduct of studies, as well as the development of interdisciplinary approaches to solve difficult problems. I believe that incorporating the concepts of both personal and societal change will serve the world well. I end with this quote from Walton (2014, p. 36) that captures the essence of this argument: "There is a continuing emphasis on the need for methodological pluralism, where researchers from a range of disciplines including the social sciences, natural sciences, humanities and arts, can engage in individual and collaborative approaches to generating knowledge that will address issues of global concern."

References

- [1] Anderson, R., & Braud, W. (2011). *Transforming Self and Others through Research: Transpersonal Research Methods and Skills for the Human Sciences and Humanities*. New York, USA: SUNY Press
- [2] Chilisa, B. (2012). *Indigenous methodologies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- [3] Cram, F., Chilisa, B., & Mertens, D.M. (2013). The journey begins. In Mertens, D.M., Cram, F., & Chilisa, B. (Eds.), *Indigenous pathways into social research*, pp. 11-40. Walnut Hills, CA: Left Coast Press
- [4] Cram, F. & Mertens, D.M. (2015). Transformative and Indigenous frameworks for multimethod and mixed methods research. In S. Hesse-Biber & B. Johnson (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of multimethods and mixed methods research inquiry* (pp. 91–110). New York, NY: Oxford University Press
- [5] Farren, M., Crotty, Y., & Kilboy, L. (2015). Transformative potential of action research and ICT in the second language (L2) classroom. *International Journal of Transformative Research*, 2(2), 49-59
- [6] Jones, J. (2015). Professional engagement in child protection: promoting reflective practice and deeper connection with the lived reality for children. *International Journal of Transformative Research*, 2(2), 30-38

- [7] Hammond, M. (2016). How ideas of transformative learning can influence academic blogging. *International Journal of Transformative Research*, 3(1), 33-40
- [8] Mertens, D.M. (2018). *Mixed methods design in evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- [9] Mertens, D.M. (2015). *Research methods in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- [10] Mertens, D.M. & Tarsilla, M. (2015). Mixed methods evaluation. In S. Hesse-Biber & B. Johnson (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of multimethod and mixed methods research inquiry* (pp. 426–446). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press
- [11] Mertens, D. M., & Wilson, A. T. (2012). *Program evaluation theory and practice: A comprehensive guide*. New York, NY: Guilford Press
- [12] National Health Committee. (2003). To have an “ordinary” life, Kia whai oranga “noa.” Wellington, New Zealand: National Health Committee
- [13] Pratt, D., Peat, B. (2014). Vanishing point – or meeting in the middle? Student/supervisor transformation in a self-study thesis. *International Journal of Transformative Research*, 1(1), 1-24
- [14] Smith, D. (2016). An intuitive approach to learning delivery in higher education. *International Journal of Transformative Research*, 3 (2), 8-14
- [15] Symonette, H. (2009). Cultivating self as responsive instrument. In D.M. Mertens & P. Ginsberg (Eds.), *Handbook of Social Research Ethics*, pp. 279-294. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- [16] Walton, J. (2014). What can the ‘transpersonal’ contribute to transformative research? *International Journal of Transformative Research*, 1(1), p. 25-44