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*Adult Education Quarterly* 1999 50: 5

DOI: 10.1177/07417139922086885

The online version of this article can be found at:

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# AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF POWER IN TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF ETHICAL VEGANS

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*Critics have argued for a better understanding of power in transformational learning. This study explored the power of normative ideologies in the transformational learning of ethical vegans. The findings indicate that Mezirow's transformation theory does not adequately account for power relations in this case of transformational learning, power was central to the transformational learning of ethical vegans, relations of power operated across interrelated scales of organization and time, normative ideologies regulated emancipatory praxis over time, and transformational learning should be viewed from a more holistic perspective.*

**An enduring tension** between Mezirow's transformation theory and its critics is the debate over the role of power in transformational learning. Mezirow (1991, 1992, 1995) claimed that his theory is an individualized and generic process comprising critical reflection, rational discourse, and emancipatory praxis. Transformational, emancipatory learning is optimized within ideal conditions of discourse, that is, communication free of distortion and manipulation. Following Habermas, however, Mezirow recognized that discourse is susceptible to such pitfalls (Mezirow, 1995). Considering these pitfalls inevitable, transformation theory assumes they can be overcome. Alternatively, critics have argued that transformation theory does not adequately account for the power of systematic knowledge and cultural

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ADULT EDUCATION QUARTERLY, Vol. 50 No. 1, November 1999 5-23  
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ideologies to distort communication and therefore constrain or inhibit adult learning (Hart, 1985, 1990; Pietrykowski, 1996).

Cultural ideologies are self-perpetuating and do so in the interests of those with power, structuring systematic communication and action through inequality and injustice (Hart, 1985). Even when power is "thematized," it remains a formidable barrier to adult learning (Hart, 1985). Critics have argued for the importance of power in understanding such learning (Hart, 1985, 1990; Inglis, 1997; Newman, 1994; Pietrykowski, 1996). In spite of these calls, transformation theory has retained its psychological emphasis, and research has yet to empirically show how power might be integrated into the theory (Inglis, 1997).

Unfortunately, there have been no published empirical studies designed specifically to examine the role of power in Mezirow's transformation theory. In fact, according to Taylor (1997), few empirical studies on Mezirow's transformation theory have been published at all. Taylor further observed that of the numerous dissertations completed using Mezirow's theory, there has been scant theoretical critique. A recent edited volume on transformational learning (Cranton, 1997) contained no empirical research specifically designed to explore Mezirow's transformation theory. In short, there is a dearth of data-based evidence to support either Mezirow's transformation theory or its critiques. As part of a larger study conducted to address this void (McDonald, 1998), the purpose of this research was to critically examine the role of power in transformational learning.

### RELEVANT LITERATURE

In 1978, Mezirow first introduced ideas that he later developed as a theory of adult transformational learning. Although Mezirow has refined his theory over the years, its basic tenants remain intact. Mezirow suggested that following a triggering event, or disorienting dilemma, individuals experience a sequence of events, which could occur in any order. These events lead to a transformation in perspective that is more integrative of life experience and is more discriminating, inclusive, and permeable than the replaced meaning perspective. The events following a disorienting dilemma are self-examination; critical assessment of assumptions; recognizing that discontent and transformative experiences are shared; exploring options for new roles, relationships, and actions; planning a course of action; acquiring knowledge and skills; provisionally trying new roles; renegotiating relationships and building new ones; and reintegrating the new perspective into one's life. Other features include the importance of critical reflection on assumptions, democratic dialogue, and reflective emancipatory action, or praxis.

The development of transformation theory can also be linked to its critiques. As noted, critics have suggested that a more explicit role for power relations is needed. Power and context are interdependent (Cervero & Wilson, 1994; Hart, 1990). Clark and Wilson (1991), for example, pointed out that the meaning of any experience cannot be understood apart from its context. They asserted that the political and

social systems in which people negotiate personal change “actually provide . . . meaning” to the discourse that occurs in service to that change (p. 83). Newman (1994) observed that transformative learning may be more “clearsighted” if the focus of reflection is not so much on the learners’ assumptions, as suggested by Mezirow’s theory, as on the “assumptions and actions of their opponents” (p. 241). Cunningham (1992) criticized Mezirow’s theory for its lack of attention to “social transformations and the equalizing of power relations in society” (p. 185). This critique draws attention to the interdependence of power and context.

Taking a critical view, Hart (1990) argued that transformation theory misses the point of emancipatory transformation by not placing power at its center.

It is my contention that by not placing the issue of power or dominance relations at the center of the concept of critique or critical educational theory, Mezirow essentially declaws a body of theory and writing which ultimately leads to a questioning of the entire normative base of our social and economic arrangements. (p. 126)

Through her critique, Hart (1990) described the distorting impact of power, especially its systematic and unconscious nature. Emancipatory education, she claimed, is based in the ability to question the normative ideologies that sustain the status quo and its relations of power. Normative ideologies are systematic values, beliefs, and concepts that are widely held so as to be typical of a culture. The medium of ideologies is communicative action, which when based in relations of power is associated with three interrelated levels of potential distortions. These levels include a large-scale social-cultural level, an interpersonal level consisting of human relationships, and an intrapersonal or psychological level.

Social-cultural distortions are composed of the normative ideologies, beliefs, and values of a culture. These communicative distortions are insidious, having “the power to immunize norms against critique” (Hart, 1990, p. 130). Such distortions legitimize injustice and inequality, discourage or prevent critical thematization of normative ideologies, and promote the status quo.

Interpersonal communicative distortions are reflective of social-cultural distortions and are manifested in human interaction and relationships. Hart (1990) noted that human interaction not only manifests but also perpetuates these unequal relations. Social-cultural and interpersonal levels of communicative distortions are mutually supportive.

Hart (1990) described a third level of distortion: the unconscious psychological structures that constitute an individual’s self-identity. Hart called this kind of distortion a “pathology” that harms the truth and perpetuates interpersonal communicative distortions (p. 132). Citing Habermas, Hart called such pathological communication “pseudo-communication” (p. 132). People are unaware not only of the internal source of their distortions but also that such distortions exist.

Presented as distinct levels for the sake of description, Hart (1990) observed that these levels are so deeply entwined that a critique of one “can never be severed from

a critique of the other two” (p. 130). Each level of distortion affects the others so that breaking free of these distortions is a daunting task.

Hart (1990) insightfully but inaccurately (from a technical perspective) referred to the cultural level as ecological. In 1997, a call for an ecological understanding of transformational learning promoted the idea that context may be as important as psychology to understanding such learning (Taylor, 1997). Ecology, the model invoked for the individual-in-context perspective, “emphasizes a holistic study of both parts and wholes” (Odum, 1997, p. 34). In ecology, hierarchical organizations are recognized in which larger organizational structures are composed of smaller scale elements. A sociological example of this might be depicted as world→continent→nation→region→community→family→individual. All living things are open systems and continually exchange energy with organizational levels at smaller and larger scales. In a social-psychological context, communication is one of the energy exchange mechanisms between an individual and other organizational scales. A level can be more fully understood by tracing the flow of energy (or communication) to and from adjacent levels or scales. Explaining this epistemologically, Ahl and Allen (1996) introduced empirical hierarchies, or scales of observation. Empirical hierarchies are defined by the observer. In transformational learning, for example, critics have argued for recognition and exploration of the relationships of the individual to larger scales, defined as families, communities, or cultures. Hart (1990) employed empirical hierarchies in her threefold depiction of levels of communicative distortions. By defining three levels and suggesting a connectedness (energy flow) between these levels, Hart has provided an ecologically based operational framework to understand the role of power in transformational learning.

Transformation theory recognizes the connection between the individual and larger scales of organization. The role of discourse, for example, is a central feature of the theory. Transformation theory, however, is focused on the intrapersonal or psychological level and gives little attention to other levels of organization. From an ecological perspective, as well as the perspective of transformation theory’s critics, transformational learning can only thus be partly understood.

### *Veganism as a Case Study for Transformational Learning*

Mezirow (1996) stated, “A transformative learning experience requires that the learner makes an informed and reflective *decision to act*” (pp. 163-164, emphasis in original). One of the more dramatic actions that an individual can take is to make a major change in her or his diet.

Eliminating all animal products for ethical reasons is an extreme dietary change. Such a change calls for the elimination of dairy products, as well as meat, fish, and eggs. Individuals who make this choice, called ethical vegans in this study, also typically subscribe to an animal rights perspective.<sup>1</sup> The vegan movement, like the feminist movement, represents efforts to expose and resist systematic structures of

power by “thematizing” them (Adams, 1990; Hart, 1985). Within the vegan movement, power is defined by human supremacy over nonhuman animals. Human supremacy is sustained by the normative ideology of speciesism, a systematic prejudice in favor of one’s own species and against others (Singer, 1985).

Hart (1985) argued that if “the acquisition of a practical consciousness that is capable of rationally addressing moral-practical questions is accepted as a major educational objective, consciousness raising groups and collectives can be considered genuine adult educational situations” (p. 121). Thus, the consciousness raising and collectives of vegans should also be considered adult education. Mezirow (1991) defined transformational learning as the interpretation of experience using “a new set of expectations” (p. 11), or a newly discovered meaning. Such interpretation “call[s] into question deeply held personal values” (p. 168). If Mezirow’s theory is valid for a variety of transformational learning experiences, it should explain how people learn to become and remain ethical vegans.

### RESEARCH QUESTION

This study is based on an assumption that adopting a vegan diet for ethical reasons fits Mezirow’s criteria for a perspective transformation within transformation theory. Given this assumption, the larger study’s overarching purpose was to investigate if Mezirow’s (1995, 1996) descriptions of transformation theory explain the process of learning to become an ethical vegan (McDonald, 1998). Hart (1990) has pointed out the need for critical analyses in adult education and especially the need for a critical understanding of power. We took, therefore, a critical perspective to answer the following question: What is the role of power in the transformation of individuals who have become ethical vegans? This question emerged from the constant comparative analysis, which revealed a force defined as power in the learning process of these ethical vegans. We define power as being free to act or act on. Although interdependent with context, power emerged as a salient quality across three interrelated scales within the lifeworld. We will describe how power emerged in participants’ narratives, followed by a critical interpretation.

### METHODOLOGY

A phenomenological framework was chosen to uncover the experience of self-transformation. By employing this perspective, the salient learning events and their influences could be identified and described by the learner. The goal was to discover what mattered, from the vegans’ perspective, as they adopted veganism as a “generalized norm” (Hart, 1985, p. 126) in place of their speciesist ideology. One of the researchers, herself an ethical vegan, used her own understanding of veganism to facilitate the interview process. By revealing her status to the participant, the interviewer was able to eliminate the participants’ need to explain veganism. This saved time, established rapport, and garnered trust.

**TABLE 1**  
**The Participants**

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Vegetarian (in years)</i>	<i>Vegan (in years)</i>
Cary	31	~12	~10
Drew	26	6	5
Franz	38	16	7
Janet	52	7	7
Lanny	40	2.5	2
Lena	40s	~14	~13
Lisa	42	1.5	1.5
Lucille	85	~6	~5
Michelle	60s	10	NA
Sean	23	5	4
Roger	23	6	~4
Maire and Will	40s	7	~4

Note: ~ = approximately.

In-depth unstructured interviews lasting between 60 and 120 minutes were conducted with 12 ethical vegans. The interviewer asked the participant to tell her or his story, chronologically, beginning with a brief self-description and a brief description of his or her childhood. Then, the participant was asked to tell how she or he learned to become an ethical vegan. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. All participants were Caucasian, middle class, and had been vegan for at least 1 year (see Table 1). Purposeful sampling techniques were used. An initial sample of 10 ethical vegans was identified at a national animal rights march, based on the acknowledged relationship between acquiring an animal rights perspective and the adoption of veganism (Adams, 1990; Stepaniak, 1998). Although some of the vegans were animal rights activists prior to becoming vegan, some became vegan prior to or concurrent with becoming active in the animal rights movement. Of the vegans identified at the march, 5 were interviewed, and an additional 7 were identified through snowball and opportunistic sampling.

A holistic analysis was conducted, followed by open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). First, each of the interviews was read all the way through, and a description of the learning process was written for each individual. These individual processes, or learning journeys, were combined into a prototype learning journey that was then verified with the transcript of each interview. Open and axial coding resulted in the identification of four factors influencing the learning journeys of these vegans. Member checking was used in two ways to verify the accuracy of the analysis. The first 6 participants were asked to read the researchers' interpretation of their learning journey, extracted from the interview. The last 5 participants read and verified the results of the open and axial coding.

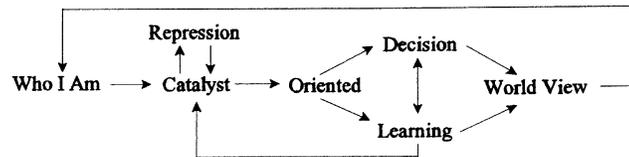


Figure 1. The Process of Learning to Become an Ethical Vegan.

## RESULTS

This analysis revealed that transformational learning is more of a journey and less of a decision at one point in time. Such learning is not just the decision to adopt a new expectation or meaning perspective. Transformational learning is shown to be a process, continuing past the decision to adopt a new perspective and including interaction with others as one learns how to apply the new perspective (see Figure 1).

The constant comparative analysis revealed that the learning process was affected by normative and systematic structures of power. The oppression of non-human animals, systematically reinforced across three dimensions through communicative and activity norms, served as the vortex for participant reflection, discourse, and a regulated praxis.

The oppression of nonhuman animals was introduced by written or spoken word and by visual images. It was embraced by the participants “through the more quiet moment of nagging doubt, courageously given into, or through the emotional turmoil of disorienting dilemmas” (Hart, 1985, p. 122). This was a point of ideological clarity for the vegan-to-be. Prior to becoming vegan, every participant had eaten meat and had assumed the speciesist ideology. Lisa, having never heard of veganism nor previously considered a vegan ideology, was shown a video on animal cruelty. Her comments are representative of how a discovered truth about animal cruelty was embraced.

I watched the video. It was, like they say, the curtain was pulled back. The truth was made known. It’s just when I learned the real truth of the matter and how [nonhuman animals] are treated, I didn’t want to partake in it. I didn’t want to contribute in any way to what I knew now to be the real truth out there. I know the cruelty that exists.

Just as women in the 1960s became aware of society’s “maleness” (Hart, 1985), these vegans-to-be discovered society’s humanness—its self-perpetuating but largely unconscious ideology that keeps nonhuman animals subjugated. Participants found themselves struggling against powerful cultural and interpersonal

challenges to their newly discovered ideology. Power emerged as an integral force that shaped the transformational learning journey beyond the decision to adopt a new meaning perspective. To adopt a new meaning perspective, participants had to do more than make a decision. They had to live their new perspective in the everyday world. Thus, transformational learning emerged in this analysis as an ongoing, dynamic journey of learning.

The participants did not distinguish between these levels of distortion, but the constant comparative analysis showed that communicative distortions may be categorized into three levels. These levels parallel the levels proposed by Hart (1990). Therefore, we present our analysis of communicative distortions using Hart's framework.

### *Social-Cultural Communicative Distortions*

Social-cultural power was manifested in the pervasiveness of the ideology of human superiority within family, community, industry, and education, and was operationalized through misinformation, selective information, or lack of information (Forester, 1989). Participants observed that information was manipulated by research, health, and educational institutions, and in the marketplace. Welton (1995) noted that institutions either enable or inhibit learning, calling those that are not democratic communities of learning "miseducative" (p. 134). Such miseducative institutions distort communications. Maire noted how school posters show "all these smiling cows." Roger and Cary pointed out that in advertisements cows are shown grazing in pastures, rather than the factory farms that is their reality. Sean's words illustrate how industry obfuscates information and may constrain transformational learning and praxis.

Reading the [product] labels drives me nuts. It was technically a gradual step to veganism because although I took all of the dairy out of my fridge, I didn't know that monodiglycerides were bad for about a month. . . . I think a lot of vegans don't realize what those big words on the backs of food are.

Drew, a former Army Ranger, observed how his fellow Rangers acquired their allegiance to meat eating and their reaction to his conversion to veganism.

It was just that animal consumption had been ground in their minds since they were born. Their parents ate meat. They taught them to eat meat. Just as my parents ate meat and taught me to eat meat. That's all they ever knew. They would watch the McDonald's commercials and the milk commercials, and that's all they knew. . . . They would say stuff like I wasn't a man anymore because I didn't partake in eating animal flesh.

Clark and Wilson (1991) suggested that the meaning of experience cannot be properly understood outside of its context. Our data support this suggestion by revealing how normative ideologies establish the baseline for transformational learn-

ing. The most relevant normative value in this study is represented by the belief in human superiority over other animals. The result of this normative ideology is the widespread and unquestioned use of animals for almost any human purpose, the most obvious and frequent being for human food. None of the participants had previously made the connection between living animals and the food on their plate. Cary, a young attorney and real estate developer, explained,

Well, when I saw hamburgers or steaks, I never put two and two together really. I mean, I used to eat tongue, which is a Jewish delicacy. I never thought, I never even knew what it was. It's that disguised. I mean, even though they say the word *tongue*, I never knew it was that.

Lisa, a professional secretary and single mother, described how a belief in human superiority over other animals was passed from her mother.

My mother used to try to tell me that animal doesn't have any feelings. That's how she raised me. . . . She honestly had me believing that there was a difference in the way an animal feels. That a cat and dog feel this way, and a cow and chicken feel this way. . . . Her answer to everything is that God put these animals here for us to have dominion over them.

The context in which these ethical vegans learned is a mostly unconsciously assimilated set of beliefs regarding the inferior status of animals. Will, a business manager in a large corporation, illustrated how normative ideologies are passed from adults to children.

You see your parents. You know, they're the role models, and they eat meat, and they tell you it's good for you, and it's at the top of the food chain . . . and all of that, and you just grow up thinking that that's the way of the world. . . . I have to have [meat]. And [the animals] never feel a thing. And you know, they're treated well up to that point, and all of these rationalizations. . . . So you're just brainwashed to believe that this is the nature of things.

Cary's words illustrate how such ideologies maintain the status quo.

[People] just block it out. This is what man has always done, and in their opinion, it's right. Tough luck if animals are treated bad, you know, that's just how things are. They bring up that man is superior to everybody, and man can do whatever [he] wants to anybody.

Franz, a university professor, provided this (possibly unintentional) metaphor for how the speciesist ideology is transmitted and sustained: "What you get fed as a child you think is right." The normative ideology is precisely what was challenged and changed. This change gives transformation its meaning.

Prior to becoming vegan, the normalizing influence of the mainstream culture was unrecognized. A parallel may be drawn with the tobacco industry. The commu-

nicative distortions of that industry, such as preventing the release of information to the public and manipulating released information, helped to maintain the status quo of smoking in U.S. society for years (Cannellos, 1997). In effect, such institutions distorted communication to suppress the transformational learning of the consuming public. Cultural institutions, therefore, may be powerful protectors of the status quo. Michelle, a soft-spoken grandmother with a strong religious faith and practice, mentioned how schools teach children to consume animal products.

You know, something else that really bothers me is schools. I've read that they teach kids [to eat animals] from early on, and I don't like that, and I don't really know how you go about changing that. A lot of that is the money behind it. And money talks, you know, there's no doubt about it.

Institutions also used power to hide cruelty from consumers. Roger, a young professional body piercer, explained some of the ways in which the animal food industry hides the truth about factory farming from consumers.

I know a lot of people don't know because everything's packaged in a nice little package in the grocery store, and you don't have to think about it at all. It's funny, I watch the news, and there's this whole E.coli thing going around. And most of the meat out on the market comes from factory farming, but they are only showing the happy, free-range cattle roaming around. It's like, no, that's not where the E.coli's coming from. Why don't you show the true atmosphere that it's coming from?

Although fewer in number and less culturally powerful, some institutions supported transformational learning and became agents of change. Learning from vegetarian and vegan organizations was important to most of the participants in this study. Will and Maire attended an animal rights conference every year because they enjoyed support from others.

That's why we take the time to travel there once a year, you know, that's why of course we do the march [for the animals], that's why we try to get together with people, because it just uplifts your spirits, and you learn things from one another.

Other institutions offered support for the vegan's learning, including natural food stores and animal rights and vegetarian organizations. Publications from the vegetarian industry and animal rights organizations, primarily magazines, cookbooks, and newsletters, were often the vegan's primary means of learning and support. Cary described how attending a vegetarian conference and becoming involved in an animal rights organization helped him at the beginning of his vegan journey. Lanny and Lisa relied heavily on publications for support. All but Michelle sought support from organizations or publications.

*Interpersonal Communicative Distortions*

The power of normative ideologies to affect human relationships emerged at the interpersonal dimension. Family and friends often initially inhibited, constrained, or at least strongly objected to the vegans' adoption of a nonspeciesist ideology. Lanny "broke down and bowed to [my family's] pressure" when they threatened not to eat the holiday dinner at his house unless he served meat. Lena, a design artist, lost a friend of 20 years, who made fun of her and taunted her with descriptions of eating lamb chops. Roger said, "Every time I go and visit my mother, it's like, 'I'd like to give you something to eat, but we've got butter in everything.'" Through subtle, sometimes cunning, and often overt objections by close others, the personal lives of these vegans were often tumultuous as they first began to adopt a vegan perspective.

Such action on the part of family and friends usually created a painful dilemma for the developing vegan. Although not physical, this was power nevertheless. Hart (1985) observed that power

always has the same purpose: to keep individual autonomy within strict and narrowly defined boundaries. This can occur either through direct, open power in the form of violence . . . or through the mechanism of a false consciousness in the grips of beliefs and assumptions which reflect and cement power relations. (pp. 120-121)

The strict boundaries were defined by speciesism. Autonomy meant that one could eat whatever one wants, as long as it supports the ideology of speciesism. By crossing these boundaries, the vegans severed themselves from the dominant ideology and forced a redefinition of their interpersonal relationships.

Family members in particular played havoc with the transformational learning of some of the vegans. Lanny's family used a variety of tactics to try and get him to serve and eat meat in his own home, including clandestinely bringing meat into his house and into his food. Family members often argued with the vegan about their diet, teased them, or refused to discuss the issue. Sometimes, family members trivialized the vegan's diet by dismissing it as "just a phase" (Lanny, Michelle, Will, and Maire). Michelle's husband, for example, told others this was "another one of Michelle's flaky things that she does." Drew's family accused his vegan wife of "giving them dirty looks" at dinner, an incident that led to 7 months of silence between Drew and his family. Lisa described having to become better educated about animal issues so that she could "intelligently talk with people, like my dad's brothers, who attack me. . . . My uncle and aunt just jumped me with both feet. They are very Christian people, very controlling people."

Will described how others may use labeling to avoid the issues of veganism.

What our family does, and I think a lot of people do with vegetarians . . . you brand them as being right wing, lunatics, far left, far right, wackos, whatever, because that way, you don't have to deal with [them] . . . that way you never get down to issues. You just write them off as nuts and say, "Well, it's not even worthy of a conversation."

Interpersonal communication distortions also were played out in the larger community. Drew talked about being unfavorably known in his community, especially during his more active days. Janet, who writes editorials in the paper and tries to stay active in local media, said, "I've been alone in this town, and I've been misrepresented in the media. I've been turned into an interesting story, and I have been lied about, that sort of thing."

Families and friends were also supportive or neutral in regard to the vegans' diet. Lucille and her granddaughter became vegetarians (and later vegans) together when they first heard about the animal cruelty involved in factory farming. Sean's parents were supportive of his vegan diet because they had once experimented with vegetarianism. For most of the participants, their veganism became less of a divisive issue over time.

Power in interpersonal relationships was reflective of normative social-cultural ideologies regarding the human treatment of nonhuman animals. To explain why others resist veganism, Roger observed,

They feel threatened. A lot of people do feel threatened. You are breaking the traditions of family dinners, where you've got the turkey in the center and mashed potatoes all around the side. And when you start breaking traditions people have grown up with, they start thinking you are like the antichrist or something. [They think] you are trying to destroy all these morals and values, and you are like, "I'm just not killing an animal, calm down."

### *Intrapersonal Communicative Distortions*

Transformational learning began to stir at the intrapersonal level, as a psychological recognition of the truth. Many described their learning as discovering the truth (Lisa, Lena, Drew, Roger, Will, and Maire, Cary). Intrapersonal communicative distortions are violations of truthfulness (Hart, 1990). When the truth is discovered, learners become free to examine or acknowledge the psychological distortions that have motivated them in the past. Transformation theory's focus is primarily within this dimension. For transformation theory, critical reflection is the means by which individuals may change or revise a distorted meaning perspective (Mezirow, 1995).

For these vegans, intrapersonal distortions were discovered either suddenly and emotionally or gradually and more rationally. Lisa, as noted earlier, said that when she first learned of animal cruelty, "The curtain was turned back. The truth was made known." Michelle, like Lisa, discovered the truth about animal cruelty at a deeply personal level and made a sudden and permanent decision to give up meat.

Lucille, an 85-year-old grandmother who had become vegan only 5 years earlier, acknowledged the psychological roots of her transformation.

I wish I had [been a vegan] for 20 years. I wish I had not contributed to [animal cruelty], but as I said, people have to be awakened in their own conscience about these things.

Will noted that following a vegetarian seminar, both he and Maire were convinced that they must give up meat. Speaking for them both and indicating the intrapersonal roots of transformation, he said, "In your heart, you knew this was something that you just had to do. And both of us were thinking, 'How am I going to tell the other?'"

Power relations, in summary, emerged at three interrelated levels of communicative distortion, as proposed by Hart (1990). When freed from their own psychological distortions at the intrapersonal level, the vegans quickly moved their attention to the interpersonal and social-cultural levels. This learning strategy was suggested by Newman (1994), who noted that transformations may be more successful if the assumptional focus is at what Hart (1990) would identify as the interpersonal and social-cultural levels. From the perspective of hierarchy theory, these levels are empirically defined. In the lifeworld, such distinctions do not exist.

Communicative distortions perpetuated the normative ideology of speciesism and therefore became a challenge to transformational learning and emancipatory praxis. To a lesser extent, ideology was used to support transformational learning, especially by vegetarian and animal rights organizations and by sympathetic family and friends. For these, the speciesist ideology became an acceptable subject of discourse.

### *Confronting Communicative Distortions*

Discovering that nonhuman animals are powerless in relation to humans, the vegans initially felt compelled to dismantle the conditions of power. To advocate on behalf of nonhuman animals, every participant felt responsible to educate others about animal cruelty. Janet, for example, said,

I do tend to identify myself as an educator, so I take the opportunity. But I try to get as much as possible at their level and nudge a little further. But if you come on strong, I find that they get awfully. . . . That's why I'm not someone who tends to like to be out doing demonstrations. I would rather do it mainstream like.

Although every participant engaged in some form of pedagogical activity, their style and approach varied. Some initially tended to be proselytizers, whereas others took a less aggressive and more opportunistic approach. Over time, every participant became less outspoken. The often unfriendly or defensive reaction of others

tempered their pedagogy. Maire told about learning from her husband and from experience itself.

I was more aggressive, trying to convert people, that type of thing. [Will] really digests his words a lot better than I do, so I would take a lot of lessons from him. And a lot of my changing the way I would approach people was from kind of being slapped back down.

The participants' pedagogical activities took a number of forms. Michelle used church potluck dinners to show people they can eat well on and enjoy a vegetarian diet. She said she does not push her views on others but finds ways to provide information to them. She told this story about trying to gently educate a woman at her church.

One lady told me that she was really fond of veal. And I told her, 'Let me bring you a book to read.' And I said, 'You don't have to read the whole thing, but I'll clip the part about veal.' So I took it to her, and she read it.

When asked if the woman still eats veal, Michelle replied, "I don't know because I didn't ask. You know, the information's there."

In contrast to Michelle's passive pedagogical approach, Drew and his wife initially promoted social change by participating in organized protests and public appearances.

[My wife and I] have done tabling, led demonstrations, been a guest for a radio program, and been on television a few times, and I have given lectures to like the Unitarian Universalists Group. We haven't done all that much lately, but we have written a newsletter.

Drew continued to explain his evolution as an educator, describing how being attacked by others "took a lot of wind out of my sails for wanting to be active. It made me a lot more passive."

Cary was pessimistic about the chances for widespread change, yet he persisted in educating others whenever he could. He acknowledged, however, that he was more successful when he recognized that others had a right to their opinions. Although the vegans varied in their willingness to push their educational message on others, they typically expressed satisfaction at the thought of converting another person to vegetarianism. Lisa, for example, said wistfully of trying to teach her daughter about veganism.

I tried to just discuss what I had learned. I tried to not preach to her. I probably did come across that way, and she got mad at me. But now, she's understanding. Now that she's moved out, she has been real sweet. . . . I hope she comes around. She knows I hope she comes around. I've said it.

A few have found or are looking for ways to make their professional lives work for the animals. Lanny, who is a self-employed construction engineer, refuses to do jobs that contribute to animal cruelty. Lena and Lisa are looking for ways to use their skills and talents to further the animals' cause but also to make a living. Janet is in graduate school, pursuing a degree that she hopes will help her become a more effective legislative lobbyist for the animals.

The vegans found that others did not welcome their proselytizing. Over time, they learned to use pedagogical techniques that were less offensive and ultimately, they believed, more effective. They did this by providing reading materials, videotapes, and other information that others could look at if they chose to do so. Learning to be a successful activist meant learning to negotiate for the interests of animals without infringing too much on the interests of their audience.

### *A Critical Analysis of Power*

Successful at becoming vegan, the participants emerged with an intact transformed perspective, albeit at a personal price. The sustained power of the normative ideology, however, brought subtle changes in the vegans' praxis over time. No longer shocked by animal cruelty, and worn by social-cultural and interpersonal challenges to veganism, their praxis became less outspoken. Many virtually stopped talking about their vegan ideology to nonvegetarians. This was explained by the vegans as the most effective way to educate others, as the need to adopt some kind of normal existence, or as putting their nonviolence into action. A critical reading of their narratives, however, reveals the unconscious power of the normative ideology to regulate to conformity. The ability of this ideology to unprehesively modify a praxis of resistance presents evidence for the powerful and constraining effects of the dominant ideology on emancipatory education.

The vegans' communication, within the context of speciesist institutions and with meat eaters, became less outspoken, more conforming. Recall Maire, who stopped trying to "convert people . . . and a lot of my changing the way I would approach people was from . . . being slapped back down." Cary had previously been an activist. Now, he says, "It's changed. I used to be unafraid of anybody. . . . You know, now it's a matter of tact, and people have their own views, and they're entitled to their views." The vegans came to believe they could be most effective in alleviating animal cruelty by silencing their own voices, discussing veganism only when asked, muting what they believed to be the truth, and living by example. They learned to avoid confrontations with the dominant culture, in spite of their continued discourse among themselves and their commitment to veganism. Sometimes, they even compromised their veganism. Franz said he would never eat meat, even as a guest, but "if they make a lasagna which contains cheese or something that contains a moderate amount of eggs, for example, I probably will eat it, to not cause a stir and just be respectful." Without exception, the vegans became more content

with and more committed to their vegan ideology but were less apt to share that ideology with meat eaters.

## DISCUSSION

The vegans' narratives and a critical reading of their experiences present five primary findings for discussion regarding their emancipatory transformational learning. First, Mezirow's transformation theory does not sufficiently address the effects of power in the transformational learning of ethical vegans. Second, power was central to the emancipatory and transformational learning of these ethical vegans. Third, relations of power operated across interrelated scales of organization and time. Fourth, a temporally sensitive critical interpretation of power highlighted the ideological limitations to emancipatory learning. Finally, to more fully understand emancipatory and transformational learning, such learning should be viewed from a more holistic perspective.

### *The Limits of Transformation Theory*

Learning to become an ethical vegan is an exemplarity of transformational learning and should be accounted for by Mezirow's transformation theory. Transformation theory, in spite of its considerable contributions to understanding adult learning, does not adequately address the effects of power on the transformative learning and emancipatory praxis of ethical vegans. Power may be ameliorated by critical reflection, rational discourse, and collective participatory action as suggested by Mezirow, but such activities must be sustained over time in the face of formidable cultural and interpersonal odds. Transformation theory fails to account for the enormity and temporal demands of this task for these ethical vegans. Power is an implication of the transformational journey. It is not enough to recognize the need to confront power. Understanding how power operates and resisting its subtle regulation to conformity must also become the transforming learner's continuing challenge.

### *The Centrality of Power in Transformational and Emancipatory Learning*

Hart (1990) argued that Mezirow's theory misses the point of transformational and emancipatory learning by not placing power at its center. Emancipatory and transformative learning, by their nature, are ultimately struggles against normative ideologies sustained by power relations and operationalized through communicative distortions. Any theory of transformational and emancipatory learning must be primarily concerned with power. The narratives of the ethical vegans in this study provide empirical evidence for the centrality of power as the vortex for transformational work. Although these vegans were successful at changing their intrapersonal

perspective, they never became completely free of the normative ideology of speciesism. The normative ideology unconsciously herded these vegans into a more culturally acceptable and conforming praxis. As suggested by Hart (1990), the centrality of power in transformational learning and emancipatory praxis needs more empirical and critical attention.

#### *Power Operates Across Interrelated Scales of Organization and Time*

Employing Hart's (1990) three levels of communicative distortions as an interpretive framework, this analysis showed how power relations at multiple levels of organization may block transformational learning and emancipatory praxis. Transformative learning originates at the intrapersonal level but is affected by and affects the interpersonal level most profoundly. Although individuals may transform their meaning perspective, they do so in the face of enormous interpersonal and social-cultural challenges. A more in-depth reading of the transformational learning of ethical vegans also reveals their journey as dynamic. They do not, as transformation theory suggests, become reintegrated into society with a transformed and static, albeit transformed, meaning perspective. Instead, these ethical vegans continued to change their intrapersonal and interpersonal understandings and relationships. As they became more committed to the vegan perspective (an intrapersonal phenomena), they became less outspoken about it in their personal relationships (an interpersonal phenomena). This suggests a need for longitudinal research, so that the nature of transformation across time may be better understood.

#### *The Ideological Limitations to Emancipatory Learning*

A critical reading of the vegans' praxis over time revealed the pervasive and unprehesive strength of the normative speciesist ideology, manifested in the life-world through social-cultural and interpersonal communicative distortions. Unconsciously but relentlessly, the normative ideology of speciesism shaped the praxis of individuals who became entrapped by it, even as they resisted it. These individuals undoubtedly transformed their speciesist meaning perspective. But is such transformation emancipatory, as Mezirow suggested? Does it extend to the interpersonal and social world, or is it ultimately intrapersonal?

Transformation theory recognizes the need to confront normative ideologies through "critical reflection, rational discourse, and collective participatory action" (Mezirow, 1995, p. 68). But how, when normative ideologies are so deeply entrenched, can this occur? Inglis (1997) suggested that we need a better understanding of power. He parceled power into two types—empowerment and emancipation. Empowerment is the capacity to operate within the existing ideology, and emancipation is resistance and challenge to such ideology. The vegans were empowered to substantially transform their intrapersonal ideology, but their

interpersonal and cultural emancipation was never fully realized. From sustained but often unconscious acts of systematic power against their vegan ideology, these participants succumbed to the normative ideology, acting “in a way which precisely prevents . . . thematization” (Hart, 1985, p. 126), or exposure and discourse about the status of nonhuman animals. The vegans’ self-silencing suggests that power must be continually analyzed and challenged if true emancipatory learning is to occur. Transformative learning otherwise runs the risk of becoming a mechanism for self-control (Inglis, 1997), evident in the gradual social conformance of these vegans, even as their personal commitment increased.

### *The Need for a Holistic View of Transformative Learning*

Transformation theory remains primarily a psychological theory, focusing attention on the intrapersonal dimensions of learning. Although Mezirow’s theory recognizes the influence of epistemic distortions and the importance of discourse in transformational learning, these acknowledgments of social-cultural and interpersonal relations fall short of their central role as indicated in the narratives of these ethical vegans. This analysis points to a need for a more holistic approach to understanding adult learning, one that simultaneously recognizes the importance of the individual and of the individual in context. Employing concepts such as empirical hierarchies (Ahl & Allen, 1996) as an epistemological tool for understanding, adult education researchers may be better able to account for the complexity of adult learning.

## SUMMARY

This study focused on the transformational learning and praxis of ethical vegans. As such, it presents a case study of one kind of transformational change. Motivated primarily by ethical concerns, the experience of these vegans may be different from the transformational learning of vegetarians motivated by personal health, for example. More research is needed to identify whether transformational learning can be described by a generic model or whether different types of transformational change suggest different models of learning. Although the current depiction of transformation theory recognizes the social-cultural and interpersonal challenges to transformational learning, their proportionate role is inadequate to describe the experience of these ethical vegans. It seems that a more holistic empirical approach to understanding adult learning might be more useful. By incorporating the concept of empirical hierarchies, adult education research may avoid the dilemma of focusing too heavily on either a psychological or sociological model of adult learning.

## NOTE

1. Most vegetarians eat egg and dairy products.

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