CHAPTER 9

Transformative Learning and Black Spirituality

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Introduction

There is a growing interest in spirituality in the practice of adult education and specifically transformative learning scholarship (Mikaelian, 2018; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006). Race-centric scholarship on transformative learning is a recent development, often focused on the African or African American experience (Dei, 2002; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Taylor, 2017). However, there is still a poor representation of empirical studies on transformative learning within the context of Black spirituality.

I locate this discourse within the framework of race-centric scholarship and examine Black spirituality as a significant player in the transformative

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learning experience. This chapter examines the findings of a qualitative research study on transformative learning and Black spirituality. The purpose of the study was to explore how a group of Black church lay leaders interpreted and responded to their transformative learning experiences in a leadership development program and the possible role of Black spirituality in their meaning making. The study asked, "What role, if any, did Black spirituality play in their perspective transformation?" The chapter will discuss the findings related to this question in six major sections: context, literature review, research design, critical incidents, discussion, and conclusion.

Context

The context of this study was a one-year church leadership development program. The goal was to create an educative space that provided theological knowledge and simultaneously challenged and fostered examination of underlying assumptions. The pedagogical structure was based on Mezirow's (1978) transformative learning theory and guided by Cranton's (2002) seven steps to set up a learning environment for transformation.

The curriculum incorporated a critical theological approach. The goal was to create a disorienting dilemma between the person's previously held assumptions or home theology, and the current emerging understanding of the literature (Cranton, 2002; Mezirow, 1978). The core principle of the pedagogical design was to create and maintain a safe holding environment (Kegan, 1994), providing ample support and challenges for developmental growth. The pedagogy included critical friend feedback (Costa & Kallick, 1993), journaling (Boud, 2001), Gestalt art (Bourgault du Coudray, 2020), and critical reflective practices (Brookfield, 2000; Cranton, 2002; Schon, 1984).

Besides the curriculum, the cultural context was also significant. Mezirow (2000) concurred culture impacts meaning making. "The who, what, when, where, why, and how of learning may be only understood as situated in a specific cultural context" (p. 7). In this study, the ethnic background and church institutionalization of the participants were important considerations. The ethnicity of the students was predominantly African American and Afro Caribbean. Further, all participants were affiliated with interdenominational churches with roots in the historically Black Pentecostal movement.

The participants referred to their religious context as "Black Pentecostalism" throughout their narratives. There is no one type of modern-day Black Pentecostal church, but there are numerous churches with links to the Azusa Street revival in 1906. Such denominations include Church of God in Christ (COGIC), Pentecostal Assemblies of the World (PAW), and Charismatic churches (1960s). The Holiness movement of the nineteenth century, emphasizing piety and stoical living, eventually became intertwined with the Pentecostal movement. Hence, the Pentecostal Holiness church emerged (Alexander & Yong, 2011). Overall, African Americans have been at the helm of the Pentecostal movement, forging the worship and music, and shaping the theological landscape. Participants in this study had roots in either Black Pentecostal Holiness churches or the Church of God, headquartered in Tennessee. The Church of God began in 1886 as a breakaway from the Baptist movement and later began to follow the doctrine of sanctification and the holiness movement.

There has been some relaxation of the standards of piety in the neo-Pentecostal churches, but very little has changed in worship styles or theology (Alexander & Yong, 2011). In essence, Black spirituality is a way of life from birth to death (Appiah, 2005). There are deep rooted values, notably regarding commitment to church attendance, the role of the pastor, and worship styles. Church attendance is an accepted way of life for those steeped in Black church culture and is disproportionately higher among African Americans than White Protestant Americans (Wiggins, 2005). Black church pastors perceive themselves as playing more of a social and political role in their communities than White pastors (Cohall & Cooper, 2010). The pastor has a strong authoritative role in the faith community and plays a dominant role as the locus of authority for biblical knowledge (Appiah, 2005). This is even more pronounced in the interdenominational context in which the pastor is typically the founder and progenitor of the church's doctrine and praxis. In the traditional Black church ethic, there is a tacit understanding of authoritarianism and loss of voice as worshippers may not critically question interpretations, methodologies, ideologies, and/or doctrine. There is a "devoicing" and "internalized devoicing" in the hegemonic relationships in the Black church (Appiah, 2005).

Worship is another distinguishing characteristic of the Black church in both North America and the Caribbean (Erskine, 2014; Herskovits, 1943, 1990). Whether slave or free, Blacks brought their African worship

to Christianity. Along with their own songs of hope known as "Negro Spirituals," clapping hands, dancing, and crying aloud were customary. The religious dance called "ring shout" or "running sperichils" was widespread (Frazier & Lincoln, 1974; Raboteau, 1980). In traditional Black churches, variations of the shout and spirited worship are still actively practiced. These deep historical values are significant considerations in an examination of the ontology and epistemology of Black lay church leaders. The cultural and spiritual context affects not only what they know, but what they value, and how they construct meaning.

Literature Review

Until recently, spirituality was given limited attention in the adult education literature outside of religious education studies. Formerly, adult learning was understood primarily as a cognitive process. Now, adult learning is regarded as multi-dimensional, involving the body, emotions, spirit, and mind (Merriam, 2008). There is a growing body of literature acknowledging the role of spirituality in adult education (Merriam & Ntseane, 2008; Mikaelian, 2018; Richards, 2019; Roberts, 2009). A concept of spirituality informing this study is the interconnectedness between spirituality and cultural identity (Charaniya, 2012; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2002, 2006). Spiritual and cultural identity are interwoven (Tisdell, 2008). Individuals give expression to their experiences and construct meaning through the lens of culture—symbols, values, rituals, and images (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). Similarly, these elements are at the core of how spiritual knowing is interpreted and expressed (Fowler, 1981). Therefore, spirituality can have an important role to play in culturally relevant education (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003).

There is a general trend in the adult education literature of distancing spirituality from any religious commitment and toward more holistic learning. This study is informed by the understanding of spirituality as the conscious honoring of and connection to the Life-force (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2002, 2006). Further, Tisdell and Tolliver (2003) proposed seven assumptions about spirituality and education, four of which are relevant to this study: (1) it is a conscious honoring of and connection to the Life-force that is occurring through everything; (2) since the Life-force is always present, people's spirituality is always present in the learning environment; (3) spirituality is about how people make meaning, and about experiences that contribute to their wholeness of life; and (4) it is how

people construct knowledge through unconscious images, symbols, and music.

While there is a deficit of empirical research on adult learning within a Black spiritual context, three studies—Mattis (2002), Merriam and Ntseane (2008), and Salinas et al. (2018)—showed the interweaving of culture, spirituality, and adult learning. Mattis (2002) interviewed ten African American women to determine how they used spirituality to cope and construct meaning in times of adversity. Participants reported a strong reliance on the Transcendent in times of adversity as the source of knowledge, identity, guidance, and compass for character and moral principles. Merriam and Ntseane's (2008) qualitative study in Botswana examined how the culture shaped the transformative learning process. Using Mezirow's transformative learning theory as a guide, the researchers interviewed twelve participants who acknowledged having an experience that significantly changed their view of themselves or their perspectives. The findings showed participants constructed meaning of their experiences within their cultural contexts of spirituality, gender roles, and community responsibilities and relationships. The researchers noted participants' interpretation was guided by a "spiritual system" operating parallel to their faith tradition (Merriam & Ntseane, 2008, p. 89). Similarly, the Salinas et al. (2018) study on *The Role of Spirituality for Black Male Community College Students*, showed an affinity toward cultural understandings of spirituality. The study using semi-structured and group interviews included twelve Black and Latino college males. Like the African American women in Mattis' (2002) study, the Black male students had a high awareness of their spirituality as a source of self-identity. They relied on their spirituality as a source of courage in times of challenge and had a strong reliance on their spirituality for guidance and a sense of purpose. As with the Botswanan participants, the Black men's learning experiences were intertwined with strong ties to their spirituality, community, and family.

Conceptual Framework

The goal of this constructivist study was to understand not only the outcome of the transformative experiences, but to explore how, if at all, their spirituality shaped their meaning making process. Mezirow's (1978) theory of perspective transformation guided our understanding of the meaning construction of the participants. Mezirow (1978) described

perspective transformation as "involving a structural change in the way in which we see ourselves and our relationships" (p. 100). Over the years, a plethora of understandings of transformative learning has emerged, often nuanced by disciplinary approaches.

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research methodology (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002), framed from an interpretive paradigm and a constructivist epistemology. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT; Flanagan, 1954). The purpose was to understand how participants interpreted their transformative learning experiences and to examine how they constructed meaning during such incidents. Qualitative critical incident was deemed the best method due to its strength in capturing both incidents that evidence the phenomena of interest and the participants reasoning or meaning making about the incident. Therefore, every activity during the interview process was intentionally designed to invite the participant to tell their story in as much detail as possible (Kain, 2004). Participants had to have completed all courses and successfully graduated from the program. Incidents were participants' experiences of perspective transformation. A constructivist narrative approach to CIT (Ellinger & Watkins, 1998) allowed the researcher to capture both context and meaning from the perspective of the respondent.

The interview questions sought significant incidents of perspective transformation (Kain, 2004). Questions included "Think about a time when your perspective of God, yourself, or others changed as a result of the program; tell me what happened, who was involved, and what was the outcome." There was no limit to the number of incidents a participant could describe. The probing technique was used to obtain "rich thick descriptions" of each incident (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Interviews were conducted with nine graduates of the program who acknowledged experiencing some type of perspective change and who volunteered to participate in the study. The sample included six females and three males.

The analytical approach selected for this study was narrative analysis. Narrative analysis was used successfully in similar research studies (Watkins, et al., 2018). This study used Ollerenshaw and Creswell's (2002) method of analyzing stories through restorying or retelling. Restorying is a process of gathering stories, analyzing them for key

elements such as time, place, plot, and scene, and rewriting the story to place it within a chronological sequence (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Often the participant's stories do not follow a logical sequence. Hence, the researcher provides a "causal link" among the fragments, including rich detail about the context or setting of the incident (p. 332).

Researchers Subjective Location

As a clergy woman and educator, Miller is located in and committed to adult development and growth. Miller approached this study as a Black Jamaican female, educator, clergy, and a naturalized American citizen, with an interdenominational faith praxis. Watkins is an adult educator, scholar of adult learning, and expert in qualitative critical incident techniques.

Findings: Critical Incidents

Participants recalled incidents of disorienting dilemmas related to their faith symbols and practices (Fowler, 1981) and described their meaning making process as they grappled with the disorienting dilemma during their transformative learning experience. Participants reported negotiating their interpretations of four major symbols of Black Pentecostalism: (1) the sacred text, (2) authority of the pulpit voice, (3) rules of piety, and (4) spiritual worship. Each of these symbols is presented below with supporting data from the critical incidents of transformation identified and narrated by the participants. The words of the participants are identified in italics.

Negotiating the Non-negotiable Sacred Text

When Mary[1] became aware of diverse literary voices in the biblical text as a result of the course on biblical exegesis, she struggled to reconcile the paradox of the human yet divine authorship of the sacred text. Mary did not recall when or how she came back around to accepting the sacred text as holy after her disorienting dilemma, but she reframed her perspective

[1] All names are pseudonyms. Biblical names were selected that best fit the nature of the incidents.

to make sense of the dichotomy. For Mary, transformation was changing the way she received the sacred text.

> We were reading two parallel stories that said the exact opposite of each other. I remember so clearly; it was about David taking the census. To my amazement, one narrative said God incited David and the other said Satan incited David to take the census. I said, 'Wait, was it God or was it Satan?' For the first time, I began to see human perspectives behind the text. I came from a nondenominational church, but we had a Pentecostal background. So, we were taught the Bible is written by God. If I questioned anything in it, the response was basically, 'Because God said it' and 'This is just what the book says. So, we're just going to do what the book says.' But something happened to me that day when I read these parallel stories. It was challenging to move from the idea that this is a book written by God, to accept it is a book written by human beings with opinions. It just had me questioning. Is everything in here real? Should I believe all of that? … And where does that leave me? That definitely shook everything in me because, with the Christian faith, the Bible is our everything. And so now I was put into a situation where I didn't know if I should believe everything in the book. What should I do with this new information? So, everything I thought I knew was ripped apart. I don't know how, but somehow it brought me back into understanding that although this book is written by humans, it is sanctioned by God. I think God wanted us to see ourselves in it …, and [if] it was just all divine, we would never achieve what it says, or be able to relate or grasp it.—Mary

Likewise, Joshua recalled struggling with placing confidence in a text with human authorship. He reframed his meaning making in another course to accept the sacredness of the writings again. Below he explicated how he resolved the anomaly.

> On the second class, we were introduced to the two creation stories in Genesis by two different sources. We were learning how to identify their voices in the texts and how they tell the same story differently. I had never heard there were two creation stories or different sources. I struggled with it. How do I know the stories are accurate? How could redactors just add or re-arrange it? Can I believe what's in here? I think what brought it all back together for me was when we got to the New Testament and there were stories that were similar in the synoptic gospels but yet focused on different aspects of the event. I realized these writings were recordings of ordinary people's testament of what happened and how they saw it. I

> found confidence in seeing the stories were very similar although handed down from different sources. So the fact that they were so closely similar, gave me confidence that these things really happened.—Joshua

Negotiating the Authority of the Pulpit Voice

The authority of the preacher is a hallmark of Black spirituality (Wimbush, 2000) and in the Black church context, the preacher and the denomination are the authoritative voices. Therefore, participants had to reinterpret this symbol of the faith in light of their new knowledge. Deborah described the dynamic of the pulpit–congregant relationship.

> We go to church on Sunday mornings and we expect the preacher to tell us everything. And I was one of those people. Prior to this, I had never gone back to see, is this really true … I've spent the majority of my Christian life just being churched and being a listener. I never really had the urge to check things for myself …. And so, this awakened me to realize there are things we've been taught but we never really went back to inquire … We've been taught just to do things as part of the tradition, but it doesn't mean it's for today or that we are following the original meaning or intention for it … But I recognize now that I do have to do my due diligence in searching scripture for myself and not just accept everything that someone says from the pulpit. I recognize the intentions are good, but they are giving their interpretation … I am now more attentive to what's being taught, and I research what I hear to see if it's correct or makes sense to me … I'm not just being led, so to speak. —Deborah

Ruth and Leah found a way to integrate their new knowledge and growth with honoring the pulpit voice. They focused on getting something out of it anyway. Ruth elucidates,

> I remember the first time we looked at one of the popular texts we love to quote and realized we had taken it out of context. It didn't mean what we thought. I felt like, what?! Was I taught wrong? I don't want to go that far, but is it ignorance? Why don't they know this? Why is it being taught like this to us? … I came to a point where I realized I don't have to make those definite judgments like they were wrong because it could be a number of things and it's okay. I just think it's culture, education, class, it's just a whole bunch of factors, but they're still doing the best they can.—Ruth

> I try not to think they're right or wrong. When something is preached that I now know is taken out of context, I tell myself, 'just focus on the main point'.—Leah

Negotiating Piety

The third pillar of Black Pentecostalism participants grappled with during their critical incidents was symbols of piety. Ruth summarized her assumptions, "*You have to be a perfect Christian and you have to dot all your I's, cross all your T's and everything is supposed to go perfect*." Mary narrated how she felt pressured to hide her tattoos when she went to church and coloring her hair was a major step toward redefining piety. When Joshua declared, "*I stepped out of the religious box,"* he was referring to letting go of embeddedness to institutional standards of piety from his upbringing in the Black Pentecostal Holiness church. He admitted, "*And to be honest … I've been so strict on what we shouldn't be wearing.*" Ruth reframed her perception of the Old Testament laws as standards of piety for her life. Instead of "*rules, rules, rules*," she saw the commandments as guidelines for life which she could selectively choose to apply.

One significant area of transformation for Paul was his perception of the Transcendent as judgmental and an enactor of rules. He became aware of how this previously taken for granted assumption had affected him and his relationship with his family. He explained,

> I used to see God as a judgmental God, a harsh God, a hard God, and if I don't pray, if I don't read the Bible, God's going to cut me off. So I used to put pressure on myself, always trying to appease and keep God from being angry with me. It was so bad that even when I went on vacation, I would search for a church to attend on Sunday. I felt God would be upset with me if I missed church. I began to see this did not match what I was seeing in the stories. So I grabbed hold of this new God I never knew; I began to see God as gracious and merciful. Now I live my life knowing God forgives me of whatever I've done wrong. I can rest knowing that God's love is unconditional.—Paul

Paul later explained how his relationship with his daughter changed because of his new way of seeing and being.

> From that moment I was a changed person. I realized my perspective of God as a harsh judge had affected my relationships with others. I was very

judgmental. I would pressure my wife and family to do what I thought was the only way to serve God.—Paul

Negotiating Worship

High spirited worship is a hallmark of Black spirituality. Throughout their narratives, participants referenced the primacy placed on spiritual worship and exuberant preaching styles in the Black Pentecostal church. Exuberant worship defined one's level of spirituality. Anna commented, "*We're taught that if you don't jump and shout, then something is wrong.*" Anna recalled her own struggle:

> I was sitting in my seat and everyone around me was dancing and shouting and someone asked me, "What trouble did you get into?" She asked because I wasn't shouting or jumping … One thing that changed [for me] is how I worship at church. That's something I struggled with for a long time because I've always felt it should not be about my emotions, but we're taught that if you don't jump and shout then something is wrong … So, I think that I have changed in a way that's more beneficial to me because sometimes I would do things just to please everybody else …. Yes, there's a place to dance and shout … I will dance and shout when I want to, but not because other people think I should.—Anna

Milcah explained further:

> From the Black church standpoint, it's a lot of whooping and hollering that we're used to. And I come from a Pentecostal background. So it's like once you hear, "God is good all the time" and "you were called for a purpose for such a time as this," you start shouting. But what is the text about? Who was the intended audience? What can the text tell me? So, now I read with my brain turned on and listen to the Holy Spirit. Then I can shout because I have understanding.—Milcah

Interestingly, neither Milcah nor Anna chose to let go of the worship style. Milcah did not abandon this hallmark of her faith but integrated the more substantive understanding with the dance: "*So, now I read with my brain turned on …. Then I can shout because I have understanding.*" Similarly, Anna integrated her new perspective with the dance. "*Yes, there's a place to dance and shout …. I will dance and shout when I want to, but*

not because other people think I should." The core of Anna's struggle was not demonstrative worship; it was about her freedom to choose.

Discussion

The findings showed negotiating four symbols of Black spirituality was a significant part of the participants' perspective transformative experience and created new understandings of freedom. Black spirituality represented the culture, mythos, praxis, and doctrine of Black Pentecostalism. The symbols represented the frames of reference through which new experience and knowledge were filtered. The symbols of Black spirituality were a way of life (Appiah, 2005).

Life-Force

The reported critical incidents showed that participants viewed God as the ultimate architect from the beginning; a life-force that was present and involved (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2002, 2006). Similarly, participants saw their lives as grounded in relatedness to God. There was a tacit understanding God was to be revered. These findings are congruent with prior empirical studies on Black spirituality (Mattis, 2002; Merriam & Ntseane, 2008; Salinas et al., 2018).

The participants' transformative learning experiences included reexamining meaning perspectives rooted in Black Pentecostalism regarding the sacred text, the authority of pulpit voices, forms of piety, and demonstrative worship. While participants reported incidents of new perspectives concerning these pillars of the faith, their meaning making centered on holding on to these symbols and reintegrating the new perspectives into their current contexts (Fowler, 1981). Thus, this is an interesting example of transformative learning in that perspectives changed, deepened, and a new level of awareness emerged; yet core symbols of Black spirituality were preserved. Faith development theorist James Fowler (1981) supports this finding in his discussion of "centers of value" that consciously or unconsciously have great worth to us and give our lives meaning (p. 276). Fowler (1981) elucidated the significance of symbols and images during transformative learning. It is a process of holding on, letting go, and renegotiating symbols with which we have aligned ourselves and find meaning.

Reframing Perspectives

When participants encountered an anomaly with a core pillar of Black spirituality, they engaged in a process of reframing to preserve the sanctity of the pillar. There was a conscious or unconscious understanding that certain symbols of their faith would not be altered. Certain pillars, such as the sacredness of scriptures and exuberant worship, were indelibly etched. A part of the participants' process of meaning making included reframing their perspective to accommodate the new knowledge while re-establishing the validity of the symbol. When an experience is too threatening or strange, the learner makes a new interpretation that reinforces the existing frame of reference (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). In Merriam and Ntseane's (2008) study, participants interpreted their transformative experience within the confines of their spiritual systems, community and familial traditions. Similarly, the participants in this study demonstrated a contextually bounded transformation.

Mezirow and Associates (1990) included reframing in the reflection phase. Mezirow (2000) discussed two types of reframing, objective (critical reflection on the assumption of others) and subjective (critical reflection of one's own assumptions). Neither description correlated with the participants' experiences in this study. Instead, we saw a blend of both types in the nature of their reflections. There is robust data in the study to support the integrated process of reframing as an alternate step in perspective transformation.

New Sense of Freedom

Perspective transformation includes epistemological and ontological processes in which knowers experience enlargement in their identities and in how they are being in the world (Charaniya, 2012; Lange, 2004). Participants in this study identified experiencing more freedom as one of the hallmarks of their experience of perspective transformation. Being free to ask questions about texts or to independently choose how to carry out their faith were some of the liberatory actions described by participants. Participants indicated a deep desire to be liberated from restraining structures and to make an impact in a wider world.

Conclusion

Participants in this study reported critical incidents of perspective transformation and described how negotiating key communal symbols of Black spirituality played a key role in their transformative learning experience. The study demonstrates Black spirituality is a nuanced cultural context, affecting not only how individuals view themselves and the Transcendent, but how they learn, grow, and construct meaning. The mythos, symbols, and values played a significant role in how the Black lay leaders constructed meaning during their experiences of perspective transformation. While the participants hailed their expanded freedom to question or to choose, there was an unconscious commitment to key symbols. Further, the study supports that transformative learning engages the whole person (Dirkx, 2012; Tisdell, 2000), including one's spirituality which transcends religion. The study highlights spirituality is not homogenous and further delineation in future scholarship on the spiritual dimensions in transformative learning is required. The study posits Black spirituality is much more than a style of worship; it is cultural and spiritual, with its own interpretive lenses and an active influence on adult learning experiences. Finally, although the study focused on a Judeo-Christian context, there are implications for future research on Black spirituality in other religious and non-religious contexts.

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