TALES AND TESTIMONIES OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING
IN YOUNG ADULTS

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This qualitative study took a naturalistic inquiry approach to explore vignettes of the process of transformational learning in young adults, ages 16-24, working as lifeguards in the aquatics environment. Data were collected through a progressive interview and focus group format. Eligibility to participate in the study was determined through real-time experience with a critical incident, defined as "a circumstance requiring action on one's part to facilitate or prevent consequences that would have a lasting impact on the well-being of another." Ten lifeguards participated in the study. Responses indicated that participants were able to experience Mezirow's (2000) three criteria for transformation, which carries significance regarding the theoretical foundations of transformational learning. From a practitioner perspective, the data suggested transformations were contextually based, as participants were unable to apply perspectives gained through transformative experiences in the aquatics environment to other areas of their lives. Additionally, participants indicated that actual critical incidents had a greater likelihood of enacting transformation than simulations. Responses did not suggest that the severity of a critical incident had influence over the transformational experience, provided the fidelity of the situation was high. The most significant finding was the presence of an appropriate critical friend or facilitator played an important role in bringing the transformational experience into consciousness in young adults. The cohort demonstrated the capacity to engage in transformation, but needed to realize that they could. It is important to consider the findings of this study in situations where young adults are subjected to critical incidents; especially work environments. By bringing the transformational experiences into consciousness at an early age, there is significant opportunity to assist this cohort towards individual efforts of meaning making, identification of values, and the overall process of "growing up."

To my parents, who've always encouraged me to follow my dreams,
even while tolerating my pursuit of a doctorate.
To my sister, with whom I am more alike than anyone.
And to my brother, my closest friend.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Background

The concept of adult learning acknowledges that learning in adulthood differs from childhood. This idea is rooted in deeper levels of cognitive and psychological development achieved in adulthood, and bolstered through the concepts of constructivism and andragogy (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Constructivism has been widely studied as a theory of adult learning (Bandura, 1975; Cranton & Roy, 2003; Dewey, 1916; Erickson, 2007; Gagne, 1985; Kohlberg, 1973; Kolb, 1984; Krauss, 2005; Merriam, 2001; Piaget, 1970; Taylor, 1997; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). It suggests that individuals make meaning through experiences, and these experiences are governed by social and cultural influences (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). As adults have a greater repertoire of life experiences, they have a deeper foundation from which to interpret new learning. The primary learning goals of constructivism are to engage in critical thinking, problem solving, reasoning, and reflection (Driscoll, 2000; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

Malcolm Knowles (1968) presented andragogy as a framework of adult learning, defined as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (p. 4). Andragogy is based on the following six assumptions: adults are self-directed; they have a rich reservoir of life experiences; the social role of an adult directly influences their readiness to learn; adults are largely problem-centered as opposed to subject; adults are internally motivated to learn; and adults need to know why they need to know something (Knowles, 1980, 1984). The emergence of Knowles' model marked a significant shift in modern thinking on

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learning, as it formally differentiated adult learning from pedagogy, or the art and science of helping children learn.

Expanding on the symbiotic relationship of andragogy and constructivism is transformative learning theory, as advanced by Mezirow (1978, 1990, 1991, 1993, 2000, 2003). Transformative learning theory states that individuals can engage in powerful and fundamental shifts in the way they see themselves and their world and create new meaning through three core processes: critical reflection; rational discourse; and reflective action (Mezirow, 1993). Where transformative learning differentiates itself from other constructivist theories is that it operates in a much more comprehensive nature by actually replacing archaic assumptions and outlooks with more enlightened meaning perspectives and meaning schemes. When past experiences from which meaning was being made are exposed as flawed or misguided, individuals progress through a process of revisiting their foundational values and transforming towards a different way of thinking.

Mezirow (2000) lists ten stages of transformation typically experienced by the learner. The process begins as a response to a "disorienting dilemma," or an experience that causes the learner to doubt previously held assumptions about the world. Disorienting dilemmas can be positive or negative, rapid or slow to onset. As transformative learning theory is fundamentally constructivist, the nature of disorienting dilemmas is not universal. What is disorienting for some is not for others. Following the disorienting dilemma, the learner generally progresses through nine additional phases of transformation: self-examination; critical assessment of assumptions; recognition that discontent and the transformational process are related; exploration of new roles,

relationships, and actions; forming an action plan; gaining necessary skills and knowledge for the action plan; trying new roles; gaining self-confidence in these roles; and reintegration into one's life based on the new perspective (Mezirow, 2000). The process of transformative learning theory has been widely studied (Brock, 2010; Brookfield, 2000; Brown, 2006; Cohen, 2004; Courteney et al., 1998; Courtenay et al., 2000; Cragg et al., 2001; Cranton, 2000; Cranton & Roy, 2003; Dirkx, 2006; Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006; Eisen, 2001; Erickson, 2007; Ettling, 2001; Feinstein, 2004; Garvett, 2004; Gunnlaugsen, 2007; Illeris, 2004; Jarvis, 2006; Johnson, 2003; Kegan, 2000; King, 2000; Kovan & Dirkx, 2003; Lange, 2004; Larson, 2005; McDonald et al., 1999; Merrim, 2004; Mezirow, 1978, 1990, 1991, 1993, 2000, 2003; Moore, 2005; Pugh, 2002; Scott, 2003; Sloan & Wilgosh, 2005; Taylor, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2007; Tennant, 2005; Walsh, 2007; Zieghan, 2001), and addresses the fundamental human need to continually negotiate the dissonance that arises from interacting with the world.

Statement of the Problem

Since the summer of 2000, I have worked with a local park district in various roles relating to aquatics, including lifeguard, lifeguard instructor, and management. I was seventeen years old when I started as a lifeguard, my first form of formal introduction to employment. In my initial interview, I was asked, "Why do you want to be a lifeguard?", which implied that there were several seasonal employment options for young adults. My answer included such reasons as money, the tan, my friends were doing it, and because my parents were making me get a job. After being hired, I went through preseason lifeguard training to learn in-water rescues, basic first aid, and the emergency action plan of the facilities in which I would be working. Come Memorial Day – opening

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weekend for the pools – I was ready to save some lives! I didn't get that chance my first day in the lifeguard chair, though I recall being nervous. I was concerned about getting in trouble for my posture in chair, or for failing to follow protocol when rotating from one station to the next, and worried that I looked awkward carrying the nylon red rescue tube in my oversized lifeguard shirt. The next few shifts I worked were largely the same, though I became increasingly more comfortable in my uniform and my understanding about pool employment expectations. The notion that I would actually be involved in a critical incident (a circumstance requiring action on one's part to facilitate or prevent consequences that would have a lasting impact on the well-being of another) began to fade; June 22, 2000 changed that.

Nearly one month after the pool had been open for the summer, I had my first rescue. While guarding the 12-foot deep diving well, a child began to struggle after jumping off the one-meter diving board. I blew my whistle code per protocol, jumped into the water with my shirt on, and swam the child safely to the side of the pool with assistance from the rescue tube. After the experience, I was shaken. Suddenly, I was less concerned with whether my shirt was too big, or how my sandals were affecting my tan lines. I realized that there were more important things to worry about. I reflected on the incident over and over. What if I had been distracted, or experiencing subconscious cognitive relapse (the condition in which cognizant cognition is temporarily suspended, commonly referred to as "mind wandering")? What if I had been joking with the roving guard who went from chair to chair supplying water? What if I had panicked and done nothing? What if the critical incident had been worse?

Through that first rescue, my attitude towards the job changed. My reason for choosing lifeguarding over other employment options was that it gave me the opportunity to make a difference in someone's life in a meaningful way. While I still made money and got my tan, my purpose had much higher fidelity. Though I had not yet realized it, I had gone through a transformation as a young adult. In the years that followed, I lifeguarded for two additional summers before moving into a lifeguard instructor and management role. I spent five summers as a member of the aquatics leadership team, of which the core five members shared a similar perspective to the one I had acquired through my transformation; many had had comparable experiences to mine. Through these relationships, I was able to talk through my experiences and participate in reflective discourse. Together, the leadership team worked diligently to train in a manner that better prepared lifeguards to handle critical incidents, but it seemed that no exercise or simulation could replace the actual experience of having a rescue or being involved in a first aid incident. For so many of those young adults, we watched as involvement in a critical incident triggered similar transformations to our own.

As transformative learning is considered a theory of adult learning, by definition, then, only adults are considered capable of engaging in transformative learning from an empirical standpoint. As with any dialectic, differences are most apparent at their extremes, but become harder to identify as they converge towards intersect; childhood and adulthood are an example. The question of when an individual can begin to engage in transformative learning is an ongoing debate in the literature, and the confounding variable is what defines an adult (Merriam, 2004; Mezirow, 2000; Taylor, 1997). Mezirow defines an adult as "a person old enough to be held responsible for his or her

acts" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 24). This represents a social or legal definition of adulthood. Other frames include biological adulthood (puberty) and psychological adulthood (cognitive development); perhaps the most popular empirical metric for making the determination between childhood and adulthood has been the level of cognitive development of the learner (Kegan, 2000; King & Kitchner, 1994; Kohlberg, 1973; Perry, 1970; Piaget, 1972; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

Jean Piaget (1972) presented research on the formation of cognitive processes in children, citing four distinct stages of development: the sensory-motor stage (birth to two years old); the preoperational stage (two to seven years old); the concrete operational stage (seven to fourteen years old); and the formal operational stage (fifteen to twenty years old). It is during this latter stage at which individuals can engage in abstract thinking. Piaget cited the ability to think abstractly as the hallmark of the commencement of adulthood (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Critical thinking is defined as the process of assessing claims and making judgments on the basis of well-supported evidence (Wade, 1988). Piaget's notion of abstract thought can be likened to critical thinking, as it involves reasoning, hypothesis testing, and engagement with problem-based learning (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Recent literature indicates that problem-based learning has been successful in K-12 classrooms, which suggests that individuals are capable of catalyzing critical thought at very early ages (Azer, 2009; Allen & Tanner, 2003; Brush & Saye, 2000). Abstract thought and critical thinking have been presented as foundational components required in critical reflection, which is one of the three core elements required for transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978; Kramer, 1989; Brookfield, 1990; Merriam, 2004). The notion of critical reflection implies the ability to

engage in metacognition, or the process of thinking about thinking. As with critical thinking, recent literature indicates that individuals begin metacognition between ages twelve and eighteen (Joseph, 2010; Jacobs, 2003; Paris & Paris, 2001).

Empirically, much attention has been given to the process of transformative learning in adults over twenty-five years of age (Taylor, 1997, 2007; Walsh, 2007). This is in accordance with Kegan (2000), who argues that at least twenty years of life experience are required to be capable of thinking abstractly in any situation. Though it has undergone little empirical exploration, recent literature suggests that quality or severity of life experience could enable individuals to engage in transformational learning at a younger age, (Taylor, 1997, 2007; Walsh, 2007). Furthermore, transformational learning has been identified as a potential catalyst for cognitive development that could facilitate the process of "growing up" in young adults, which has significant implications for the actual foundation of the theory (Walsh, 2007). Despite these findings, however, few studies have ventured into the transformative experiences of those less than twenty years of age, and there have been only two studies that focused on transformational learning in a cohort entirely under the age of twenty-five (Brock, 2010; Taylor, 1997, 2007; Walsh, 2007; Whalley, 1995). Additionally, the nature of events that trigger transformation have been difficult to study. The subjective, constructivist foundation of transformational learning theory makes establishing a consensus on what will and will not be interpreted as a disorienting dilemma quite difficult (Taylor, 1997, 2007; Walsh, 2007). This study spawned from personal experience, and explored recent developments that suggest that, given the appropriate circumstance and catalyst, individuals are capable of engaging in transformation at ages earlier than twenty-five. The aquatics environment

appears to lend itself well to exploring this phenomenon, as engagement with a critical incident has been observed as having a disorienting effect on those who experience them on multiple occasions, despite the lack of empirical consensus regarding the triggers of disorienting dilemmas.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the process of transformative learning in young adults, ages 16-24. By capturing the stories of this age group, post-engagement with a critical incident, this dissertation challenges the notion that young adults are not capable of engaging in transformative learning.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do critical incidents act as disorienting dilemmas?

2. What does the process of transformative learning look like in young adults (ages 16-24)?

3. How does the severity of a critical incident impact transformation in young adults?

Design of the Study

This qualitative study was conducted through the framework of transformative learning. Data were gathered through interviews with young adults hired by the aquatics department of a local park district (pseudonym: A3MJ Park District). This environment was selected due to the virtually exclusive population of employees between the ages of 16-24 years, and because of the voluntary exposure to critical incidents that naturally occurs in said environment. Three categories of critical incidents were established for the study, which stemmed from the respective level of severity: Category 1 Critical Incidents (C1) included basic rescues and first aid scenarios; Category 2 Critical Incidents (C2)

were generally indicated by whether 911 was called; and Category 3 Critical Incidents (C3) would have occured in the instance of death, or when any form of legal litigation would have been involved. Only C1 and C2 incidents were used in data collection, as C3 incidents not only fell outside the scope of the study, but did not occur. The study employed naturalistic inquiry through a two- to three-stage interview process for data collection. Young adults became eligible to participate after first engaging in a C1 or C2 critical incident. The first interview generally took place within 48 hours of the incident, the second took place an average of two weeks post-incident, and the final focus group interview took place towards the end of the lifeguarding season.

The methods employed a semi-structured, face-to-face, one-on-one interview process for the first two interviews, and a focus group interview for the third (Patton, 1990; Kvale, 1996). The first interview was structured to elicit immediate reactions to a proximal critical incident. The second interview was intended to invite the participant to reflect on the influence of the critical incident on behavior and perspective after the passage of time. Given this approach, there were instances in which the discussion topics intended for both interviews were covered in a single interview. Generally, this occurred with young adults who had multiple years of experience working as a lifeguard, and previous engagement with one or more critical incidents. Such participants were able to talk about their recent experience and their evolved mindset since their first critical incident. In these circumstances, the young adult took part in one interview, and was then invited to participate in the final focus group interview. Individuals could participate in the initial two rounds of interviews for both a C1 and C2 incident, but did not complete the interview process more than once per level of critical incident. There were a total of

seven participants who fully completed the interview process, including the final focus group discussion. Three additional participants completed the initial round of interviews, but were not available for inclusion in the final focus group. Data from all ten participants were included in the analysis of the information, as data analysis was based on the examination of the collective vignettes provided by the lifeguards. Participants have been given pseudonyms for reporting purposes within this dissertation.

Summary of Findings

Four recurrent themes emerged from the data. The first was that the young adults had difficulty transferring the lessons learned from critical reflection to areas of life outside of aquatics. While transformational learning can involve foundational shifts in how those who experience it view the world and their respective roles within it, such evolutions were not described in the testimonies of the participants. Indications of transformations were present, but they were contextually bound. This suggests that context is a mental barrier to young adults, potentially stemming from insufficient cognitive development, or a lack of relevant experience from which to make connections to other areas of life. The second theme was that while simulations could serve as disorienting dilemmas, the higher the fidelity of the situation the more potent the catalyst for transformation. This phenomenon was discussed in terms of compulsory lifeguard training that is required of anyone working in aquatics, challenge in-service training involving advanced scenarios and circumstances, and real-life critical incidents. The third theme related to the second, and suggested that the severity of the critical incident did not influence the process of transformation. This theme may be skewed, however, as the higher-level critical incidents that occurred were managed by young adults who had prior

experience with multiple C1 critical incidents. This could indicate a resiliency or tolerance that is developed through the experience of having a critical incident.

The fourth and most potent emergent theme indicated the importance of a critical friend in catalyzing the transformational process in young adults. For the purposes of this study, the term critical friend is defined as one who serves as a facilitator to the transformational process in another after their encounter with a critical incident. A critical friend is viewed as empathetic and having comparable experience to the person who had a critical incident. While this cohort revealed the capacity to engage in critical self-reflection, the interview process itself became a facilitator to help the lifeguards make sense of their experiences through reflective discourse. Without a critical friend, the impact of critical incident experiences seemed to have been perceived only on a subconscious level in several participants. Talking through the experience brought transformational learning into consciousness and helped the learners realize their own capacity to engage in transformation. To summarize, the interview vignettes suggest that young adults are capable of engaging in transformative learning, but that the process takes on unique characteristics within this age group.

Significance of Findings

The significance of this study was its exploration of transformational learning in a younger cohort than has been previously explored. Results indicated that this cohort is capable of engaging in Mezirow's three conditions for transformation. Additionally, the nature of the critical incidents that catalyzed transformations corroborated Mezirow's (2000) assertion that disorienting dilemmas and the process of transformation can be rapid or slow to onset. Finally, responses suggested that interaction with someone

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considered to be a critical friend brought the transformational experience into consciousness within the young adults who participated in the study. In practices that expose young adults to potentially traumatic events and experiences – especially work environments – it is important to consider this factor. Beyond the four recurrent themes, participant responses were likened to a mild onset of post-traumatic stress that could be treated through interaction with an appropriate individual given the context in which the incident occurred. The benefits of such discourse include reduced feelings of isolation by the participant, and clear establishment of a system of support.

Definitions

 Adult. A person old enough to be held responsible for his or her own actions (Mezirow, 2000, p. 24).

 Critical Incident. A circumstance requiring action on one's part to facilitate or prevent consequences that would have a lasting impact on the well-being of another.

 Critical Reflection. The process of identifying one's assumptions, leading to the discovery of underlying paradigms (Brookfield, 2000).

 Critical Thinking. The process of assessing claims and making judgments on the basis of well-supported evidence (Wade, 1988).

 Disorienting Dilemma. An experience that causes one to reconsider the assumptions that govern their life.

 Transformative/Transformational Learning. Becoming critically aware of one's own tacit assumptions and expectations and those of others and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation (Mezirow, 2000, p. 4).

Young Adult. An individual in the early years of being capable of engaging in abstract thought.

Summary

This chapter presented an overview of the background, rationale, methods, general findings, significance, and definition of terms in this study. The following chapters will bolster the snapshots provided here by elaborating on the empirical evidence for the study, the methodology, the stories of the participants, and discussion, culminating in a comprehensive exploration of the transformational learning experience of young adults.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

      This literature review will establish the foundation necessary to justify the study of transformational learning theory as it applies to young adults. The review has been broken up into three main sections, each of which will be covered to level of depth commensurate with the amount of empirical and secondary research and literature that exists on the respective topic. These three sections include: Background on Transformational Learning; Empirical Research Regarding Transformational Learning; and Transformational Learning in Young Adults. Each section will conclude with a brief review before advancing to the next.

Background on Transformational Learning

      Prior to examining the empirical literature that has advanced transformational learning theory since its inception, it is imperative to establish a foundation of its origin and major tenets, as well as the learning theories on which it is based. Accordingly, this section has been separated into to two categories, and will establish the frame by which this literature review should be interpreted.

      Origin and major tenets of transformational learning theory. Jack Mezirow first introduced transformational learning in 1978. This theory of adult learning suggests that perspective transformation is required when dilemmas of life cannot be solved through the acquisition of new information, refinement of problem-solving abilities, or by increasing one's skills or competencies (Mezirow, 1978). To enact transformation, one must: a) become critically aware of how they view both themselves and the world, and b)

understand that underlying beliefs, assumptions, and values influence interpretation of incoming information (Mezirow, 1991). These underlying conditions are a result of preexisting frames of reference – synonymous with meaning perspectives – and habits of mind (Mezirow, 2000). Frames of reference dictate how experience is interpreted, are often subconscious, and result from indoctrination throughout the developmental years of youth, and through acquired cultural paradigms. Habits of mind represent the beliefs, attitudes, and positions that help make meaning of experience. Habits of mind are expressed through points of view, which are also referred to as meaning schemes. Mezirow (2000) states that "learning occurs in one of four ways: by elaborating existing frames of reference, by learning new frames of reference, by transforming points of view, or by transforming habits of mind" (p. 19). These transformations and changes can take place incrementally over a period of time, or they can be epochal, sudden, and dramatic (Mezirow, 1991).

Mezirow (1991) describes three foundational elements to transformational learning theory: critical reflection, rational discourse, and reflective action. Critical reflection, also referred to as premise reflection, is the examination of deeply rooted, socially constructed beliefs, assumptions, and values (Merriam, 2004). Critical reflection is one of three types of reflection differentiated by Mezirow (1993), and is the only type that can foster transformation; the other two types include content reflection (thinking about an event or experience), and process reflection (thinking about how the event or experience was handled). Mezirow (2000) states that content and process reflections are often outcomes of transformational learning, but lack adequate depth in and of themselves to be considered transformational. Key elements of critical reflection are

critical thinking, and metacognition, or the ability to think about thinking (Mezirow, 2003).

The second condition for transformational learning is rational, or reflective, discourse, which Mezirow (2000) defines as

> that specialized use of dialogue devoted to searching for common understanding and assessment of the justification of an interpretation or belief. This involves assessing reasons advanced by weighing the supporting evidence and arguments and by examining alternate perspectives. Reflective discourse involves a critical assessment of assumptions. It leads toward a clearer understanding by tapping collective experience to arrive at a tentative best judgment. (pp. 10-11)

Ideal conditions for reflective discourse are acknowledged, and include having accurate and complete information, freedom from both internal and external manipulation, openness to other points of view, awareness of context and assumptions, and equal opportunity to participate in said discourse (Mezirow, 2000, p. 13). The third condition for transformation is referred to as reflective action involving reintegration with the world having experienced perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991).

The process of transformation is catalyzed by a triggering event, or "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow, 2000). The nature of the disorienting dilemma can be either positive or negative, and, too, can be epochal or incremental (Mezirow, 1991). The disorienting dilemma marks the first of a ten-stage process of transformation described by Mezirow (2000). The second step involves an examination of one's self, which is "often accompanied by feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame" (p. 22). Third is a critical examination of existing assumptions about the world that have been called under review by the dilemma. The fourth step involves recognition that the discontent with one's current viewpoint and the process of transformation are related. During the fifth stage, participants will explore alternative roles, relationships, and actions that would better

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align with their transforming view. Sixth, the participant will establish a plan to enact said roles, relationships, or actions. Seventh, the participant will seek to acquire obtaining adequate knowledge and skill to accomplish their plan, followed by the eighth stage of trying out new roles. During the ninth stage, individuals develop self-confidence and competence in their new relationships and roles, resulting in the tenth stage, which is a reintegration into life with the newly established set of assumptions (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22).

Learning and developmental theories on which transformational learning theory is based. As presented prior, transformational learning theory is grounded in constructivism and andragogy (see Chapter 1). Additionally, transformational learning theory is strongly influenced by the Habermas perspective on domains of learning. Habermas (1984) distinguishes between two fundamental types of learning: instrumental learning, which occurs through the manipulation of people and environments towards performance improvement, and communicative learning, which deciphers the meaning behind communication. Successful communicative learning requires a critical awareness and understanding of the intentions and assumptions of the communicator, just as it does within the recipient of the message. The concept of communicative learning is parent to reflective discourse (Mezirow, 2000, 2003).

The work of Paulo Freire is also considered foundational to transformational learning theory. Freire (1970) remarked on a fundamental change in perspectives observed within villagers located in rural Brazil and Chile as he facilitated educational and emancipatory experiences. Once the villagers became aware of their own influence over their self-imposed cultural and economic roles, they began to take control of their

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lives and make better for themselves amidst odds that were previously considered insurmountable. Freire called this shift "conscientization."

Section review. This brief introduction to transformational learning theory described its conception and definitive features, and addressed the core theories that influenced Mezirow's original work. The next section will present a more accurate snapshot of the theory in its current state of development and practice to date.

Empirical Research Regarding Transformational Learning

According to Taylor (2007), transformational learning has become "the most researched and discussed theory of adult education." In order to adequately address the relevant topics, this section has been divided into the following categories: the evolution of transformational learning; the expansion of transformational learning; and major critiques of transformational learning. Perhaps these categories could be better described as the how, the where, and the why; for the evolution category will explain *how* the theory itself has grown since its introduction, the expansion category will address *where* it has gone, and the critiques will explain *why* it needed to change from its original presentation.

The evolution of transformational learning. Transformational learning was initially presented in the cognitive domain of learning (Mezirow, 1978, 1991). This was originally evidenced by the emphasis Mezirow placed on rationality, which continues to be valued in more recent publications as well (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006; Mezirow, 2003). In recent literature, there has been significant attention given to transformation that occurs in the affective domain, which encompasses the emotional, spiritual, and other less tangible dimensions of life. (Dirkx, 1998, 2006; Gunnlaugson, 2007; Jarvis, 2006).

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Discussion of the affective domain departs from the cognitive domain, since the process of transformational learning becomes increasingly more individualized and harder to capture. Taylor (1997) refers to affective transformation as unconscious knowing, which is learning that initially occurs outside of the awareness of the learner, and consequently out of direct control or influence (p. 52). In a study of the ethical implications of transformational learning, Ettling (2006) refers to unconscious knowing as "subliminal material" that influences action and judgment (p. 60). The concept of transformation in the affective domain is reiterated by Kroth and Boverie (2000) with regard to the impact of transformational learning on discovering one's "life mission" (p. 145). In this study, the term "life mission" was meant to embody the question of one's purpose in life, or "Why am I?" (p. 135). The authors argue that many of the influences impacting the answer to this question lay largely outside of the cognitive domain. In a discussion of the impact of emotion on transformation, Dirkx (2006) refers to emotion-laden experiences that invoke an unconscious meaning making. Such experiences are interpreted through the imagination rather than literal means, thus their origin can be elusive. Dirkx argues that, regardless of their obscurities, emotion-laden experiences have the ability to enact powerful transformation, despite existing outside of the cognitive domain. Jarvis (2006) furthers the prospective power of imagination by citing the use of fiction as a means of inducing disorienting dilemmas that can lead to a transformational experience. In an update on transformational learning, Taylor (2000) agrees, stating both critical reflection and affective learning contribute to transformation. In response to this body of literature, Mezirow acknowledges that both the affective and cognitive domains are necessary for transformational learning to occur (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006). He goes on to clarify that

learning does occur in the affective domain, but that it must be brought into the cognitive domain to be considered truly transformational (p. 134).

The debate concerning the affective and cognitive domains has spawned further discussion over the incremental/epochal aspects of transformational learning. Dirkx suggests that transformations originating or predominating in the affective domain are more incremental, and are only realized upon becoming aware of their outcomes (Dirkx, 2006; Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006). While not referring to transformation, specifically, Jarvis (1993) presents a synonymous term called disjuncture, described as an ongoing, lifelong, and fundamentally incremental effort to gain an understanding of meaning and purpose in life. Brookfield (2000), however, uses the same logic to argue that transformations are strictly epochal and slow to onset, only formally occurring upon recognition and understanding of their outcome(s).

In addition to the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning, Illeris (2004) discusses a third environmental, or social, dimension necessary for fully realizing the depth of a perspective transformation (p. 82). Through an integrative discussion of the cognitive, affective, and social domains of learning, Illeris (2004) discusses the notion of "genuine transformation," which refers to the experience whereby a perspective transformation occurs simultaneously in all three dimensions (pp. 84-85). Described as encompassing the concepts of communication and cooperation, the social dimension of transformational learning acknowledges that it occurs in practice as a result of external interactions. Tennant (2005) agrees, stating that the process cannot be entirely individualized, that "…others are always implicated [in transformation], both immediate others and generalized others such as institutional and social practices, beliefs, and

values" (p. 113). Scott (2003) supports this idea of "the other" by acknowledging the influence of the social dimension to transformational learning. He argues that the context of one's personal story is a direct result of their environment. The importance of the social domain of learning is prevalent in several other works pertaining to transformational learning, and will emerge over the course of this literature review.

Defining the nature of disorienting dilemmas has not been so much a literary debate as a collective exploration. Kovan and Dirkx (2003) studied the transformational experiences of environmental and nonprofit activists whose tasks become difficult to maintain due to external pressures and hardships. Taylor (1994) studied the development of intercultural competence when living in a foreign country. Both studies used the term "catalytic events" synonymously with disorienting dilemmas. In a study of adults in an English as a Second Language class, King (2000) refers to disorienting dilemmas as "prominent life changes" (retrieved online, pagination indiscernible). In a discussion of initiating perspective transformation, Clark (1993) calls disorienting dilemmas "integrating circumstances." In a study of transformation for sustainable lifestyles in adults, Lange (2004) uses the term "cognitive disequilibrium" interchangedly with the concept of a disorienting dilemma. In the field of higher education, Cohen (2003) described the participants of her study as having experienced "confusion" upon enrolling in a new program of study (p. 245), while Johnson (2003) describes disorientation as the "negotiation" she experienced when balancing her expectations as an incoming teaching assistant with the reality of her environment (pp. 228-229). These myriad terms suggest that, while disorienting dilemmas are well documented and quite present, the conditions that enact them have not been fully codified or even realized (Taylor, 2007); consensus

has not been achieved. As transformational learning is a constructivist theory, it implies that meaning making is based on prior experience. Consequently, there is a fundamental and naturally occurring difficulty in establishing a consistent set of criteria for disorienting dilemmas. Taylor (1997) remarks that the likelihood a disorienting dilemma will result in a perspective transformation is dependent on "the immediate and historical context surrounding the life crisis" (p. 46). In a study of coping mechanisms, Skinner and Welborn (1994) discuss a similar difficulty in objectively identifying sources of stress, which have been linked to disorienting dilemmas, citing the subjectivity of the person-environment interaction as rationale (p. 93). As Joseph Weiss (1987) states:

> Because people's beliefs about themselves and their world inevitably are based on the inferences they make from their own special experiences, each person's beliefs are different and each person can be said to live in a different reality (in Dirkx & Mezirow, p.134).

In 1995, a longitudinal study of HIV-positive adults, ages 23-45, was conducted to understand how meaning was made in life when its end seemed more proximal (Courtenay, Merriam, Reeves, & Baumgartner, 1998). In a two-year-long follow-up study, the researchers redirected their efforts to understand both the staying power of the transformational experiences that were had by this particular group, and the stability of newly acquired meaning perspectives. These emergent perspectives were: 1) that participants became more future-oriented; 2) were increasingly dedicated to and conscious to their own self-care; and 3) inclusive of being HIV-positive in their definition of personal identity (Courtenay et al., 2000). The findings suggested that the perspective transformation within this group was irreversible, which was consistent with Mezirow (1978) who said, "as we move forward to new perspectives, we can never return to those in our past" (p.106). In an additional follow-up study, Baumgartner (2002) again

presented findings that suggested perspective transformation remained stable, and that the evolved meaning perspectives persisted over time (p. 49). An additional finding was that social support was a significant factor in the maintenance and proliferation of the transformation (p. 54). Similarly, Sloan and Wilgosh (2005) studied the stability of perspective transformation in men with spinal cord injuries and found positive and lasting effects on meaning schemes. In each of these studies, the researchers noted that this perspective transformation was the result of a serious, life-threatening event, and identified the staying power of non-threatening catalysts of transformation as an area for future study (retrieved online, pagination indiscernible).

As shown here, disorienting dilemmas have been documented in a multitude of settings, ranging from enrolling in a new program of academic study (Cohen, 2004), to taking on a new role or career (Johnson, 2003; Lange, 2004), to living in a different environment or country (Taylor, 1994), to experiencing types of physical and emotional trauma (Baumgartner, 2002; Courtenay et al., 1998, 2000; Sloan & Wilgosh, 2005), and more. While the variety of its application serves as a testament to the prevalence and prominence of transformational learning, it also creates a dissonance. The need for context is a significant area of critique found in the literature, and will be discussed later in this review.

Taylor (2008) summarizes four divergent views of transformational learning that have gained momentum in the past ten years. The first is a neurobiological perspective, which emerged from the medical field through the use of brain-based imaging techniques to observe how the brain functions during learning (Janik, 2006, 2007). Findings suggest that the brain experiences a physical alteration during learning, which has prompted

reconsideration of more traditional theories of learning such as behaviorism, constructivism, and transformational learning theory. The second area of advancement is the cultural-spiritual perspective of transformation, which emphasizes the relationships and connections between individuals that serve to facilitate transformation. The goal of the cultural-spiritual perspective is to highlight the importance of narrative in capturing the process (Tisdell, 2003). Third is a race-centric perspective of transformational learning, which focuses on transformation strictly from the position of a race other than Caucasian. In doing so, the emphasis is placed on the promotion of inclusion, empowerment, and cross-cultural negotiation (Williams, 2003). Finally, a planetary perspective of transformational learning has been discussed, which examines the incremental process of epistemic change over the life span, accounting for all dimensions and influences on life. This perspective acknowledges that context is crucial to understanding the intricacy of transformation, though the body of literature pertaining to the planetary perspective is very limited (Taylor, 2008).

   The expansion of transformational learning. Several scholars have expanded the framework of transformational learning by integrating it with additional models, or applying it to other bodies of literature. Whereas Mezirow (2000) describes a ten-phase process culminating in transformation, Moore (2005), Taylor (1994), and Lange (2004) offer alternative and supplemental frameworks to interpret the process of change. Building off the work of Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente (1994), Moore (2005) compared a transtheoretical model of psychological development with transformational learning to offer a more robust exploration of each, and to identify a need for interdisciplinary conversation. The transtheoretical model articulates levels of

psychological development experienced by individuals seeking to change their thought processes, behavior, or relationships with others or their environment (Prochaska et al., 1994).

Based off several theories of psychotherapy, the transtheoretical model involves six unique stages of change: 1) precontemplation, 2) contemplation, 3) preparation/determination, 4) action, 5) maintenance, and 6) termination (DiClemente & Prochaska, 1998; Prochaska et al., 1992, 1994). Moore (2005) cites several points of convergence between the transtheoretical model and transformational learning. The precontemplation stage can be likened to a disorienting dilemma, as both imply an unsettled awareness that a process of change has been initiated. Within the transtheoretical model, contemplation encompasses Mezirow's stages two and three (*i.e.* self-examination and the recognition that discontent and the process of transformation are shared, respectively). The preparation/determination stage of the transtheoretical model is similar to stages five, six, and seven of transformational learning, as it involves exploration of new roles, actions, and relationships, and involves planning a course of action. The action stage of the transtheoretical model is essentially identical to the action stage of transformational learning, as both involve a process of acquiring momentum while moving in a new, more enlightened direction. The maintenance stage is similar to the reintegration phase of transformational learning. Finally, the termination stage is the point at which perspective transformation has been fully realized (Moore, 2005, p. 408). The significance of Moore's comparison is that it represents a paralleled emergence of a similar theory within an entirely different discipline. This simultaneous yet autonomous

evolution serves only to bolster the credibility of the other as a relevant theory or model of learning (Moore, 2005, p. 410).

Taylor (1994) applied transformational learning theory as the framework to understanding the learning process in establishing intercultural competence. He defined intercultural competence as "an adaptive capacity based on an inclusive and integrative world view which allows participants to effectively accommodate the demands of living in a host culture" (Taylor, 1994, p. 154). Taylor noted three distinct stages in the development of intercultural competence, which include: 1) a catalyst for change; 2) a process; and 3) an outcome. The study did not specifically measure all ten individual phases of transformation, though Mezirow (2000) acknowledged that the ten phases of transformation need not be experienced in the order originally presented (nor are all required for transformation to occur within a learner). This is consistent with Erickson (2007), who, in a study of three Learning in Retirement Programs, presented data to suggest that, given the individuality of transformational experiences, at least two alternate orderings of the ten stages were found to be applicable in the transformational processes of participants.

Transformational learning theory has been primarily studied through qualitative means (Taylor, 1997, 2007; Walsh, 2007). One area of qualitative research that has a natural affinity in the study of transformational learning is action research, which can be considered the study of a perceived social problem by those with the capacity to enact its change. Lange (2004) used transformational learning theory as the framework for an action research study aimed at revitalizing citizen action for sustainable lifestyles. The concept of restorative learning, which is described as a reconnection with that which

remains stable during transformation and enables the participant to overcome a disorienting dilemma (p. 122) is presented as symbiotic to transformative learning. Lange suggests that action research and transformational learning are complimentary, since both are concerned with acquiring understanding in the process of facilitating change (p. 124). Taylor (2000) describes the benefit of using action research to study transformational learning as it brings the theory into the realm of practice (pp. 320-321). He furthers his argument for their mutually beneficial relationship by noting that they share similar assumptions and attention to outcomes, including "the participatory approach, the emphasis on dialogue, the essentiality of a reflective process in learning, and the need for action" (Taylor, 2007, p. 188).

Gravett (2004), King (2000), and Feinstein (2004) provide additional testimony to the compatibility of action research and transformational learning through their respective studies. Gravett (2004) used action research in conjunction with transformational learning to understand the process of changing teacher-centered perspectives into learner-centered perspectives in instructors of higher education. The conclusion noted that while action research was successful in achieving transformation of perspectives, additional support and encouragement was needed to enact the transformation in practice (p. 270). King (2000) discussed similar findings in a study of 208 adult learners enrolled in an English as a Second Language (ESL) program, noting that the social support structure facilitated by the action research design of the study was integral to enacting perspective transformation. Feinstein (2004) also cited social support as a catalyst for facilitating environmental activism during an action research study of traditional ecological Hawaiian classrooms. These four studies give further credence to the claims of Illeris

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(2004) who emphasized the social dimension of learning as a crucial element to full perspective transformation. In addition to psychology, intercultural competence and communication, and action research, transformational learning theory has been influential in studies of social justice and equity (Mezirow, 1990; Brown, 2006), which is respectful and appropriate considering its origins in the work of Freire (1970) and Habermas (1970, 1984).

Major critiques of transformational learning. Equally important as the evolution and expansion of transformational learning are its critiques, as critiques provide the refinement necessary to solidify its sophistication. Perhaps most notably, there has been a lack of consensus on what constitutes transformation. As Kegan (2002) warns:

> Because both the subject and phenomenon of transformation are enormously exciting and appealing, there's a temptation to become intoxicated by the thrill, hope and spectacle of it all, which can make it difficult to get at what transformation is (p. 144).

Largely, confusion over what constitutes transformation stems from a lack of attention to the context in which a transformational experience occurs. In an early, pointed critique of transformational learning, Collard and Law (1989) attack the position that the theory is considered emancipatory by design, citing lack of context as rationale. Kegan (2000) argues that context is crucial for transformation to occur, stating, "the form that is undergoing transformation needs to be better understood; if there is no form, there is no transformation" (p. 48). More recently, Gunnlaugson (2007) noted that the acontextual nature of transformational learning has served as a positive catalyst for further developing the theory, though efforts remain inadequate. Taylor (2007) supports this historical inadequacy of addressing the context of transformation through a comprehensive analysis of 41 peer-reviewed journal submissions, published from 1999-

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2005. In his discussion of context, Taylor revisits the longitudinal study conducted by Courtenay et al. (1998, 2000) and Baumgartner (2002) in critiquing the validity of their findings that HIV-positive adults maintained their transformed perspectives over time. Taylor states that the studies were limited in that they could not account for the impact of increased tolerance for HIV-positive individuals, improvements in medicine, and other social factors on sustaining transformation (Taylor, 2007, pp. 176-177). Context can also manifest itself as "readiness for perspective transformation," as indicated by Cragg, Plotnikoff, Hugo, and Casey (2001) who studied transformational experiences in RN-to-BSN distance education programs. Conditions such as attitude, skill level, and experience – intangible elements that add to the tapestry of context – contributed to the overall readiness of graduates to engage in transformations, which is consistent with Mezirow's (2000) preconditions for transformation. Taylor has been consistent in his calling for additional attention to the context of transformation, and methods to recognize its impact (Taylor, 1997, 2007).

Critical reflection has been another prominent topic of debate within the literature. Mezirow (1998) suggests that critical reflection could perhaps have been better defined as perspective reflection or reframing in order to include the affective domain of learning and unconscious assimilations into new ways of thinking that can occur. John Dirkx agrees, noting that Mezirow's initial concept of critical reflection is overly analytic and does not allow the subconscious to become conscious on its own accord (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006). Taylor (1994) argues that thoughtful action is a substitute for critical reflection in those with a nonreflective orientation who experience transformation. Similarly, Gunnglauson (2007) argues that generative dialogue is a more appropriate term

to describe critical reflection, as it relies on meta-awareness to mediate the process of conversation to encompass the affective and cognitive domains. In her study of 256 undergraduate business majors, Brock (2010) concluded that Mezirow's original notion of critical reflection was instrumental to the process of transformation, and adequate in the context of its traditional definition. Brookfield (2000), however, staunchly disagrees with Mezirow (1998), Dirkx (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006), and Gunnlaugson (2007), stating that the term "critical" has been overused to a point of disrespect to its actual meaning. For Brookfield, reflection involving the affective domain of emotion, spirituality, and feeling cannot be considered critical, as it lacks rigor in identifying assumptions that are self-deprecating (Brookfield, 2000, p. 126). He goes on to argue that ideology critique is central to the process of critical reflection, which involves acknowledging one's own ignorance and recognizing taken-for-granted assumptions about the world. Brookfield upholds that critical reflection is required for all four types of learning advanced by Mezirow (2000) – elaborating existing frames of reference, learning new frames of reference, transforming points of view, or transforming habits of mind – but only through a strict adherence to an exclusive, and rigorous definition of the term critical. He goes on to note that critical reflection and transformational learning are not synonymous. Transformational learning requires critical reflection, but critical reflection does not guarantee transformation (Brookfield, 2000, p. 142). Taylor (2007) corroborated this observation by citing several studies in which critical reflection occurred, but meaning perspectives and schemes remained largely unaffected.

Brookfield makes a passionate case for the discovery of power dynamics, relationships, and hegemonic assumptions (wisdom considered to be common sense)

during critical reflection. Eisen (2001) agrees, citing that the identification and acknowledgement of power and trust in relationships can be harnessed as a catalyst for enhancing transformational experiences, but can also act as a barrier if not properly addressed. McDonald, Cervero, and Courtenay (1999) preemptively support Brookfield's (2000) argument concerning the importance of identifying power structure during critical reflection. They state that failing to incorporate the occurrence of hierarchies in studies of adult education and transformational learning can result in relying too heavily on psychological models, which consequently discredit influence of the affective and social dimensions of learning (p. 22).

Another prominent critique of transformational learning has centered on acknowledging other ways of knowing. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) presented data obtained through an interview study of 130 women on how they acquired knowledge and information, citing intuition and deep frames of reference that lay outside the cognitive domain. In their critique, Collard and Law (1989) were early to point out that transformational learning does not account for instinctual methods people develop for successful navigation of the world (p. 104). This critique has been addressed through the recent attention given to the learning that occurs in the affective domain, but the issue still surfaces in discussions over the limitations of the theory, as a satisfactory solution of coexistence has yet to be reached (Gunnlaugson, 2007; Taylor, 2007). The current argument is for a more holistic approach to understanding transformational learning, which can account for the individual and their own unique contexts (Dirkx, 2006; Eisen, 2001).

As the theory of transformational learning has become deeply entrenched in adult education (Taylor, 2008), its critiques can be better interpreted as areas for exploration. Merriam (2004) questions the importance of cognitive development to properly engage in critical reflection, rational discourse, and, consequently, transformational learning. Walsh (2007) agrees, stating that the necessity of cognitive development to transformational learning has not received adequate empirical attention. Brock (2010) and Taylor (2007) suggest that the topic of culture's impact on transformational learning has been overlooked, as their interactions have the potential to be quite profound. Perhaps the most salient critique in moving forward with transformational learning is the need to become interdisciplinary in its study (Illeris, 2004; Moore, 2005; Taylor, 2007). As Cranton and Roy (2003) point out, "scholarly work is often fragmented" (p. 96), which reiterates Mezirow's (2000) call for alternative perspectives to be integrated with the theory of transformational learning. Mezirow considers alternative perspectives and interdisciplinary examination paramount to the future growth of transformational learning theory (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006; Mezirow, 2000).

Section review. Within this section, I have presented a summary of the significant empirical literature that has advanced the subject of transformational learning theory throughout the past thirty years. The prominent areas include the evolution of the theory, its expansion, and its major critiques. The next section will discuss additional research, though its focus will be on empirical literature that applies to transformational learning in young adults. It is important to note that elements of the literature presented in these former sections will be revisited for full discussion of the relevant information as it pertains to the cohort of study in this dissertation.

Transformational Learning in Young Adults

Mezirow (2000) regards an adult as "a person old enough to be held responsible for his or her own actions" (p. 24). By this definition, a young adult, then, is a person in the early stages of being responsible for his or her own actions. The importance placed on critical reflection in transformational learning, however, implies that Mezirow holds a psychological definition of adulthood as well. The translation into empirical literature on transformational learning has been that the term "young adult" refers to those high school aged through early- to mid-twenties (Brock, 2010; Feinstein, 2004; Walsh, 2007; Whalley, 1995). This is within the realm of consistency with Parks (2001) who considers individuals to be young adults when they reach age seventeen, and Neugarten (1996) who, as a prominent psychologist in the field of adult development and aging, considers the age of young adulthood to be 18-22 years. This section will examine data that have emerged regarding transformational learning in young adults of high school age to mid-twenties. As the body of literature that examines the transformational experiences of young adults is quite small, it will be presented without delineation by section.

Empirical literature on transformational learning in young adults. According to Walsh (2007), factors of age, life experience, education, and cognitive development are all influential in facilitating transformation (pp. 164-165). Whalley (1995), however, has produced one of the only documented studies using age as a metric to gauge transformational learning (Taylor, 1997, 2007). In a study of high school exchange students, Whalley examined journal entries over a three-month period to determine that a group of young adults was successful in transforming their habits of mind through content, process, and premise reflection. In this cross-cultural setting, data indicated that

habits of mind were only partially transformed. The exchange students adapted to their new environment and culture by modifying their meaning schemes, but their larger frames of reference remained ultimately unaffected since indoctrination to the exchange student program was, in fact, only temporary. These Canadian and Japanese exchange students knew that eventually they would return to their native countries, in which their newly acquired perspectives would be as out of place as their existing ones were during their time as an exchange student. Whalley suggested, however, that high school-aged individuals are capable of engaging in transformational learning, given conducive context.

In a cohort study of slightly senior participants, Brock (2010) conducted a mixed methods examination to test whether 256 undergraduate business school students engaged in the ten phases of transformation outlined by Mezirow. The study involved participants, ages 17-22, of which 80% were under the age of twenty. The study found that after completing four semesters of college (two years), as high as two-thirds of participants reported having engaged in disorienting dilemmas, trying on new roles, critical reflection, and a change in meaning perspective (p. 137). Feinstein (2004) studied the process of perspective transformation in young adults, ages 19-27, enrolled in an undergraduate, introductory immersion course on Hawaiian environmental knowledge. Of the twelve participants, the majority reported a subjective reframing of meaning schemes, while one twenty-one-year-old reported significant transformation in meaning perspectives, meaning schemes, and consequential action. For this student, catalysts for transformation were reported as being both the course itself, and previous life experience (Feinstein, 2004, p. 119). This is consistent with Walsh (2007) who suggested that the

quality and severity of life experiences in younger (high school aged) individuals could compensate for age, education, or cognitive development in establishing conditions to experience transformational learning. Walsh noted that a consistent finding among those who experienced transformation in the high school years was that they felt the experience facilitated their process of "growing up" (p.164), suggesting that transformational learning itself could be a catalyst for cognitive development and maturity.

Section review. As indicated prior, the body of empirical literature that examines the process of transformational learning in young adults is limited. In this review, however, each of the presented studies implies that the process is possible in younger adults. Most notably, perhaps, Walsh (2007) argues that age, education, life experience, and cognitive development all are influential in fostering transformation, but indicates that an increase in quality or severity of life experience can supplement or circumvent the other influences.

Summary

While transformational learning theory has developed profoundly since its introduction by Mezirow in 1978, it has significant area for additional study. Excluding this dissertation, little empirical attention has been given to the process of transformational learning in young adults, despite several studies that indicate its potential. Beyond the scope pertaining strictly to a population of young adults, the environment in which transformational learning has been studied has focused primarily on formal, controlled classrooms. Consequently, it is unclear as to how the process unfolds under more natural circumstances that are outside of the direct control or influence of a teacher or trainer. Additionally, the severity of life experience as a

supplement for age or cognitive development is intriguing, and represents an area of

opportunity to further expand the theory of transformational learning.

Chapter 3

Methods

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methods that were used to collect

data to address the three questions that guided the study:

1. How do critical incidents act as disorienting dilemmas?

2. What does the process of transformative learning look like in young adults (ages 16-24)?

3. How does the severity of a critical incident impact transformation in young adults?

This section has been divided into six categories: Context; Design; Participants;

Procedures; Data Coding; and Summary.

Context

Overview of context. Data collection took place within the Aquatics Department

of the A3MJ Park District in Sparkling Wine, USA (pseudonym), during the 2010 season

(May 28 – September 6, 2010). The A3MJ Park District annually serves a population of

approximately 68,000 residents of Sparkling Wine, USA, in addition to students of a

local Research I University and surrounding towns. The District has 75 full-time

employees and 8 regular part-time employees earning benefits. As a supplement to these

staff members, it employs approximately 110 seasonal employees in the fall, winter, and

spring, and 465 seasonal employees during the summer months. The District is divided

into four primary departments: Finance; Marketing and Development; Operations; and

Recreation. Among these four departments, the District offers approximately 1200

programs each year, primarily in Recreation. It boasts 60 parks, 11 trails, and 14

facilities, totaling 654 acres. Of these 14 facilities, two are pools specifically associated

with aquatics; herein, these pools will be referred to as Major Aquatic Center and Minor

Pool. Major Aquatic Center opened in 2006 and was built on the location of its

predecessor, which opened in the early 1960s. Current features include a zero-depth entry

area, a lap pool, a 200-meter lazy river, a waterslide, and a children's splash area. In

2009, the average daily attendance of Major Aquatic Center was 925. Minor Pool was

built in the 1970s. Features include an eight-lane, twenty-five-yard lap pool, twelve-foot

diving well with two, one-meter boards, and a kiddy pool. Average daily attendance of

Minor Pool in 2009 was 221 (Personal communication, Aquatics/Tennis Coordinator,

A3MJ Park District).

Design

Overview of the study design. The empirical framework of transformative

learning was used as a foundation for the design of this study, and qualitative research

was its facilitator. Considered synonymous with constructivist research (Gall, Gall, &

Borg, 2007), qualitative research lends itself well to studying transformative learning

experiences due to its richly descriptive nature. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln

offer an elegant definition of qualitative research:

> Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It
> consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible.
> These practices transform the world… This means that qualitative researchers
> study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret,
> phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.
> (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, pp. 4-5)

The data collection methods of the study most resembled naturalistic inquiry

(N/I). Patton (1997) uses Wolf and Tymitz (1976-77) description of N/I, stating it is

> …a process geared to the uncovering of many idiosyncratic but nonetheless
> important stories told by real people, about real events, in real and natural
> ways…naturalistic inquiry attempts to present "slice-of life" episodes documented

through natural language and representing as closely as possible how people feel, what they know, how they know it, and what their concerns, beliefs, perceptions, and understandings are (p. 278).

This research used a semi-structured interview approach (Kvale, 1996) to capture the transformative learning process of lifeguards involved in rescues or first aid scenarios that complied with the definition of a critical incident (see Definitions, p. 15, Chapter 1). Note: Incidents of patron conduct (*i.e.* fighting, vandalism, verbal abuse) were not considered critical.

There are three categories of critical incidents naturally occurring within the A3MJ Park District aquatics environment:

Category 1 critical incidents (C1). Occur when Emergency Medical Services (EMS) is not required. Such situations are managed entirely within the skill sets and personnel staffed at the Park District. Examples of C1 include individual in-water rescues and individual first aid scenarios. This represents the most frequent category of critical incidents that occur within the aquatics environment. In 2009, for example, 97 of the 105 total in-water rescues at the A3MJ Park District and 113 of the 125 first aid scenarios were C1.

Category 2 critical incidents (C2). Occur when Emergency Medical Services (EMS) is required. Examples of C2 include severe in-water rescues requiring the body of water in which the event occurred to be cleared of other patrons, and first aid scenarios requiring more assistance than can be effectively provided by the on-site staff at the time of the event. A general metric for determining a C2 is whether 911 is called. In 2009, 8 of the 105 in-water rescues and 12 of the 125 first aid scenarios were C2.

Category 3 critical incidents (C3). Occur when death, or any form of legal litigation is involved. This could include a drowning that is the direct result of action or inaction on the part of the staff, death by natural causes, and rescues or first aid scenarios under legal review by any representative of the victim. The A3MJ Park District has a protocol in place for such events involving formal counseling, legal representation, and additional support for both the employee and the Park District. Although there were no C3 incidents that took place within the A3MJ Park District during the 2010 season, such an occurrence would have been omitted from the study due to its highly sensitive nature.

Overview of the interview process. This case study was compiled through analysis of responses to a suite of interview topics that was continually refined through constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Responses were obtained through a two- to three-step, semi-structured interview process. While three interview guides were established (see Appendices A-C), the flow of the interview process was allowed to naturally unfold depending on the unique nature of each circumstance and participant.

Participants were potentially eligible to complete the interview process once for each of the two categories of critical incidents eligible for inclusion in the study (*i.e.* C1 and C2). For example, one of the final participants had a C1 rescue at one point in the season and a C2 at a different time. In this scenario, the young adult was interviewed for each critical incident in accordance with the model of the study. No participants were interviewed twice for the same category of critical incident.

Interviews were held at distinct times, post-engagement with a critical incident. The first interview, on average, took place within 48 hours of engagement with a C1 or C2 critical incident. Its intended purpose was capturing reflection of the experience when

still recent and vivid. This interview was face-to-face and one-on-one between the researcher and lifeguard. When the semi-structured interview model revealed that a second interview was necessary to adequately cover all interview topics, this took place, on average, 14 days following initial engagement with the critical incident. The purpose of the second interview was to facilitate critical reflection on the incident after the passage of time; again, this interview was face-to-face and one-on-one. An example of a situation where the second interview was deemed unnecessary was with a young adult who had significant experience with prior critical incidents. The nature and tone of the initial semi-structured interview focused more on this person's first critical incident, rather than the most recent; naturally, it was more reflective and included topics reserved for the second interview in those who had not had such previous experiences.

With regard to the final focus group interviews, the initial intent was to hold three different interviews at three different times with three distinct groups: those who engaged with only a C1; those who engaged with only a C2; and those who engaged with both a C1 and C2. The constant comparison approach indicated that the experiences of these three groups were not distinct enough to merit three separate interviews. Consequently, the third and final interview was conducted via a single focus group to which all young adults who sufficiently covered discussion topics in the first interview(s) were invited to participate. The focus group interview was held on August 19, 2010, a date that was determined appropriate since ongoing analysis of the data revealed recurrent themes and redundancy within the data prior to the end of the season, suggesting a saturation point had been reached in the study.

Before the final focus group interview, participants were emailed the following

paragraph to help frame the discussion:

> Prior to the [final focus group interview], I ask that you all think about how your experiences on the job transfer outside of the pools into other areas of your life. Think beyond how you would handle first aid situations if they were to occur, and focus more on the lessons that this job has taught you about yourself.

> A common example that you all share is that you've had a rescue and chose to continue lifeguarding instead of deciding this type of work isn't for you. What does that tell you about yourself? What have you learned from it? How is your life different having experienced a critical incident? These will be major talking points of the evening.

All interviews were held on A3MJ Park District property, either on site at one of

the two aquatics facilities, or at the central meeting center of the Park District. The first

two rounds of interviews lasted an average of nine minutes and fifty-one seconds. The

final focus group interview consisted of seven participants and lasted one hour thirteen

minutes.

Data collection, storage, and security. The first two rounds of interview data

were collected through the use of an audio digital recorder and were then transcribed into

text. Data from the focus group interview were collected via both video and audio in

order to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. All participants whose interview data

has been included have been assigned an alias for use with regard to quotations and other

personally specific information within this dissertation. Had an individual been involved

in a critical incident during the specified time period, but had elected to forgo

participation or voluntarily withdrawn at any point throughout the interview process, that

person would have been allowed to do so without negative repercussion; this did not

occur. The potential research subjects were of no direct association to the researcher. The

researcher was affiliated with the A3MJ Park District in a non-supervisory, administrative role during the summer 2010 season.

Participants

Overview of participants. Due to the hiring practices of the A3MJ Park District and the age group that has historically filled the position under review, it was anticipated that the majority of the potential sample would fall within the cohort age of 16-24 years for the duration of the season. The minimum age of eligibility for employment as a lifeguard for the A3MJ Park District is sixteen years, and few applications (if any) are received from those over age twenty-four. During the 2010 summer season, 100% of the staff members employed as lifeguards fell within this age range. Had individuals been hired by the A3MJ Park District as lifeguards, but were over the age of twenty-four at any point throughout the 2010 season, they would have been ineligible to participate.

Consent/assent. Consent/assent forms were distributed to all lifeguards prior to the season's opening on May 28, 2010, and were continually accepted on a voluntary basis, through August 1, 2010. Only those young adults who submitted appropriate informed consent/assent forms were eligible to participate. Those under the age of eighteen required parental/guardian approval to participate in addition to an active assent submitted by the individual lifeguard. The parental consent form was distributed to all parents of lifeguards under the age of eighteen throughout the 2010 season.

Procedures

Establishing eligibility. Once a guard engaged with a C1 or C2 critical incident, it was first considered whether he/she was within the ages of 16-24 for the duration of the 2010 season. If so, the next question was whether the guard submitted the appropriate

consent/assent form(s). If appropriate consent/assent had been submitted, it was then determined whether the young adult had previously completed the interview process for the category of critical incident most recently engaged in. (Recall that the same lifeguard was not eligible to complete the interview process twice for the same category of critical incident, but could complete the interview process once for a C1 and again for a C2.) Lifeguards who met all of these criteria were determined eligible to participate in the interview process.

Once eligibility of the participant was established, the first interview took place, on average, within 48 hours following the critical incident. Once the first interview was completed, the participant then became eligible to complete the second round of interviews, which took place, on average, 14 days following the initial engagement with a critical incident. A suite of interview topics was initially created, and then refined over the course of the interviews through constant comparison. In some situations, a second interview was not necessary, as the topics of discussion were covered in one session. A total of ten young adults participated in the interview process of the study. A total of seven were present for the final focus group interview. Data from the three participants who were unable to be present for the final focus group were included as well, since their experiences remained important to consider. All critical incidents took place at Major Aquatic Center at the A3MJ Park District. Figure 1.1 provides a visual representation of the process that determined eligibility for participation in all parts of the study.
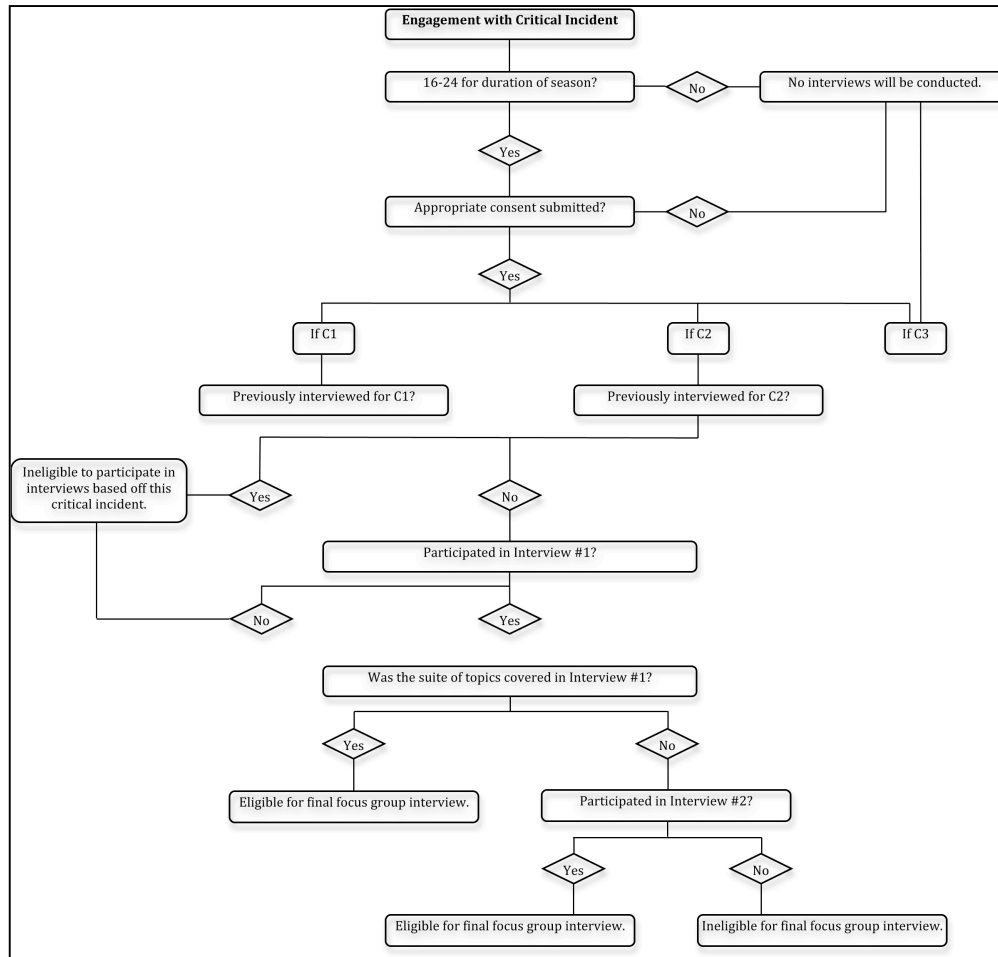
Figure 1. Flowchart: Establishing participant eligibility

Data Coding

Data were interpreted in an ongoing manner, and commenced immediately following the first interview. For all interviews, the recorded audio file was transcribed into text and read in its entirety by the researcher. No markings were made to the transcript on first read through. Once the interview had been examined as a whole, the coding process began by using the research questions as the initial frame. Passages were highlighted with a color that corresponded to the subject matter of their respective question:

1. How do critical incidents act as disorienting dilemmas? (Blue highlights)

2. What does the process of transformative learning look like in young adults (ages 16-24)? (Orange highlights)

3. How does the severity of a critical incident impact transformation in young adults? (Pink highlights)

Data were continually examined in this capacity throughout completion of the final focus group interview. Beginning with each color, data were explored to identify recurring concepts and similarity of language. Once examined within each color, themes were examined across each color as well to identify instances that might bolster or negate the emerging themes. Prior to the final focus group, three broad categories were identified: potency; severity; and transfer. The final category, the "critical friend," was identified retrospectively as a result of the final focus group interview.

Potency. Examining the responses pertaining to the disorienting nature of critical incidents (blue highlights) revealed discussion of different types of on-the-job encounters regarding rescues. Participants discussed differences between critical incidents, challenge in-service trainings, and compulsory lifeguard training, stating that each type of training carried a respective level of impact. Consequently, discussion of each type of training was recorded. Potency was determined an appropriate term for the category. Once named, the category was explored in depth to identify the theme that real-life situations were indicated as having a higher potency than simulations. This category and theme emerged earliest in the coding process and was continually sought during the interview and final focus group process.

Severity. Due to the methodology of the study, it was impossible to predict the number of critical incidents that would fall into each respective category over the course of the summer. Of the ten lifeguards who participated in the study, eight experienced

Category 1 critical incidents; two experienced Category 2 critical incidents. To discern the category of severity, the process of transformation (orange highlights) was compared between those who experienced a C1 and those who experienced a C2 to identify differences in the type of language used. There was no significant difference between the descriptions provided by each group, thus the category of severity was ill supported. Consequently, it was determined that – based of this study – severity did not carry significant influence over the transformational process. Pink highlights were often included in addition to orange highlights due to the overlap between these two categories. This theme emerged after the occurrence of the Category 2 critical incident interviews. It was sought for the remainder of the data collection process, but the lack of C2 critical incidents prevented further exploration of the theme.

Transfer. Passages that received orange highlights showed indication of one of the three conditions for transformation (*i.e.* critical reflection, rational discourse, and reflective action). Initial exploration of this color was done by identifying the occurrence of each condition, thus indicating that transformation took place. Once this had been examined, the impact of the transformation was considered. Considering that transformation replaces assumptions about the world, this category was approached from a global perspective. The researcher recognized that, despite specific questioning to its occurrence, those who experienced the conditions for transformation repeatedly struggled when asked to apply the lessons learned to a context outside of aquatics. Consequently, the term "transfer" was applied to this category, and the theme of inability of young adults to apply insights gained outside of the environment in which they were acquired emerged. This category emerged late in the interview process, which prompted an

emailed disclaimer being sent to all final focus group participants, inviting them to consider how their experiences in aquatics transferred to other areas of their lives. This became a prominent topic of discussion during the final focus group, but responses continued to bolster the presence of the theme.

Critical Friend. During the final focus group interview, participants indicated that the interview process itself was important in helping them to realize that transformation had taken place. Using this statement as a frame, every interview was re-read in search of language that indicated participants had spoken with others regarding their experiences with a critical incident. Such instances were marked with a green highlighter and examined in the same manner as the other like-colored passages. The term "critical friend" was applied when responses began to indicate that only discussion with a certain type of individual was successful in enacting the transformational process. Common characteristics of "critical friends" were that they were empathetic and had comparable experience to the person who experienced a critical incident.

The researcher also considered that participants were engaging in reflective discourse by discussing their experiences during the interview process, which led to the revelation that the process itself might play a role in the transformational experience of this cohort. As this finding was retrospective, it was considered largely through artifacts.

Summary

In this chapter, the qualitative methods used in this dissertation were examined. Data collection took place through a semi-structured, two- to three-stage interview process aimed at capturing the process of transformation as it unfolded over time within young adults hired as lifeguards by the A3MJ Park District in Sparkling Wine, USA

(pseudonym). Young adults were eligible to participate in the study upon engagement with a critical incident (a circumstance requiring action on one's part to facilitate or prevent consequences that would have a lasting impact on the well-being of another). Three categories of critical incidents naturally occur within the field of aquatics, and were labeled C1, C2, and C3, respectively. Eligibility was determined by engagement with either or both a C1 or C2 critical incident; C3 critical incidents fell outside the scope of this study and were not eligible for inclusion in the interview process. The first two rounds of interviews were conducted on an individual basis between participant and researcher. The final interview was in focus group format, and was held on August 19, 2010. A total of ten young adults participated in the study, seven of which were present for the final focus group interview. Data from all ten participants were included in the data analysis and coding process. Data were collected with assistance from an audio video recorder during the first two stages, and via video for the final focus group interview. It was then transcribed and coded in order to uncover themes pertaining to the process of transformational learning in young adults, ages 16-24.

Chapter 4

Tales and Testimonies

Overview

Mezirow (2000) describes four types of learning: elaborating on existing frames of reference; acquiring new frames of reference; evolving points of view; or reestablishing habits of mind (p. 19). Three conditions must be present in order to categorize an experience as transformational: critical reflection, reflective discourse, and reflective action. When describing the actual process of transformation, Mezirow (2000) lists ten stages through which a typical learner might progress. This next chapter is devoted to exploring the learning, conditions, and stages of transformation experienced by the young adult participants of the study. This story will be told through the frame of the three questions that guided the interview process:

1. How do critical incidents act as disorienting dilemmas?

2. What does the process of transformative learning look like in young adults (ages 16-24)?

3. How does the severity of a critical incident impact transformation in young adults?

Throughout this chapter, we will meet Michael, Kevin, Ines, Sue, Jean, Andy, and Stefanie, all of whom participated in the initial stages of interviews, as well as the final focus group. We will also explore the experiences of Charli, Maggie, and Kelly, who each completed initial interviews, but were unable to participate in the final focus group. The names of each participant have been replaced by pseudonyms to protect identity and maintain confidentiality. Not all participants reported experiencing all ten stages of transformation, nor was the manner by which the conditions for transformation emerged

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identical. This, however, is consistent with the constructivist nature of transformational learning. What follows is a summative recount of the individual vignettes collected throughout the 2010 aquatics season.

The Disorienting Nature of Critical Incidents

Michael was 17 years old for the duration of the study. He was a second year lifeguard, meaning that he had worked at the pools the summer before; he had the first save of his career during opening weekend, 2010. I sat down with Michael on June 5, 2010, to talk about his engagement with a C1 critical incident. A two-year-old girl had been sitting in the zero-depth entrance (*i.e.* an area of the pool that starts at the water's edge and gradually gets deeper, similar to a beach), and tipped over onto her stomach leaving her face-down in the water and unable to help herself up. Michael recognized the situation, blew the appropriate whistle code, jumped out of chair, and quickly swam across the pool towards the little girl. Before he could reach her, however, her mother became aware of the circumstances and picked up the child, resulting in no direct contact between Michael and the victim. Despite not actually going through the motions of applying a rescue technique, the experience carried an impact for Michael. He recounted his feelings, stating "…it happened so quick I barely remembered it. When I saw that little girl, my heart started beatin'. There was this weird feeling; it was indescribable…" (personal interview, June 5, 2010). After the experience, Michael recalled feeling upset:

> I got back up in chair and I just had this feeling where I was about to cry but I didn't cry…I don't think I was upset with myself. I was more upset with the patron. (personal interview, June 5, 2010).

Ines, a 20-year-old second year guard had an experience similar to Michael's. She had her first critical incident (C1) during the 2010 season, in which a five-year-old boy

was in water that was over his head, requiring Ines to engage and actually put the child

onto her rescue tube. Afterwards, Ines described feeling "…a little shaky" and nervous

(personal interview, June 24, 2010). She recalled replaying the incident in her mind and

thinking about it at times throughout the rest of the day:

> What if I didn't see him? What if [another lifeguard] hadn't seen him? What
> would have happened if he would have gone unconscious and I would have had to
> do CPR? It just makes me think how much farther it could have gone (personal
> interview, August 19, 2010).

Kelly, a sixteen-year-old first year lifeguard who had a C1 in June 2010 also

experienced this reflection, stating "I replay [the critical incident] over and over…things I

could've maybe done better or like what could have happened if I hadn't gone in"

(personal interview, June 12, 2010). In yet another example, Kevin, a nineteen-year-old

first year guard at the A3MJ Park District with two years' previous guarding experience

at another facility, spotted a five-year-old girl clinging to the sidewall in the lazy river

feature of the facility; the water carried a constant current. Kevin whistled, jumped in,

and brought her to safety. During his interview, he recalled the significance of his C1

critical incident, citing it as "the most important thing that happened that day," and that

he, too, kept thinking about it for the duration of his shift (personal interview, June 9,

2010).

Michael, Ines, Kelly, and Kevin all alluded to experiencing an unsettling

sensation after engaging with their respective critical incidents, though each struggled in

articulating why the incident made it so. However, each guard reported that having

experienced a critical incident had an impact on their perspective over the meaning of the

job. Michael stated that "[the job] became more real" (personal interview, July 5, 2010);

Ines noted that she began to perceive events differently while in the lifeguard chair, and

that she felt as though "the way I started guarding changed" (personal interview, June 24,

2010); and Kelly stated "I'm just a lot more alert [after having a critical incident]"

(personal interview, June 25, 2010). Kevin reflected on his C1 critical incident, stating:

> I'm trying to figure out how to put this in words. I mean, [before having a critical incident] you think "Ok, I'll just watch out for these kids," but after you make a save you realize that it's entirely necessary. That somebody could drown at any second (personal interview, June 9, 2010).

Each of these reflections came within a few days or weeks of experiencing a

critical incident, thus can only be interpreted through a short-term frame. Mezirow (2000)

states, however, that disorienting dilemmas can be rapid or slow to onset. Charli, a 20-

year-old third year guard, had experience with several critical incidents during the years

prior to the one experienced in July 2010, but vividly reflected on her experience with her

very first incident that occurred during the summer of 2008:

> It was definitely an adrenaline rush. My heart was beating really, really fast…I was really nervous because it was the first time that I had ever actually seen something. And there's a difference after your first rescue. Before, you always know that something could happen…the job becomes a lot more real once you actually have a rescue (personal interview, July 8, 2010).

Stefanie was a twenty-one-year-old third year lifeguard who experienced both a

C1 and C2 critical incident during the 2010 summer season, and had had multiple rescues

throughout her time at A3MJ Park District. Like Charli, Stefanie recounted that her initial

rescue had a significant impact. "I would have dreams about it," said Stefanie (personal

interview, June 4, 2010). "I [thought about my critical incident] the first year a lot." The

similarities between Charli and Stefanie's reflections and the descriptions provided by

Michael, Ines, Kelly, and Kevin are distinct. In Charli's experience, the significance of

the disorienting dilemma subsided during subsequent critical incidents, but the potency of

the original critical incident remained intact:

If I didn't have a rescue and I'd never been involved in anything that was serious [at the A3MJ Park District] then I don't think I would take this job as seriously as I do now (personal interview, July 8, 2010).

In each of the examples presented here, experiencing a critical incident had an obscuring effect on the young adult, causing the learner to reflect on their personal perspective of the job to a degree not possible prior to having had an incident. It is crucial to note that experiencing a critical incident was not considered disorienting universally across all participants. Andy, for example, was an 18-year-old third year guard who experienced a C1 (his first critical incident ever) later in the 2010 season. During his interview, he acknowledged that he thought about the incident after the fact and that his awareness while on duty increased as a result, but that it did not have an effect on him in the same capacity as other participants. He stated that having a rescue did not change his dedication or alter his perspective, as he took the job just as seriously even prior. Mezirow (2000) states that the very nature of the disorienting dilemmas is subjective; what is disorienting for some is not for others (Mezirow, 2000).

And so concludes the prologue to the tale of the transformational process in young adults. This section identified commonalities, both within guards who had their first critical incident during the summer of 2010, and across guards who reflected on similar experiences they had in years prior. Several participants described reflecting on not only their experience, but on how their respective situations could have been worse. There was also a shared feeling that something had changed upon engagement with a critical incident, accompanied by an inability to initially articulate what that difference was or meant. It is in this awareness that reflection went beyond content (what happened), process (how it was handled), and reached the deeper level of perspective,

which Mezirow considers as the only form of reflection capable of enacting

transformation (Mezirow, 2000). In moving forward, the indication of critical incidents

being able to serve as disorienting dilemmas has set the stage to explore the actual

process of transformation in young adults.

Tales and Testimonies to Transformation

Identifying the disorienting nature of critical incidents was paramount to

establishing the potential for transformational learning to occur in young adults, for it is

from this determination that the true tale of transformation can commence. This section

examines the testimonies of lifeguards, including an examination of the three conditions

of transformation, a look at the ten stages of transformation, and a reframing of data

interpretation that resulted from the final focus group interview. To start, we revisit

Michael's tale.

The tales. Michael had more than one critical incident over the course of the 2010

summer. In fact, he had more than one C1 critical incident in one day. On July 3, 2010,

Michael found himself rescuing a fifty-seven-year-old woman who had lost her balance

in the lazy river, and a four-year-old boy who had gotten into deep water, all in the span

of a few hours. Michael recalled experiencing an epiphany that day, which he felt

compelled to share with other younger staff members. He wanted to express his

realization that critical incidents could happen at any time to anyone; he just happened to

be in the right place at the right time – twice in one day and three times throughout the

summer. Michael wanted to convey the importance of being alert, of being well rested,

and even to have eaten properly prior to reporting for his shift. "[Having the two rescues

in one day] made me realize that I need to always be at my best" (personal interview, July

5, 2010). Now, to provide a bit of context, these reflections were coming from a lifeguard who had the following to say about his mindset prior to engaging in a critical incident:

> Going into this job, I was completely scared. I was the person wanting to hide behind people, didn't want to be picked up for scenarios…but that [first] save, it changed a little bit…I feel a little more confident now that I did have my first real save (personal interview, June 5, 2010).

Furthermore, Michael mentioned aspirations of eventually moving into a management role within the A3MJ Park District. Through the rational discourse provided by the interview process, Michael was able to articulate that the newfound confidence he earned through his critical incidents was the catalyzing factor to pursuing a new goal. Michael connected the experience of his first critical incident with the two he experienced in one day, stating that he was looking for them to happen because he had seen something similar happen before. "I saw them coming," he said (personal interview, July 5, 2010). Not only did he know what to look for, but his language alluded to a proactive perspective that was different from that of his former self. His actions were meaningful, purposeful, and informed; Michael was engaged in reflective action.

Michael's experience of having two rescues in one day was unique among the participants of the study, but his reflective action towards better preparedness was not. Sue was a 19-year-old in her second year as a lifeguard, but in her first year with the A3MJ Park District. Like Michael, Sue had more than one C1 critical incident during the 2010 summer. In her opinion, her first critical incident was milder in comparison to her second, stating "the [second rescue] was a bit more scary [than the first] because he was littler…couldn't swim, like, at all" (personal interview, June 24, 2010). She went on to acknowledge that she had learned to be more aware of the signs of drowning by reflecting on her first experience with a critical incident:

Before my first rescue, like, I knew [what a drowning person looked like] but I never actually experienced it. Now that I have experienced it, it's like I can pinpoint it all and know that I need to go in and get someone (personal interview, June 24, 2010).

Kevin, the 19-year-old guard with two years' prior experience at another aquatics facility, also had multiple C1 critical incidents over the summer; he echoed Sue's implications regarding reflective actions:

At first you think "Okay, I'll just watch out for these kids," but after you make a save you start – you realize that someone could drown at any second and you have to be there to help them out…I'm more aware…more proactive…more parent-like, actually (personal interview, June 24, 2010).

When young adults are initially interviewed for the job, a common question is "Why do you want to be a lifeguard?" When Sue was asked to recall the answer she gave at the time of her interview, her response was that she liked working with kids. She was then asked whether her answer had changed over time, to which she replied that having a critical incident made her actually want to be more aware so she could better maintain a safe and fun environment for the children who were visiting the pool. She still liked working with kids, but was able to explicitly articulate her rationale. Like Michael, Sue experienced critical reflection and gained self-confidence by having a rescue. She even felt more grown up as a result:

You start out and you don't have any experience as a lifeguard…you're like a baby. And then, you get more [experience] and you're like a toddler…the longer you work somewhere you grow and know exactly what you're doing…you mature (personal interview, June 24, 2010).

Charli's answer to the question "Why do you want to be a lifeguard" evolved from "My sister was a lifeguard and she said it was really fun," to "I really like the feeling and the responsibility of having somebody else's life in my hands and being held accountable" (personal interview, July 8, 2010). Maggie was a nineteen-year-old second

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year lifeguard who had one C1 critical incident during the summer of 2010. Like her

peers, she was able to recall her prior perspective, noting that the feelings of fear did not

go away, but the condition of the feelings changed.

> Before my first rescue, I didn't take the job as seriously…I was so scared. [Having a critical incident] makes me confident that I have abilities that are able to help people. I like knowing how to help people…I definitely still get afraid up in chair a lot, especially when there's so many people in there. I'm afraid I'm not gonna like spot something because there's so many people around" (personal interview, June 12, 2010).

Ines expressed similar sentiments to Maggie's, but was able to connect the

experience of having a rescue to better understand how the job fulfills her:

> I probably chose this job for the wrong reasons when I first started for the Park District, "Oh, it pays good money . . . I'll work outside . . . I'll get a pretty tan." And the longer you work and after you've had an incident and after you have drills, it really just makes you realize how much you're doing for people and how much people depend on you. And that's what keeps me coming back knowing that I can make a difference in somebody's life (personal interview, August 19, 2010).

What Kevin, Sue, Charli, Maggie, and Ines were describing was that learning had

taken place through evolved frames of reference that went beyond what happened or how

it was handled. They indicated an ability to better grasp the personal importance they

derived from their role as a lifeguard. The collective group discussed the identification of

personality traits – such as being more parent-like, gaining confidence, and an increased

sense of awareness – as direct results of engaging a critical incident. In doing so, these

young adults were expressing their habits of mind. In each of these stories, the

participants increased their understanding of their personal motivations by reflecting on

their experiences.

Perhaps the most distinct example of an expanded capacity to understand a habit

of mind was Charli, who stated that engaging in a critical incident directly influenced her

academic path going into college, as well as her eventual goal of entering into the medical field. She attributed the source of this direction back to the confidence, sense of accomplishment, and shift in perspective she gained by having a rescue. While Andy did not indicate that his career plans were influenced by his experience with a critical incident, he expressed frustration with those who fail to recognize the importance of their responsibilities. "I'm mad when guards don't take their job seriously" (personal interview, August 19, 2010). At eighteen years of age, Andy could recognize the personal importance of the position he held, and acknowledged that seeing others acting in a manner that he considered a violation of something of personal value could elicit an emotional response on his part. This suggests that he had either gone through a transformation, or that his previous life experience had prepared him for engaging in critical incidents with a level of resiliency.

Ten stages of transformation. In terms of the ten stages of transformation, Michael's story represented the most complete experience. The following is an examination of this process in terms of Michael's testimony. Additional examples from other participants have been included to bolster the phenomena that emerged. It is important to consider that the scope of this study was not to quantify the frequency of occurrence of the ten stages of transformational learning. This section has been included to acknowledge their presence and provide a foundation for additional discussion.

In discussing their respective dilemmas, Michael recalled being on the verge of tears as he reflected on his critical incident. Similarly, Ines described herself as being shaky and nervous, while Maggie was simply scared. Such feelings directly correlate to the second stage of transformation, which is "self-examination with feelings of fear,

anger, guilt, or shame" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22). While Michael indicated that he wasn't upset with himself or his response, he reported feeling unsettled, as if something had changed. The third stage of transformation involves a critical assessment of one's assumptions. Michael reported coming to terms with his anger. "But over time, [being on the verge of tears] changed," he said. "I actually started feeling happy that I finally got my first save. I felt more confident that I can save someone and that next time it's gonna be even better" (personal interview, June 5, 2010). While not consciously acknowledged, Michael's experiences are indicative of an awareness of a previous mindset being replaced by one more accurate, having had experienced a critical incident.

The fourth stage of transformation is an objectively pivotal point in the process. It is the stage at which those experiencing transformation realize that their previous perspective is no longer acceptable, and that they have begun to acquire a new worldview. Michael expressed the most blatant example of this when describing his mindset prior to having two rescues in one day. "I wanted a spinal [rescue] because I was so confident with my spinals" (personal interview, August 19, 2010). Having had the experience of a critical incident, Michael had abandoned the timid perspective whereby he formerly wanted to hide behind people when it came time for training, let alone an actual situation. He had acquired a confidence and wanted an opportunity to demonstrate his skills. During Charli, Kevin, and Ines' interviews, each was able to discuss their perspective with regards to their personal definitions of the lifeguard role, both before having a critical incident and after. Before, Charli wanted to be a lifeguard to be like her sister. For Kevin, lifeguarding started out simply as a task he felt he could do well. In her initial interview to work for the A3MJ Park District, Ines responded to the question of

"Why do you want to be a lifeguard" by stating that she wanted to be a lifeguard for "all the wrong reasons" (personal interview, August 19, 2010). After their rescues, however, Charli discovered an interest in the medical field as a potential profession, Kevin became more attuned to the necessity of his role, and Ines' answer focused entirely on ensuring the safety, security, and well-being of others in the environment. Michael's confidence, as well as Charli, Kevin, and Ines' shifts in perspective, related to the fifth stage of transformation, in which participants explore options for new roles, relationships, and actions (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22). Michael recalled the urge to share the lesson of knowing that critical incidents could happen at any time with younger guards. This indicated a willingness to assume a leadership role and take on a mentoring relationship with less experienced staff members. Charli described wanting to be a role model to both patrons and staff:

> Like, the little kids…they think lifeguards are so cool. I want to be the one that's [they're] like, "She knows what she's doing…I want to be like her." And then there is also being a returning guard. There's responsibility for setting an example for the new employees as well (personal interview, July 8, 2010).

For Michael, the sixth and seventh stages of transformation occurred simultaneously with the fifth. The sixth stage involves planning a course of action to enact the newly acquired roles and relationships. In the aquatics environment, this involved deciding to share his experiences with younger guards, and then carrying it out at the appropriate time. Michael reported that several opportunities presented themselves throughout the season, primarily during training scenarios. Upon deciding to enact his plan, Michael realized that he already possessed the skills and knowledge to implement it, which represents the seventh stage of transformation. These skills included experience, willingness to take on a teaching role, and the capacity to communicate. Charli

experienced stages six and seven simultaneously as well by connecting with the experience of having a critical incident in a metacognitive manner. Through her critical incident and concurrent experiences, Charli discovered an interest that would direct her education and career. She articulated that she rededicated herself to diligence in her role as a lifeguard, and sought to use the opportunity to improve her knowledge and applicable skills to advance her eventual goals.

Over the course of the summer, Michael became much more vocal during trainings, and indicated that he only increased his confidence by doing so. "Being a second year, I am one of the best guards [the A3MJ Park District] has!" said Michael (personal interview, July 6, 2010). This expression aligned with stages eight and nine of the transformational process, as it indicated trying on new roles (stage eight), and building confidence within said roles (stage nine). While Sue and Kevin used different language, they each described an acquired confidence and increased ability to explain why they felt the way that they did with regards to their approach to the job and respective personal growth. All ten participants were asked to consider the personal implications of having had a critical incident, and why they chose to continue to work in the aquatics environment. The unanimous response was that the confidence and perspective gained through having a critical incident was personally rewarding.

An objective of the semi-structured interview process was to probe whether experiences with critical incidents enabled young adults to become more attuned to their value systems, both within the aquatics environment and in other areas of their lives. Michael began to explore options for new roles within the aquatics environment as a result of having a critical incident, such as being a mentor to younger staff and his

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potential capacity for management. By acknowledging his desire to share his evolved perspective with others who had not had similar experiences, Michael indicated recognition of personal growth over time through establishing new roles.

Prior to the final focus group interview, a letter was sent to participants asking them to consider how lessons learned through having critical incidents extended beyond the aquatics environment into other areas of life, specifically outside of first aid scenarios. During the final focus group interview, Michael discussed how his awareness of surroundings at the pools allowed him to absorb more of his environment when walking down the hall at school, but quickly reverted to discussing the lessons in the context of the aquatics environment. For instance, he stated that he would find himself scanning in restaurants for opportunities to apply his CPR and first aid skill sets. Jean was a twenty-year-old fifth-year lifeguard, and first-year aquatics manager during the 2010 summer season. Despite her management role, Jean was involved in a C2 critical incident; her tale will be discussed in an upcoming section. During the final focus group interview, she mentioned that she felt calmer in her life outside of aquatics as a result of her critical incidents, but the examples she provided were from experiences at the pools. "I bring my [CPR] mask and my lifeguard pack to school with me in case anything happens" (personal interview, July 6, 2010). Stefanie reported that working with the A3MJ Park District helped her become a more effective stress manager; but again, her examples were related to the aquatics environment. The culminating implication is that while the participants were able reintegrate into their respective lives with a newfound perspective – the tenth stage of transformation – this reintegration was contextually based.

Framing the final focus group. An important twist to understanding the process of transformation in young adults emerged during the final focus group interview. Ines presented closing comments expressing her gratitude for the opportunity to participate in the study:

> I'll say that I really liked this because it made me realize how much that I do. Before you did this study, I feel like people thought about what happened after a critical incident, but talking it out and hearing other people talk about it really makes you think about how important your job is and makes you realize how it affects you in so many aspects of your life (personal interview, August 19, 2010).

This one statement rejuvenated the conversation. Michael added that prior to the study, he felt isolated in feeling the way he did about his experiences with critical incidents. "When we're at work, we don't really have the time to talk about this…we don't know what other people are thinking." Ines shared thoughts she had experienced:

> Am I the only one that's shaking after this happened? Am I the only one who's freaking out like this? And then you realize, no, that you're not alone. This is what people feel like after a critical incident (personal interview, August 19, 2010).

Jean, the twenty-year-old fifth-year lifeguard, but first-year aquatics manager during the 2010 summer season, was one of two lifeguards interviewed to have had experience with a C2 critical incident. She agreed with Ines:

> I know when I had saves my mind was just going a thousand miles an hour. I wanted to call my mom. I wanted to call up my friends to tell them…like you said, "Oh, my God, is anyone else feeling like this?" You wanna get that reassurance, "Yeah, it's normal. You're fine" (personal interview, August 19, 2010).

Jean went on to express gratitude for being able to participate in the study. In response to the experience itself:

> I also appreciate [the] questions. I thought they were kinda hard, but I realized a lot of things about myself that I probably wouldn't have drawn exactly from the

situation. Now I can kinda think back, "Oh, yeah, this is what happened . . . this is what I learned" (personal interview, August 19, 2010).

This part of the conversation carried an important influence to the frame of the entire story. It suggests that the interview process itself was not only a catalyst for the group to be able to engage the transformation process in terms of the condition of reflective discourse, but a necessity for it to even occur. This interpretation does not negate the transformational experience of these young adults; their testimonies remain what they were. What it does suggest, however, is that the process for young adults relies more heavily on the presence of a critical friend to consciously engage in transformation. Responses indicated that this facilitation role required a certain level of experience or familiarity with the aquatics environment. Kelly, the sixteen-year old first year guard, talked to friends and family about her rescue.

> After I tell [my friends], they're like "Oh, so it wasn't that bad," like it wasn't that big of a thing…I guess since they weren't really there like to experience it so they don't really know and they're not lifeguards, obviously, so they don't know…They probably just think, "Ok, he could've gotten back in the tube by himself." So, I mean, I guess it makes me feel like you don't really know what you're talking about (personal interview, June 25, 2010)

When I recounted my own story of transformation as a catalyst for this study, I indicated that I did not consciously realize that I had experienced a transformation directly after having a critical incident. While I cannot testify to what specifically triggered my realization, it was likely due to the passage of time, the acquisition of like experience, and the gradual opportunity to talk with others who had had rescues similar to mine. I did not have the opportunity to discuss my experiences in such a manner as was provided by this study. Consequently, my personal transformation was gradual and largely subconscious. Considering Kelly's comments with the final focus group

participants indicates that reflective discourse – one of the three conditions required for transformation – seemed to carry significance with these young adults, and the presence of an appropriate facilitator or "critical friend" could be crucial to speeding up the transformational process and bringing it into consciousness. The facilitator was "appropriate" when he had comparable experience to the one who encountered a critical incident, and could empathize with their situation.

Severity, Fidelity, and Transformation

Of the ten participants, two were involved in a C2 critical incident. The other eight experiences were at the C1 level. The third question guiding the study explored the impact of severity to the transformational experience in young adults. This section will examine participant responses both within the C1 and C2 groups, but across these categories as well.

Towards the end of the last section, I introduced Jean as a first-year manager at the A3MJ Park District. Jean was the primary respondent to a C2 situation this summer; Stefanie, the twenty-one-year-old third-year lifeguard who had both a C1 and C2 rescue during the season, was a secondary respondent to the same incident. What follows are two accounts of the same incident through very different perspectives.

On June 16, 2010, Jean was in the manager's office at Major Aquatic Center. The office itself is attached to the main building of the facility, which houses a concessions stand, cashier administrative offices, as well as male and female locker rooms. The view from the office itself provides an unobstructed outlook to the zero-depth entry to the primary body of water at the pool. Through adjacent doors, managers and lifeguards have direct access to the pool area. Depending on the side of exit, staff members reach the

deck at the same point by which men and women enter the pool area from their respective locker rooms. Jean was one of three supervisors on duty when a patron came through an open door to the manager's office to report an unconscious guest in the women's locker room. Jean was first to respond.

> I was the only female manager [in the office]. I got up and ran [into the women's locker room] and I saw two women slouched over kind of crouched in the furthest showering stall. When I got there I put on my gloves and I started touching and trying to shake her to wake her up and she couldn't open her eyes and she was completely pale. No color in her face (personal interview, June 17, 2010).

Shortly after Jean made contact with the one woman who seemed to be in distress, Claire, the second female manager on duty that day, arrived on scene with a "crash bag." This mobile duffel bag contained supplemental oxygen and masks, as well as other first aid supplies. As they administered oxygen to the first woman, Claire noticed that the second woman in the showering stall was showing signs of incoherence similar to the other. Jean used a two-way radio to convey the situation to the male manager on duty that day and requested additional assistance from lifeguards on duty; she also instructed that 911 be called. As they attended to the guests, Jean recalled a jumentous odor that left her feeling symptomatic as well. "[Claire] noticed she was feeling light-headed, and my eyes were burning. We thought something was in the air so we cleared the locker room and got everyone out" (personal interview, June 17, 2010). Soon after clearing out the locker room, the fire department arrived at the facility, took control of the situation, and tested the air for carbon monoxide poisoning; the test came back negative.

Jean reported that she had multiple experiences with C1 critical incidents over her four years as a lifeguard, including approximately twenty active rescues, bloody noses, scraped toes, and other basic first aid. While she acknowledged that her very first critical

incident ever had an impact on her similar to the accounts of the other participants in the study, she indicated that the process for C1 critical incidents had become automatic. "My active rescue was second nature," she said. "I just saw it, blew my whistle, jumped in, got the kid. I didn't even have to think about it" (personal interview, June 17, 2010). The C2 critical incident had a different impact. "I was scared because I'd never dealt with any of that before. I didn't know if I was doing everything right." After the incident, Jean reported that she felt mad at herself, and attributed it to feeling so frantic.

> I felt like I was all over the place. I didn't know if I was doing the right thing…I've had the time to sit and think about [the C2 critical incident]. Since I've had this experience, it's made it a lot more real (personal interview, July 6, 2010).

Similar to the experiences of C1 participants, Jean's language implied that the C2 incident was disorienting beyond what happened or how she handled it. Jean recalled that these feelings of frustration were short-lived, and that she personally pledged to use her experience of assisting the two women to mentally prepare for future situations. She acknowledged, however, that each circumstance will present its own challenges:

> Like you can just sit there and think about what you do, but until you've been in a situation, you're not gonna know exactly how it plays out. But the thing is every situation's gonna be different. Next time if I'm in that situation I wanna be more calm myself and just take a few seconds 'cause it's okay to take a few seconds, assess the scene, you know, talk to them on the radio. It doesn't have to be like super duper quick like lightening speed. That's kinda how I felt last time (personal interview, July 6, 2010).

As mentioned prior, Jean called for additional lifeguard assistance while attending to the two women. The first lifeguard to arrive on scene was Stefanie. The male manager on duty during the incident sent her into the women's locker room as she was one of two female guards who were not in a lifeguard chair at that time. The locker room had yet to be cleared of additional patrons, thus to maintain modesty, only female guards could

enter. Stefanie reported being able to vividly describe her involvement with the scenario, which was to ensure that all necessary equipment was on-scene, that the locker room was cleared, and that the patrons were being properly attended to by the managers and other lifeguards (personal interview, June 17, 2010). Stefanie attributed her state of calm to the fact that she was not the primary responder. "I felt I was present in the moment, but I didn't have to think about what I was doing," Stefanie said. "I just did it and did what I was asked to do" (personal interview, June 17, 2010). When asked whether she found herself replaying the incident in her mind over the course of the day, she responded:

> Not really a whole lot. I mean I told the story over and over again just because all the guards were in chair and hadn't heard it and they were like "Oh what happened, what happened?" So I was constantly telling people what had happened…It was kind of fun knowing like what happened…actually being there and being able to be the one that got to help (personal interview, June 17, 2010).

Stefanie mentioned that she didn't know what happened to the two women after they were transported away from the aquatics facility in an ambulance. When asked whether not knowing what happened had an impact on her, she responded that she did wonder what happened, but that it was more out of curiosity than anything else. Her recount of the situation was very factual, with little language devoted to her emotions. "I think I was just kind of excited that something was actually happening new," said Stefanie (personal interview, June 17, 2010). This was in direct contrast with her previously presented account of the experience with her very first C1 incident as a lifeguard, when she recalled having dreams of reliving the experience throughout her first summer.

Jean and Stefanie both responded to the same critical incident, yet their recollections were quite different. A distinction that is important to consider is that Jean

was the first responder to the scenario, whereas Stefanie played much more of a supporting role. Stefanie indicated that she was calm of mind because she was being told what to do. Jean, on the other hand, reported feeling scattered because she was the person expected to be in control, despite having never experienced anything similar. During the final focus group interview, participants were asked to compare the learning that took place during training compared to that which occurred during a real critical incident. Three categories of scenarios were discussed: compulsory lifeguard training, which included standard rescues, basic first aid, and CPR training; challenge in-service training, in which management planned and executed advanced scenarios to which select guards were asked to respond; and real-life critical incidents. The consensus was that, of the three scenarios, real-life critical incidents had the most potent effect, while challenge in-services were a close second. When asked of the similarities between them, Ines indicated that the element of surprise was what set challenge in-services and real-life critical incidents apart from compulsory lifeguard training; Jean referred to it as "the craziness" (personal interview, August 19, 2010). When probed further, however, the participants unanimously indicated that real-life critical incidents created experience that had much more of an impact. "It's a real person; something that's actually happening," said Jean. Kevin eloquently followed up Jean's comment when he said "Knowing the person could probably die is a good stimulus."

When comparing the testimonies of the final focus group participants to Jean and Stefanie's experiences with a C2 critical incident, the stories were quite similar. The indications were that fidelity of circumstance and previous experience with like events were what carried influence and impact. This notion was furthered when guards were

asked whether there was something learned through having a real-life critical incident

that could not be gained through training, regardless of it being compulsory or a

challenge in-service. Michael stated that a person learns whether they can handle the

emotional tolls of a serious situation that can't be replicated through training; Ines

referred to it as being able to "handle the pressure." Jean brought up the concept of

"tunnel vision," a common but negative occurrence in lifeguards where they will focus

only on a singular task without regard for external influences. She thought that having a

critical incident was the only way to recognize what tunnel vision is, and to overcome it.

> I feel like tunnel vision, I mean we talk about it, but you can't just learn it. You
> have to be in a [critical incident] and understand exactly what it is in order to not
> have tunnel vision (personal interview, August 19, 2010).

Neither Jean nor the other participants used language to differentiate between C1

and C2 critical incidents from an internal perspective. It is important to acknowledge,

however, that Jean and Stefanie, the two participants who engaged a C2 critical incident

during the 2010 summer, both had more than one year's experience as well as multiple

C1 critical incidents prior to their C2, which could be influential when considering their

testimonies.

Summary

This section explored the collective stories of young adults who experienced

critical incidents while working as lifeguards within an aquatics environment over the

2010 summer season. While each was unique given their own subtleties, the similarities

provided direction to the three questions that guided the study. Participants testified to the

disorienting nature of critical incidents, and described the transformation process within

the context of the A3MJ Park District. Collectively, the group did not make connections

between the transformational lessons and insights gained within the aquatics environment with other areas of their life. While the severity of the critical incident seemed to have little influence on the process, the fidelity of scenarios was reported as important in several stories, both during individual interviews and within the final focus group. Finally, the importance of a "critical friend" was discussed with regard to catalyzing the transformational process, as participants felt that the presence of a facilitator who could empathize with their situation through comparable experience of their own brought the process into consciousness. It made them aware of their own ability to experience transformation. The next chapter will examine the results of this analysis to present informed implications based off the collected data.

Chapter 5

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusions

Overview

In the previous chapter, analysis of the data revealed four broad, recurrent themes that emerged from the study. The primary focus of this chapter is to corroborate these themes in relation to existing literature, while discussing their implications to the theory of transformational learning. The secondary objectives are threefold: to discuss the implications of the study with regards to transformational learning and practice; to establish areas for future research as a result of this study; and to discuss the limitations presented by the methodology of the model. Prior to initiating this discussion, however, I will provide a brief review of the research conducted, summarize the methods involved, and reiterate the findings.

Review of the Research

Review of the problem and questions. The purpose of this study was to understand the process of transformational learning in young adults, ages 16-24 years old. The study took place among lifeguards working in the context of an aquatics environment. This demographic was selected based off the personal experience of the researcher, and because the population working in said environment typically falls within the targeted age range. Participants became eligible to participate in the study after being involved in a critical incident, defined as a circumstance requiring action on one's part to facilitate or prevent consequences that would have a lasting impact on the well-being of another. Three questions guided the study:

1. How do critical incidents act as disorienting dilemmas?

2. What does the process of transformative learning look like in young adults (ages 16-24)?

3. How does the severity of a critical incident impact transformation in young adults?

Review of the methods. Data collection for this qualitative case study took place through a two- to three-stage, semi-structured interview process that employed a naturalistic inquiry approach. The first two interview stages were conducted face-to-face and one-on-one between the participant and the researcher. The third interview was conducted in a focus group format. Only those young adults who completed the early stages of interviews were eligible for the final focus group. As the interview process was semi-structured, however, there were instances in which topics planned for the initial two stages of interviews were adequately covered in a single interview session. Generally, this occurred in young adults with multiple years of experience as a lifeguard, and at least one prior encounter with a critical incident. This experience allowed for the discussion to focus on both the recent critical incident, but also the evolution of perspective following their first critical incident. Adequacy of topic coverage was determined through a constant comparison approach to data analysis and coding, at which point these participants were invited to participate in the final focus group. A total of ten lifeguards completed the interview process. Seven of the ten interviewees participated in the final focus group interview. All participants were within the targeted age range for the duration of the data collection time period.

Review of the results. Each interview was first examined individually and in its entirety through narrative analysis. The coding process began after the interview had been examined as a whole, and used the research questions as the initial frame. A color-

coded highlighting system was used to signify correlation between a passage from the interviews with a research question. Four broad, recurrent results emerged from the analysis. First, participants indicated that real-life critical incidents facilitated transformation in a manner that was unattainable through training or simulation. As Mezirow (2000) states, there are three types of critical reflection: content reflection, in which the participant recalls what happened; process reflection, in which the participant thinks about how the process was handled; and perspective reflection, in which the participant understands how their experience changed their understanding of personal significance. It is in this third category of perspective reflection that transformation can occur. Whereas participants of this study indicated a high frequency of content and process reflection being attained through various types of training, only experience with a real-life critical incident enacted perspective transformation. It was through discussion of these habits of mind that participants indicated that lessons learned through a legitimate critical incident could not be derived from simulation. This notion was affirmed by all participants.

The second finding was that severity of the critical incident was not indicated as having an impact on the transformational process. The stories of those few young adults who experienced a C2 critical incident recounted the experience using similar language to those who experienced a C1 critical incident. Similar to the first finding, fidelity of circumstance was consistently mentioned as having a higher influence on the transformational process than severity.

The third finding was that young adults did not make connections between the transformational learning achieved in the context of aquatics with other areas of their life.

While the individual testimonies described a shift in perspective concerning personal meaning of the job, participants struggled when asked to apply these lessons to a different context. Through constant comparison, this theme emerged early in data collection. Consequently, the final focus group interview was framed by asking participants ahead of time to think specifically about how lessons learned through having a critical incident apply outside the pools. Despite this disclaimer, examples provided by the final focus group participants were presented in the context of the aquatics environment.

The fourth and final finding emphasized the importance of a "critical friend" to engage the transformational process in a conscious manner. Prior to participating in the study, the young adults recalled feeling isolated and independent with regard to their experience of having a critical incident. Through the interview process of the study, participants were able to connect their experiences with those of others, and bring the transformational process into consciousness. The suggestion was that the interview process itself became a catalyst for transformation, indicating that a critical friend with comparable experience was important – if not necessary – to elicit transformation in young adults. Without the critical friend, the participants would have remained unawares with regard to their ability to experience transformation

Discussion

The primary significance of this study was that it explored the process of transformational learning in a younger cohort than has been empirically examined. Based upon the combined tales and testimonies of the ten young adults who participated, it seems that this cohort is capable of engaging in critical perspective reflection, rational discourse, and reflective action, which represent Mezirow's three conditions for

transformation. To supplement this significance, it is important to consider the triggering events that caused the process to catalyze. The critical incidents (*i.e.* disorienting dilemmas) experienced by each lifeguard were relatively short and contained. This is in contrast to incremental experiences, such as living with HIV/AIDS (Baumgartner, 2002; Courtenay et al., 1998, 2000), earning a degree through a program developed for the adult learner (Cohen, 2004; Cragg et al., 2001), or even going through a college course using romantic fiction to elicit transformational experiences in students (Jarvis, 2006). In each of these examples, participants described an extended catalyst, though in this study of critical incidents in the aquatics environment, the epochal experience of having a rescue enacted a similar process of transformation. This is consistent with Mezirow's (2000) assertion that disorienting dilemmas and the process of transformation can be rapid or slow to onset. To date, however, little empirical literature has been devoted to short-term catalysts in proximity to their occurrence, likely due to the subjective nature of disorienting dilemmas and transformation.

Of the four key findings of the study, perhaps the least surprising was that critical incidents carried a higher potency for enacting transformation than simulations. This only corroborated the notion that spawned the idea for the study, since it was personal experience with a critical incident that enacted my own shift in perspective towards my role as a lifeguard, rather than a recollection of an elaborate training session or scenario. The universal assertion of this finding amongst participants carries significance with regards to transformational learning theory due to the longitudinal nature of the responses. For instance, this phenomenon was testified to by young adults engaging in their first critical incident, and by those who had had several before and were reflecting

on the solidarity of their perspective transformation over time. Mezirow (1991) claimed that once a perspective transformation occurs, it is irreversible. This notion was bolstered in the transformational learning literature by Courtenay et al. (1998, 2000), and again by Baumgartner (2002) who studied the stability of perspective transformation that occurred within individuals living with HIV/AIDS. In these studies, participants indicated that a realization of their own mortality was a significant impetus for transformation. Likened to the aquatics environment, participants repeatedly remarked that engaging in a critical incident made elements of the job and their associated place in the aquatics environment seem more "real" than it was prior. In both groups – individuals living with HIV/AIDS and lifeguards – the fidelity of the individual situation determined the respective potency of impact.

The inability of participants to apply lessons and insights learned within the aquatics environment to other areas of their lives – another emergent theme – was consistent with the findings of one of the only other studies to examine the transformational experiences of young adults. In an examination of the acclimation process of exchange students to a completely foreign environment, Whalley (1995) indicated that the group of high school-aged participants was able to achieve a transformation of their meaning schemes, but only within a specific context. The exchange students were able to successfully integrate themselves into their respective new cultures, but upon returning to their native countries their behavior reverted to a previous state. In this instance, the participants acquired a deeper level of cultural competence and meaning perspective, expanding their skill set in terms of a broader worldview. As with the lifeguards, however, this behavior and meaning making was

determined contextually. Each of these circumstances is consistent with the constructivist foundation of transformational learning theory. It is important to consider that both the exchange students and the lifeguards, respectively, were providing verbal accounts of their own abilities in order to make sense of their situations. It would be logical that any examples these young adults could provide to indicate a perspective transformation had taken place would be subject to constructivist principles, inexhaustively including primacy and recency effects, perceived influence, developmental history, and other external factors. Consistent with Kegan (1994), Merriam (2004) stated that a high level of cognitive development is necessary for individuals to engage in transformational learning. While neither the study of lifeguards nor exchange students specifically measured the cognitive development of the participants, the indication that these young adults were unable to transfer their respective lessons very well could be based on a lack of relevant life experience on which to compare, rather than an inadequate level of cognitive development. As indicated by Walsh (2007), life experience could substitute for cognitive development towards a readiness or ability to engage in transformational learning.

The most compelling finding of the study was the emergence of the critical friend, which has potential to be an important link between transformational learning theory and a younger cohort than previously considered. Regarding transformation, Mezirow (2003) cites two key requirements: individuals must be able to engage in dialectical discourse (King & Kitchener, 1994); and they must possess the ability to become critically self reflective (Kegan, 2000). This study of young adults raises the question of whether an individual must come to realize that they possess these capacities on their own, or

whether assistance is allowed to spawn transformation. Part of the core of transformational learning theory is reflective discourse, in which individuals search for comprehension and understanding through dialogue; dialogue, not monologue. This is an important distinction, as the notion of dialogue involves more than one; it involves "the other." In the context of this study, there was the participant and "the other," played by the critical friend.

In order to see a situation, circumstance, or issue differently, one must first become aware that an alternative could exist. Such catalysts could occur naturally in humanistic isolation, but more likely they are the result of an intrapersonal examination of some interaction with an individual or group. Such interactions could be interpersonal, or tangential through contact with the artifacts of another. Awareness of the existence of "the other" is a prerequisite to consciously considering its perspective. Throughout the interview process, several participants seemed to experience an awakening. They indicated fresh perspectives that they had not previously considered, and attributed the acquisition to the pointed questioning provided by the process. They were not blindly assimilating a new habit of mind, but were becoming aware of the potential that one could exist. Once the young adults realized that they had the capacity to see their experience differently, they began the process of self-discovery and reflective critique. This phenomenon is not so different from the empirical emergence of reflective discourse in adults, for as Mezirow (2003) states, "…by participating in discourse with other affected individuals adults who challenge one's interpretations can develop reflective judgment" (p. 62). What this dissertation suggests is that young adults might be able to

engage in transformational learning, but need to be made aware of their ability to do so; this catalyzing capacity is the defining characteristic of a critical friend.

This dissertation contributes to the body of knowledge of transformational learning theory by calling into question assumptions regarding discourse. This concept of a critical friend has been implied in transformational literature to date, but needs additional attention. As Taylor (2008) suggests, a primary arena for enacting transformational learning is a classroom setting, in which the educator plays the part of facilitator to – presumably – adult learners; again there are two roles: the participant and "the other." An area for future study of Taylor's critique concerns the role of the student in the process (p.13). Perhaps even in these traditional settings, the learner does not have the responsibility of understanding their ability to transform until "the other" helps them to see it. If so, there is little difference between such audiences and the young adults of this dissertation. As such, it is important to further explore the capacity of transformational learning in young adults to better understand its preconditions. As this dissertation indicates, a strong place to start is to better define the concept, characteristics, and capacity of the critical friend.

An important clarification is that the existence of a critical friend does not imply that absence thereof would prevent transformation from taking place over time. As indicated by Dirkx (1998, 2006), transformation can be enacted in the affective domain, which largely exists in the subconscious. Mezirow (2000) also acknowledged that transformation can occur through a thoughtless integration of new lessons or norms, again implying manifestation through a subconscious channel. In terms of this study, it is quite likely that Michael, for instance, would have still gained a confidence that would

inspire him to take on leadership roles within the aquatics environment without having gone through the interview process. What the data do suggest, however, is that participation in the study allowed these young adults to examine their experiences in manners not previously considered. Furthermore, without such a catalyst these young adults would not have had the opportunity to understand and articulate the impact of their experiences to the personal and ultimately transformational level achieved in the short amount of time that encompassed this study.

The rationale for the significance of a critical friend to enacting the transformational process can be corroborated through literature differentiating manners of thought and being. Kegan (1994) described the acquired ownership of an epistemology and its relation to the process of learning. His perspective regarding transformation is that it is a means of "…making what was a subject into an object so that we can 'have it' rather than 'be had' by it – this is the most powerful way I know to conceptualize the growth of the mind" (p. 34). Gunnglausen (2007) expands this concept in a manner that can help explain the phenomenon that occurred within the lifeguards during the interview process. The concept of suspension is described as a separation between "having" thoughts and "being" thoughts. When individuals are not critically aware of the influence of their thoughts to actions, they are considered as "being" their thoughts. Dialogue can enact a metacognition that enables individuals to remove themselves from the narrative nature of their mindset, consequently becoming more aware of their influence; they begin "having" thoughts (p. 139). This idea is presented as an explanation to a paradox of transformational learning theory. Mezirow (2003) states that the process of reflective discourse takes practice, but offers neither instruction nor model for refining this skill set.

The benefit of suspension is that by differentiating one's self from "having" thoughts and "being" thoughts, the process of identifying underlying assumptions becomes increasingly transparent and more attainable. When applying this concept to the study of young adults in the aquatics environment, it is believed that enacting this process of suspension was one of the most important achievements of the interview process. This was demonstrated most notably when lifeguards were first asked whether they had a different opinion of lifeguards who had had a save versus those who had not. Participants indicated that they did not have a different attitude towards these groups of their coworkers, often stating that engagement with a critical incident was a matter of chance and preparedness; it could happen to anyone at any time. This question regarding attitude was promptly followed by asking participants whether they would prefer to have a lifeguard by their side with critical incident experience or without during an exceptionally serious critical incident, all other factors being equal. The unanimous response was that those who had experienced a critical incident would prefer to have others by their side that had had similar experience over those who had not. Through pointed questioning and reflective discourse, participants of the study were able to suspend responses that might have been influenced by collegial, yet self-imposed influences preventing them from speaking ill of a guard who had not previously experienced a critical incident. This discussion enabled them to acknowledge that those who had relevant experience had engaged in a deeper level of understanding and learning. This was achieved through the intervention of a critical friend, and responses suggested that such lessons would not have been recognized without the interview process.

The young adults who participated in this study demonstrated a capacity to engage in critical reflection and rational discourse, but the interviews indicated that such outcomes were not attainable in an autonomous fashion. Furthering the importance of dialogue and the critical friend, participants indicated that they derived personal benefit from the final focus group, stating that it was helpful to know what others were thinking and experiencing after having a critical incident. Testimonies revealed that talking through experiences in a group format reduced feelings of isolation and uncertainty. When compared to literature on transformational learning, this phenomenon was also observed by Eisen (2001), who studied the importance of the peer dynamic in achieving perspective transformation within a group of community college instructors. The study indicated that having a trusted and appropriate critical friend was a prerequisite to Mezirow's ideal conditions for rational discourse. Ultimately, the same occurrence was observed in lifeguards, as final focus group participants testified to the utility of the interview process in helping them to fully realize the meaning and impact of their experiences with critical incidents.

Beyond the four recurrent themes which emerged from the data, responses regarding immediate reactions to critical incidents resembled symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual on Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) describes PTSD as an anxiety disorder that can develop from exposure to a traumatic event that is actually or perceived to be life-threatening or a threat to physical integrity, and which results in feelings of helplessness, fear, or horror (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The definition of a critical incident – as presented in this study – is a circumstance requiring action on one's part to facilitate or prevent

consequences that would have a lasting impact on the well-being of another. Elements of a traumatic circumstance are present in the definition of a critical incident, since within the aquatics environment, these elements are manifest as in-water rescues or first-aid incidents and perceived to be threatening to physical integrity and/or life by nature.

The DSM-IV describes seventeen symptoms that might be experienced by someone with PTSD: intrusive memories; nightmares; flashbacks; cue distress; cue reactivity; avoidance of thoughts/feelings; avoidance of people/places; restricted affect; diminished interest; detachment; foreshortened future; amnesia; disturbed sleep; anger outbursts; poor concentration; hypervigilance; and exaggerated startle (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The manual suggests that not all symptoms are necessary for a diagnosis of PTSD to occur, but does explain that the symptoms can be generalized into clusters. Originally, the DSM-IV presented a three-cluster model of PTSD symptoms – reexperiencing, avoidance, and hyperarousal – though empirical support for this model has been limited (Milanak & Berenbaum, 2009). Recent literature has suggested a four-cluster model, which includes reexperiencing, avoidance, hyperarousal, and emotional numbing (Duhamel et al., 2004; King, Leskin, King, & Weathers, 1998; McWilliams, Cox, & Asmundsen, 2005; Palmieri & Fitzgerald, 2005; Palmieri, Marshall, & Schell, 2007). This approach can be applied to the experiences of the lifeguards in three of the four clusters: reexperiencing; hyperarousal; and emotional numbing. Several participants, for instance, recalled experiencing flashbacks as they replayed the critical incident in their mind; Stefanie recounted nightmares and disturbed sleep after her very first critical incident. These examples can be likened to the reexperiencing cluster within the model. With regards to hyperarousal, several testimonies alluded to a heightened awareness

while in chair or on duty, as well as continual surveillance for opportunities to apply lifeguarding skills outside of the aquatics environment. Finally, several participants who experienced multiple critical incidents during the summer or over time described an acquired resiliency to the emotional strains initially experienced. This parallels emotional numbing, in which the lifeguards experienced a diminished potency with each like incident they encountered.

Participants did not describe avoidance, which represents the final symptom of this PTSD cluster; in fact, they described just the opposite with regards to thoughts, feelings, and circumstances in which the critical incident could be replicated. These participants described a desire to take what they had learned through the critical incident and apply it to their ability to perform the duties associated with their jobs. What this suggests, then, is that while there were similarities to PTSD symptoms experienced by this group of young adults, they were either incomplete, mild, or a part of the transformational process itself.

The results of the study indicated that debriefing had a positive effect on participants through a reduced feeling of isolation and clear establishment of a support system. Empirically, establishing this support system at an early age within workers is supported by human capital theory and Gestault psychology, both of which are considered disciplinary foundations of human resource development (Swanson & Holton, 2001). Human capital refers to outcomes of training and development, including advances in knowledge, skills, abilities, and expertise. Gestault psychology focuses on the individual as a whole person, acknowledging that workers must be considered as more than just their ability to perform on-the-job tasks. The theory of human capital

considers expenditures on education and training as investments towards the short- and long-term success of an organization. By investing in human capital, the company has the potential to increase the on-the-job effectiveness of an employee by satisfying basic needs, which can result in a perceived enhanced quality of life (Becker, 1993). The lifeguards who participated in the study expressed an appreciation for the interview process. They described a very real value in the ability to openly discuss their experiences with critical incidents. Collectively, participants suggested that their job satisfaction increased as a result of participation. In circumstances where workers are exposed to critical incidents, organizations may have an opportunity to increase their employees' feeling of being valued by providing options for group discussion with a critical friend, and helping to facilitate similar transformations as were experienced by the lifeguards. The results of this study indicate that the influence of such activity would be significant in like age groups.

Implications for Practice

Since participants of this study demonstrated the capacity to engage in transformational learning, it is important to consider how the findings can inform practice in circumstances that expose young adults to critical incidents in environments similar to the A3MJ Park District. One recommendation is that such organizations incorporate a philosophy of open communication into their mission. This might be achieved through a mentoring or coaching program that pairs inexperienced workers with those who have had prior exposure to one or more critical incidents. New hires could be encouraged to defer to their mentor or coach with logistical questions regarding the job, and could become a "critical friend" in the event that the new hire engaged a critical incident. The

communication structure could be formal through scheduled one-on-one meetings, and informal through more impromptu interactions.

Participants described the interview process as beneficial, as it assisted them in making sense of the effect of their critical incident. Thus, organizations could integrate a feedback or debriefing system similar to the model used in this study. Once a new hire engaged a critical incident, they could make contact with their critical friend to discuss their experience. It is anticipated that communicating the existence of such a system from the initial point of hire could reduce the feelings of isolation, as described by the participants of the study, by establishing an infrastructure of support even prior to experience with a critical incident.

In order to incorporate a mentoring or coaching program into an organization, leaders must be developed to equip their staff with the necessary skill set to do so. This could alter the training and recruitment practices of such an organization to include the key components of interpersonal communication, facilitation, and leading small group discussion in those expecting to be managers, leaders, and key individuals responsible for training. In doing so, organizations will be better prepared to integrate a transformative philosophy into their core values by establishing the capacity to help young adults realize impact. Skills such as active listening and empathy are specific examples to be fostered.

While participants agreed that actual experience with a critical incident was the most potent catalyst for transformation, responses indicated that a high fidelity approach to training provided worthwhile preparation for real events; situations that involved surprise were specifically noted as being beneficial. Therefore, it is recommended that

similar environments to the A3MJ Park District incorporate elements such as staged scenarios, relevant resources, and surprise into their training practices.

Staged scenarios could be performed during hours of operation when the likelihood for an actual critical incident is high, or could be enacted during scheduled trainings that take place outside of business hours. In order to maximize fidelity, such scenarios should be realistic (*i.e.* feasible given the environment in question) but as unexpected as possible. A common practice of training programs in aquatics environments is for an individual to stage a drowning in a lifeguard's area of responsibility. One recommendation is to involve individuals that would be unfamiliar to employees in such scenarios, provided they had been adequately briefed on how they should perform given a specific situation. This could include employees from other areas of the organization, friends or family members of employees, or former employees of the organization.

Relevant resources can be considered any tool or supplement to training that creates a fuller experience for the learner. One example includes training mannequins designed to be experiential in teaching first-aid, or Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR). Two immediate benefits of using such tools are they allow individuals to experience the sensations of actually providing oxygen to a non-breathing victim, and to understand the physical exertion required of someone who must perform chest compressions to an unconscious individual. In addition, there are several online resources that could be utilized better prepare young adults for the challenges faced through critical incidents. The Internet provides access to videos of comparably trained individuals managing critical incidents in real-time. It is recommended that young adults be

encouraged to watch such videos, either in a controlled and supervised environment, or on their own time. Should the videos be watched communally, organization leaders could be available to discuss the videos afterwards, answer questions, and assist the young adults in making sense of what they had just witnessed.

Including the element of surprise into a training program with high fidelity requires an intimate understanding of the foundational requirements of the job, the relative preparedness of the staff being trained, and the general dynamic of the environment. If any of these conditions are not being met, the objective of the training can fall short of attaining its maximum impact. Therefore, it is recommended that those designing such scenarios or trainings have appropriate experience in the environment to which the training is being developed, and expertise regarding staffing at all relevant levels of the organization. Such an approach would favor a system of promoting from within and limit the hiring of external individuals to positions of leadership and management. This notion was supported by the findings of the study that suggested an appropriate critical friend was necessary towards enacting transformation in young adults.

It is important to recognize that organizations whose employees are prone to critical incidents likely utilize a fundamental training program, designed to convey standards of practice required by the position. It may be that several of the recommendations presented here are utilized in such an environment. The benefit of this study is that it bolsters the rationale for practice should organizations be using a multi-faceted experiential training strategy, but can be a call to action for those that do not consider the importance of fidelity when teaching a skill. As participants of the study

indicated, there is a significant difference between being able to recite characteristics of a drowning patron and being able to physically rescue a struggling person from a body of water. Organizations are encouraged to consider a tiered or hierarchical approach to training, similar to Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

The implications presented here are relevant within aquatics environments similar to the A3MJ Park District, but has potential to apply in other settings as well. One characteristic of lifeguards is that they are first responders when a critical incident occurs in their facility. Day camp counselors who work with youths often serve in a similar capacity, and represent a like age demographic. Additionally, many communities offer junior firefighter programs and preparatory Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) courses to young adults. These too could benefit from the findings of this study. As applied to a broader audience, the concept of high fidelity in training could be integrated into any situation in which young adults are expected to learn CPR or basic first aid, and treated as a basic principle of good practice.

Limitations of the Study

As an employee of the A3MJ Park District for ten years, the researcher approached the study with a level of expertise that resulted in predispositions and assumptions to the data that could not be avoided. This was most evident in the interview process itself, as questions were presented in a guided fashion to assist the lifeguards in making sense of their experiences. The questions were leading in the sense that they represented the mental processes experienced by the researcher as understanding was acquired over time. The result was an expedited and more pointed approach to critically

reflecting on the meaning of a critical incident and its influence on perceptions and perspectives. It is important to consider, however, that testimonies indicated that the role of a critical friend could not have been filled by simply having someone lend a friendly ear or by discussing a critical incident with a family member (*i.e.* people removed from like experiences). Participants alluded to an appropriateness factor, which suggested that someone with a more comprehensive understanding of experiences and processing was necessary to assist the reflective discourse. Should this study be replicated, perhaps this limitation could be rectified by the pairing of a subject matter expert with a trained facilitator, although the dynamics of a semi-structured interview approach demanded the ability to adapt to the responses of the participants in real time. This would have been difficult to achieve with an interviewer who lacked said expertise or experience.

Areas for Future Research

Consistent with Walsh (2007) who observed that factors of age, life experience, education, and cognitive development were interchangeably influential in facilitating transformation, several lifeguards reported that having a critical incident left them feeling more mature, or grown up. A strong area for future research would be to observe the behavior of young adults in an environment other than the one in which they experienced their perspective transformation to determine whether there is a spillover effect of this newly acquired feeling of maturity. This could be accompanied by an exploration of the constructivist nature of the theory by taking a longitudinal approach to the participants. For instance, it would be beneficial to reconnect with this same group after the passage of one year and hold a follow-up focus group interview. One year would allow for another summer season to pass for those participants choosing to return to the A3MJ Park

District, while providing ample opportunity for each of the ten participants to apply their lessons outside the context of aquatics. The topics of discussion would center on the staying power of perspective transformation and awareness of the influences of their experiences.

The concept of the critical friend has significant area for exploration. Specifically, it would be beneficial to research whether critical friends are actually contextually bound, or if experiences from a particular setting have transferability into another. This would differ from the proliferation of lessons from one context to another, and would focus on the relationship between the critical friend and the participant. This would be appropriate to study within the age group of young adults, and into later years of adulthood. Such research would likely draw on the literature pertaining to mentoring relationships, but again would examine the context of the relationship relevant to transformation.

Another area for expansion based upon the results of this study would be to explore the frequency of occurrence of the ten stages of transformation in this cohort. While Mezirow (2000) acknowledged that all ten stages were not necessary for transformation to occur, nor did they need to occur in a specific order, further exploration would serve to develop the foundation of the theory itself. Such a study would require a larger sample size than the current study was able to provide and employ a quantitative analysis similar to the methods utilized by Walsh (2007) and Brock (2010). It is anticipated, for instance, that a larger facility (such as a water theme park) located in an environment that allowed for a longer open season would have a higher frequency of critical incidents and consequential samples. This might allow for a methods model that could take the original approach this study intended to use, which would be to examine

the severity of critical incidents both within, and across statistically significant subgroups of participants.

Finally, the participants of this study described a series of experiences that align with flow theory, advanced by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Flow is defined as "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In testimonies of individuals who had had an optimal experience (*i.e.* engaged in a state of flow), the outcomes described were similar to those who had experienced transformation. Specifically, optimal experience helps individuals better understand their own interests, values, and life choices. Based on the responses of the participants, there were parallels between the experience of having a critical incident, and engaging a state of flow. When reflecting on their experiences with critical incidents, for instance, several participants used language indicating a kairotic sensation that was outside the boundaries of seconds, minutes, or hours, but seemed to transcend time itself. Flow is described in a similar capacity, in that when people engage it, their concept of time can speed up or slow down depending on the intensity of their activity. An area for future research is to better understand how critical incidents enable young adults to experience a state of flow, and then apply the findings in a comparison to the transformational experience of lifeguards.

Conclusion

The catalyst for this study was personal experience with transformational learning, brought on at a young age by engaging in a critical incident within the aquatics environment. This study explored this experience in others, ages 16-24, to better

understand the process of transformation in a younger cohort than had been previously examined in the literature. The collective testimonies provided by the ten participants of the study indicated that this cohort is capable of experiencing critical reflection, rational discourse, and reflective action, which represent Mezirow's three criteria for transformation. Consequently, the indications of these data corroborate Walsh (2007) and Taylor (2008), who suggest that studying transformational experiences in young adults is a viable area for future research towards expanding transformational learning theory. In practice, it is important to consider the findings of this study when young adults are subjected to critical incidents. By bringing the transformational experiences into consciousness at an early age, there is significant opportunity to assist young adults in their individual efforts of meaning making, identification of values, and the overall process of "growing up."

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Guide #1

Name: _____

Age: _____

C1 or C2: _____

Incident Date: _____

Interview Date: _____

1. Please describe the critical incident you engaged with.

2. How long ago did the incident take place?

3. Was this your first critical incident? If no, please explain.

4. Recount the moments leading up to the incident. Describe your thoughts just prior to recognizing that the situation required your involvement.

5. Revisit the emotions you experienced upon making the decision to get involved with the critical incident. Describe them.

6. Describe in detail the actions you took, the words you spoke, and the feelings you experienced while providing care. Be as specific as possible.

7. Explain what happened once the situation was no longer in your direct control. (For instance, did you get back in chair? Did you go home?) What kind of an emotional state were you in at that time? Describe it.

8. Often times, people who go through such incidents will find themselves revisiting the experience in their minds. Describe how this has happened with you. What would you have done differently?

9. Your supervisors shared the preseason interview guide with me, and I noticed that one of the questions was "Why do you want to be a lifeguard?" How has your answer changed after having been involved in a critical incident?

10. How, if at all, do you anticipate your on-the-job performance will change now that you've been involved in a critical incident? How will your perspectives of the meaning of the job change?

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Guide #2

Name: _____

Age: _____

C1 or C2: _____

Incident Date: _____

Interview Date: _____

1. Please describe the critical incident you engaged with.

2. How long ago did the incident take place?

3. Have you engaged with additional critical incidents since your last interview? If yes, please explain.

4. How, if at all, has your on-the-job performance changed having been involved in a critical incident? How have your perspectives of the meaning of the job changed?

5. Describe the types of people you have spoken to about your involvement with the critical incident. Explain how talking through what happened has influenced your opinion of the incident? Of the job?

6. Describe your attitude towards your coworkers. How is it different for those who have experienced a critical incident vs. those who have not?

7. What happened to the person you assisted? Describe how knowing/not knowing has helped you make sense of the experience.

8. Having engaged in a critical incident, describe what you wish would be different about the job.

9. Describe how your experience on the job has influenced your attitude/perspective/behavior outside of the job. Give specific examples.

10. Why do you want to be a lifeguard?

Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Guide #3

Interview Date: _____

1. Please briefly describe the critical incident(s) you engaged with.

2. How, if at all, did your on-the-job performance changed after being involved in a critical incident? How did your perspective of the meaning of the job changed?

3. Describe the types of people you spoke with about your involvement with the critical incident. Explain how talking through what happened has influenced your opinion of the incident? Of the job?

4. Describe your feelings when talking about your experience with a critical incident.

5. Describe your attitude towards your coworkers. How is it different for those who have experienced a critical incident vs. those who have not?

6. Having engaged in a critical incident, describe what you wish would be different about the job.

7. Describe how your experience on the job has influenced your attitude/perspective/behavior outside of the job. Give specific examples.

8. How has your experience with a critical incident changed you? Describe what was most influential.

9. Why do you want to be a lifeguard?

Appendix D

Parental Consent Form

May, 2010

Dear Parent/Guardian:

My name is Jeff Grider, and I have worked with the Champaign Park District aquatics department since 2000. Throughout the past ten years, I have been a lifeguard, a lifeguard instructor and an aquatics manager. I am currently working on my doctorate at the University of Illinois, and am doing a study on the experiences of lifeguards on the job. My study is under the supervision of Dr. Steven R. Aragon from the Department of Human Resource Education at the University of Illinois.

The study involves a three-stage interview process. Lifeguards are able to participate in Interview #1 after having an on-the-job "critical incident." A critical incident is a situation that requires someone else to get involved to stop or prevent additional harm. In pool terms, this means performing a rescue or dealing with a first aid scenario that occur in aquatics. There are three types of critical incidents:

Category 1 Critical Incidents (C1) occur when Emergency Medical Services (EMS) is not required. These are handled by the lifeguard themselves without additional help. Examples of C1 include individual in-water rescues and individual first aid scenarios. Most critical incidents that happen at the pool are C1.

Category 2 Critical Incidents (C2) occur when Emergency Medical Services (EMS) is required. Typically, this means that the in-water rescue or first aid situation was so serious, 911 is called.

Category 3 Critical Incidents (C3) occur when death, or any form of legal action is involved. This could include a drowning that is the direct result of action or inaction on the part of the staff, death by natural causes, and rescues or first aid scenarios under legal review by any representative of the victim. *Although C3 incidents are very rare, if one should happen this summer it will not be included in the study. No interviews will take place.*

Interviews will be held at three distinct times after experiencing a critical incident. The first interview will take place within 48 hours. This interview will be face-to-face and one-on-one between the lifeguard and myself; it will last no more than 45 minutes. The second interview will take place within 7-14 days after the critical incident. Again, this interview will take place face-to-face and one-on-one, and will last no more than 45 minutes. The third and final interview will be conducted via three focus groups: one for those who experienced only a C1; another for those who only experienced a C2; and a third for those who experienced both a C1 and C2. Focus group interviews will take place between October 4-15th, 2010, and will last no more than 1 hour 30 minutes. At the beginning of the focus group, I will remind everyone that it is important to keep the conversation confidential in order to respect the privacy of everyone. It is important to understand that I can't absolutely guarantee that one or more participants will not discuss

"who said what" afterwards, but every effort will be made to eliminate this type of discussion.

Anyone who completes the first two rounds of interviews will receive a $10 gift certificate to their choice of Borders, Starbucks, or iTunes as a token of appreciation once the second interview is finished. Dinner will be provided for those who participate in the final focus group interviews.

All data will be used for research purposes. Data will be collected through both audio and video recording to help convert them into text. Any information that links the lifeguard to the data will be kept confidential. Audio and video segments will be destroyed once they've been written down. When I actually write my report, I will use pseudonyms (i.e. Lifeguard A, Lifeguard B., etc.) instead of actual names in order to further protect participants.

If you choose to allow your son or daughter to participate, please sign and return the attached form. You will be provided a copy of the form for your records. Participation in the study is important but strictly voluntary. Anyone can withdraw from the study at any time. Deciding not to participate in the study or withdrawing from the study will in no way affect your child's or your relationship with the Champaign Park District, or the University of Illinois. Your child may also skip any questions that she/he does not wish to answer.

If you have questions about this study, you may call me directly at 217.390.4701; or email me at cjgrider@illinois.edu. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Steven Aragon via phone at 217.333.0807, or email at aragon@illinois.edu. If you have any questions about your child's rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217.333.2670 (collect calls accepted if you identify yourself as the parent/guardian of a research participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

Sincerely,

C. Jefferson Grider   Steven R. Aragon
Doctoral Candidate   Associate Professor
Human Resource Education   Human Resource Education
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign   University of Illinois at Urbana-
                                             Champaign

Parent/Guardian Consent Form

Please complete the sections that apply to you:

I, _____ (Print Parent/Guardian's Name) **DO**

CONSENT to have my child _____ (Print Lifeguard's

Name) participate in *(check all that apply)*:

☐ The three-stage interview process being conducted by C. Jefferson Grider, a doctoral
candidate in Human Resource Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-
Champaign.

☐ Audio recording during the three-stage interview process being conducted by C.
Jefferson Grider, a doctoral candidate in Human Resource Education at the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

☐ Video recording during the final focus group interview being conducted by C.
Jefferson Grider, a doctoral candidate in Human Resource Education at the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

_____

Parent/Guardian Signature   *Date*

**PLEASE RETURN THIS FORM, EITHER THROUGH YOUR CHILD, OR BY
MAIL TO:**

C. Jefferson Grider
Human Resource Education
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
351 Education Building, 1310 South Sixth Street, Champaign, IL 61820

Appendix E

Participant Consent Form

May, 2010

Dear Lifeguard:

My name is Jeff Grider, and I have worked with the Champaign Park District aquatics department since 2000. Throughout the past ten years, I have been a lifeguard, a lifeguard instructor and an aquatics manager. I am currently working on my doctorate at the University of Illinois, and am doing a study on the experiences of lifeguards on the job. My study is under the supervision of Dr. Steven R. Aragon from the Department of Human Resource Education at the University of Illinois.

The study involves a three-stage interview process. You are able to participate in Interview #1 after having an on-the-job "critical incident." A critical incident is a situation that requires someone else to get involved to stop or prevent additional harm. In pool terms, this means performing a rescue or dealing with a first aid scenario that occur in aquatics. There are three types of critical incidents:

Category 1 Critical Incidents (C1) occur when Emergency Medical Services (EMS) is not required. These are handled by the lifeguard themselves without additional help. Examples of C1 include individual in-water rescues and individual first aid scenarios. Most critical incidents that happen at the pool are C1.

Category 2 Critical Incidents (C2) occur when Emergency Medical Services (EMS) is required. Typically, this means that the in-water rescue or first aid situation was so serious, 911 is called.

Category 3 Critical Incidents (C3) occur when death, or any form of legal action is involved. This could include a drowning that is the direct result of action or inaction on the part of the staff, death by natural causes, and rescues or first aid scenarios under legal review by any representative of the victim. *Although C3 incidents are very rare, if one should happen this summer it will not be included in the study. No interviews will take place.*

Interviews will be held at three distinct times after experiencing a critical incident. The first interview will take place within 48 hours. This interview will be face-to-face and one-on-one between the lifeguard and myself; it will last no more than 45 minutes. The second interview will take place within 7-14 days after the critical incident. Again, this interview will take place face-to-face and one-on-one, and will last no more than 45 minutes. The third and final interview will be conducted via three focus groups: one for those who experienced only a C1; another for those who only experienced a C2; and a third for those who experienced both a C1 and C2. Focus group interviews will take place between October 4-15th, 2010, and will last no more than 1 hour 30 minutes. At the beginning of the focus group, I will remind everyone that it is important to keep the conversation confidential in order to respect the privacy of everyone. It is important to understand that I can't absolutely guarantee that one or more participants will not discuss

"who said what" afterwards, but every effort will be made to eliminate this type of discussion.

Anyone who completes the first two rounds of interviews will receive a $10 gift certificate to their choice of Borders, Starbucks, or iTunes as a token of appreciation once the second interview is finished. Dinner will be provided for those who participate in the final focus group interviews.

All data will be used for research purposes. Data will be collected through both audio and video recording to help convert them into text. Any information that links the lifeguard to the data will be kept confidential. Audio and video segments will be destroyed once they've been written down. When I actually write my report, I will use pseudonyms (i.e. Lifeguard A, Lifeguard B., etc.) instead of actual names in order to further protect participants.

If you choose to participate, please sign and return the attached form. If you are under 18 at any point throughout the season and choose to participate, you will need to submit parental consent in addition to the attached form. You will be provided a copy of the form for your records. Participation in the study is important but strictly voluntary. Anyone can withdraw from the study at any time. Deciding not to participate in the study or withdrawing from the study will in no way affect your relationship with the Champaign Park District, or the University of Illinois. You may also skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

If you have questions about this study, you may call me directly at 217.390.4701; or email me at cjgrider@illinois.edu. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Steven Aragon via phone at 217.333.0807, or email at aragon@illinois.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217.333.2670 (collect calls accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

Sincerely,

C. Jefferson Grider   Steven R. Aragon
Doctoral Candidate   Associate Professor
Human Resource Education   Human Resource Education
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign University of Illinois at Urbana-
Champaign

Participant Consent Form

Please complete the sections that apply to you:

I, _____ (Lifeguard's Name) **DO CONSENT** to

participate in *(check all that apply)*:

☐ The three-stage interview process being conducted by C. Jefferson Grider, a doctoral

candidate in Human Resource Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-

Champaign.

☐ Audio recording during the three-stage interview process being conducted by C.

Jefferson Grider, a doctoral candidate in Human Resource Education at the

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

☐ Video recording during the final focus group interview being conducted by C.

Jefferson Grider, a doctoral candidate in Human Resource Education at the

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

I am *(check one)*:

☐ Under 18 (Parental consent required to participate.)

☐ Over 18 (No parental consent required to participate.)

_____

Lifeguard Signature   *Date*

PLEASE RETURN THIS FORM TO:

C. Jefferson Grider
Human Resource Education
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
351 Education Building, 1310 South Sixth Street, Champaign, IL 61820