

# Promoting Perspective Transformation in Post-Totalitarian Societies

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Tetyana Kloubert<sup>1,2</sup> 

## Abstract

This article explores both the prerequisites and barriers of perspective transformation in the context of two Eastern European societies as examples of post-totalitarian states. Although personal cognitive development is considered as an outcome of perspective transformation, I will demonstrate that certain manifestations of cognitive development as well as autonomous thinking are rather preconditions for engaging in the critical reflection and rational discourse necessary for perspective transformation. These manifestations cannot be taken for granted in societies with a long and still vivid tradition of totalitarianism.

## Keywords

critical reflection, social change, personal transformation

Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation (1991)<sup>1</sup> has proven to be an important asset to scholarship and practitioners of adult education far beyond the United States. This theory provides a solid base for understanding complex learning phenomena in different contexts and in different countries. In this article, I apply the theoretical framework of perspective transformation to the transitory process of post-totalitarian society and more precisely to the two societies in Eastern Europe

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<sup>1</sup> Catholic University of Eichstätt–Ingolstadt, Eichstätt, Germany

<sup>2</sup> University of Augsburg, Germany

## Corresponding Author:

Tetyana Kloubert, Catholic University of Eichstätt–Ingolstadt, Luitpoldstr 32, 85072 Eichstätt, Germany.  
Email: tetyana.kloubert@ku.de

where I have done extensive empirical research with adult educators and focused on their work in helping people adjust to life in a democracy, namely in Russia and Ukraine (Kloubert, 2014).<sup>2</sup>

The life in a new democracy requires skills, attitudes, and competences that have been purposefully suppressed in the totalitarian society. A citizen in a democracy is expected (ideally) to live with a constant effort to critically reflect on oneself, the society, and the world, in order to be able to pursue the democratic way of life and to co-shape and when necessary improve the democratic society as such. That is why (perspective) transformation is needed for people transitioning from a totalitarian to a democratic government system, so that democracy can function as a system and a way of life supported by every citizen (in the best case). That implies that ideally each individual needs to be conscious, critical, self-directed, and self-responsible decision maker—characteristics whose bearers were persecuted or even murdered in totalitarian societies. It is thus no wonder that these habits of mind were not cultivated among citizens in a dictatorship. The transition from a totalitarian regime to a democracy needs therefore to explore and address the possibilities and prerequisites of perspective transformations among the citizens in order to make the democracy sustain and develop.

One of the most common critiques of perspective transformation theory is that it is missing a social dimension (e.g., O’Sullivan, Morrell, & O’Connor, 2002; Taylor, 2007). However, as Hoggan points out, “for substantive social change to occur,” there is always a need for “profound learning at the individual level” (2016, p. 58). This article focuses on the interconnectedness of the personal and social dimensions of learning, especially as these dimensions are brought into stark relief during serious social upheaval.

Rooted in humanism and the emancipatory tradition, Mezirow’s theory of perspective transformation is defined by its programmatic commitment to individual growth and social development. This form of learning involves a shift in the meaning structures of the learners and/or collective frames of reference (Mezirow, 1981; Taylor, 2007). This article takes as its focus the change of collective frames of references, especially after a tremendous societal transformation, using the example of two countries in Eastern Europe. Perspective transformation will be seen in the article, referring to Cunningham (1992), as a process of reevaluating and transforming personal worldviews situated within larger political and economic contexts, a process that has been influenced by, but also is influencing, this context. In the case of broad social change, a certain type of transformation is required, namely perspective transformation, which results in more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspectives.<sup>3</sup> The learning outcomes of perspective transformation are (1) an awareness of “how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 14) and (2) reformulation of these assumptions that provide a better base for more principled value judgments and for conscious decisions and

actions and therefore enhance the sense of agency, self-directedness, and autonomy (see Mezirow, 1978b, p. 106).

The inspiration to analyze the transition process of people in these eastern European countries from the perspective of perspective transformation comes from the original background of the theory itself; Mezirow focused on the women's liberation movement, referring to the development of consciousness about internalized structures of suppression.

A woman becomes a *transformation learner* (emphasis in original) when she realizes how the culture and her own attitudes have conspired to define and delimit her self-conception, her lifestyle, and her options in terms of a set of prescribed, stereotypic roles. (Mezirow, 1978a, p. 15)

This development of consciousness entailed critiques of inequitable practices, the transformation of corresponding habits of mind, long-term changes in the social roles and positions of women in society, and the social structures as such. Mezirow defined perspective transformation as a social process of construing new interpretations and forms of action especially in societies experiencing shifts and upheavals:

Critical reflection and rational discourse are processes of adult learning emphasized by those cultures experiencing rapid social change in which old traditional authority structures have been weakened, and in which individuals must be prepared to make many diverse decisions on their own. (Mezirow, 1994, p. 222)

Individual learning is, consequently, inextricably linked to social transition, for example, that from a dictatorship to a democracy, because it addresses the distortions in meaning schemes and perspectives caused by the experience of living under the oppressive and manipulative regimes. Perspective transformation on an individual level can thus foster social change while making a new emerged democracy sustainable and supported by a larger number of critically thinking citizens. This learning process focus in that case on

how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others—to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers. As such it has particular relevance for learning in contemporary societies that share democratic values. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8)

Similarly, in her empirical research about fostering citizen action toward a sustainable society, Lange (2004) argues that changes in meaning perspectives affect not only the epistemological level (participants' worldviews) but also the ontological (changes of the perception of one's own being in the world and forms of the relatedness to the world) through enhancing participants' sense of social and environmental responsibility.

While not directly addressing perspective transformation, Bagnall distinguishes four requirements of the learning process in order to foster personal development and growth: “It seeks liberation from ignorance (through individual enlightenment), from dependence (through individual empowerment), from constraint (through the individual transformation of perspectives), or from inadequacy (through individual development)” (Bagnall, 2012, p. 902). I argue that perspective transformation, in the case of Eastern European citizens, can be understood using these dimensions. Although these developments exist on an individual level, the results of perspective transformations have profound social relevance.

### *Eastern Europe: Some Contextual Objection to the Possibility of Perspective Transformation*

After the collapse of the Socialist Bloc and the dictatorial regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, citizens inevitably faced new expectations in their role as citizens of a democratic state but also in interpersonal communication. The new paradigm inevitably included the question of how to evaluate and overcome the old dictatorial state system, including patterns of thinking and of behaving (described below).

According to Mezirow (2009), perspective transformation “is defined as the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives)—sets of assumption and expectation—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change” (p. 92). But what kind of frame of references are problematic in the post-totalitarian societies? Problematic frames of references in post-totalitarian states can be defined as those that preclude people from conducting their individual lives in a free and democratic society while freezing the habits of mind that have served to sustain a totalitarian regime. Since it is evaluation of the experience (made in the totalitarian past), that is, the primary medium of transformation, the essence of learning is the revision of the meaning of experience. As Taylor and Cranton (2013) point out: “Not only is the interpretation of an experience mediated by context, but also the personal and historical context is significant to the evolution and outcome of a transformative experience” (p. 36). Taylor (2007), while providing a critical overview of the empirical research of transformative learning theory, emphasizes the role of culture and context for the transformative learning process. According to Taylor, context influences the principle “readiness for change.” This article identifies some indicators that, if given, could increase this “readiness for change” (using the examples of Eastern European countries).

Building on this idea, I will look closer at the context of prior experience and the new context which demands the reevaluation of experience in order to live in a democracy and to be able to shape our living environment, that is to say, to build democracy from below. The first question I address is: Why is it necessary to reevaluate prior experiences of citizens in a dictatorial state? This question examines

a tension between how citizens have developed themselves within a dictatorial state and how they can contribute to (a new) democracy.

While answering this and the following questions, I am referring to an empirical study I conducted in 2009 with adult educators in Russia, Ukraine, and Poland (Kloubert, 2014).<sup>4</sup> I would like to begin with a quotation from an interview, which underlines a central topic concerning the process of rethinking past experiences against the background of the democratization:

Of course, it is more convenient for you if you don't feel any responsibility for what happens. And this feeling was cultivated during the Soviet era. People were used to the communist party and the government taking care of them. The motto was: You should just do your job, we will take care of the rest. You don't need to think—we will do everything instead of you. We are responsible, not you. People were used to such a parasitic lifestyle. Civil society, however, requires acceptance of responsibility by all. (Interview\_U20, para 45)

On the one hand, the new pluralistic democracy is a system that guarantees to the citizens their rights and freedoms, but, on the other hand, it is based on participation and involvement. The core idea is that the historical experience of living in a totalitarian dictatorship should be reviewed and reevaluated in order to be able to build and live in a new democracy. One can argue that after the fall of totalitarian regimes, it is impossible to build civil society without a critical inspection of the past experience and patterns of thinking and behavior. Democracy is, however, fundamentally dependent on its citizens' ability to play an informed and active role in co-shaping of the society. In post-totalitarian societies, the learning process is therefore oriented toward overcoming their totalitarian legacy through perspective transformation, which implies enhancing individual's critical thinking, deliberative capacity, and autonomous decision-making. The Ukrainian political scientist Rjabov speaks about the necessary "culture of responsibility," the personal, political, social, and economic responsibility which should be gained through overcoming feelings of powerlessness (Rjabov, 2004).

The difficulties of democratization and the development of mature citizens have been and still are partly due to the political and social attitudes of the population, which have in turn adopted their patterns of behavior from the Soviet system with strict regulation of the public and the private sphere. The Russian sociologist Yuri Levada devoted several investigations to the subject of the "Soviet man" (the so-called *homo sovieticus*) and his continued existence in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> The term "homo sovieticus," circulated by Alexander Sinowjew (1984), is now used pejoratively and refers to a person living mentally in the communist past and acting by the terms of Soviet propaganda. Levada points out the important characteristics of the *homo sovieticus*: forced isolation, state paternalism, hierarchical thinking, and empire syndrome. These characteristics point to the "subjection of man to the system of restrictions rather than to his own interests and

actions” (Levada, 2004, p. 16). The homo sovieticus, according to Levada, was and is ready to accept the Soviet system and submit to it, but not to act on his own (see Levada, 2004, p. 16). In April 2004, Levada argues that the desired change in habits of mind did not occur even after more than a decade after the break of the Soviet Union: “When the [Soviet] people were released, they began to run backward” (quoted after Mrowczynski, 2006, p. 16). On the basis of the thoroughly conducted empirical research on attitudes of the Russian population, Gudkov, Dubin, and Zorkaja (2008) describe the “post-Soviet human being” as the continuation of the homo sovieticus. They are “difficult to change” and “conformist,” suspicious of the “other” and to societal “complexity,” and is pessimistic and passive. They know from experience that “all his/her private efforts to achieve something better in life can form a basis for repressions and sanctions on the part of the state as well as on the part of the environment” (Gudkov, Dubin, & Zorkaja, 2008, p. 7–8). The post-Soviet person lives, in fact, in a more or less democratic society but keeps the characteristics of the homo sovieticus. As a result, they take no responsibility and tend to “shift the responsibility for one’s own situation to another: the government, the deputies, the civil servants, the West, the immigrants” (Gudkov, Dubin, & Zorkaja, 2008, p. 8).

In the interviews, the “homo sovieticus” was referred to as “widely spread among the participants” of their seminars (Interview\_R13, para. 37). The argument used by the adult educators was that the experience of adapting to a repressive state penetrates deeply into people’s minds and creates strong habits. A critical assessment of the origins of the homo sovieticus and the experiences of life under the Soviet dictatorship that caused this type of “homo sovieticus” personality, and recognition of the influences the prior experience on the current attitudes and patterns of behavior, can help respondents overcome their deeply rooted meaning perspectives on the epistemological and ontological levels.

The quotation from the Ukrainian adult educator answers the question of the necessity of perspective transformation, in sum, to be capable of living in a democratic society and to participate in it. Next question is how to make perspective transformation possible, if at all. To begin, I will point out some difficulties and barriers that come with regard to critical reflection of one’s own assumptions and thus to perspective transformation. Mezirow (2009) emphasizes the capacity of reasoning and providing critical inquiry as integral to perspective transformation: “Reasoning is understood as the process of advancing and assessing a belief. Transformative learning is an adult dimension of reason assessment involving the validation and reformulation of meaning structures” (p. 93). To be able to reflect on one’s prior experience requires a certain amount of cognitive capacity which cannot be taken for granted. In discussing Mezirow’s theory, Merriam (2004) asks rhetorically:

[I]s a rather high level of cognitive functioning a prerequisite for transformational learning? [...] Furthermore, to be able to engage in reflective discourse with others assumes the ability to examine alternative perspectives, withhold premature

judgment, and basically to think dialectically, a characteristic of mature cognitive development. (p. 61)

Taylor (2007), summarizing the main findings from the empirical research on transformative learning, also comes to the conclusion that this

research might have been too generous in assuming the presence of critical reflection (premise reflection) among participants while making meaning of a transformative learning experience. Possibly researchers relied too strongly on the ability of participants to articulate critical reflective thought and also recall critical thought retrospectively. (p. 186).

He adds that learners “possibly must mature and reach a level of cognitive development before they can engage in premise reflection” (ibid.). This requirement is valid for learners in each society, but in the post-totalitarian societies, where the dialogue and rational discourse have been systematically suppressed, practicing critical reflection may pose a special challenge for perspective transformation.

I argue therefore that the capacity of critical inquiry can be seriously damaged through the experiences of living in a totalitarian system because of the permanent indoctrination process that occurs in such a system. Siegel is one of the most zealous defenders of the idea that indoctrination adds significant harm to humans precisely because it undermines his or her rational capacities. As he explains:

If I have been indoctrinated, [...] I have been significantly harmed. My autonomy has been dramatically compromised, for I do not have the ability to settle impartially questions of concern to me on the basis of a reasoned consideration of the matter at hand. I am in an important sense the prisoner of my convictions, for I cannot decide whether my convictions ought to be what they are, and I am unable to alter them for good reasons, even if there are good reasons for altering them. Indeed, lacking the disposition to seek reasons, I am doomed to an unawareness of the desirability of aligning my beliefs and actions with the weight of relevant evidence . . . I have been shackled, and denied the right to determine, insofar as I am able, my own future . . . (Siegel, 1988, p. 88)

According to Siegel, restricting rationality and autonomy is shown through the inability to ask critical and important questions that are relevant to one’s own interests and to act considering one’s own interests and those of others. Consequently, these incapacities would diminish the possibility of perspective transformation. Siegel even speaks of a “cognitive straitjacket” that limits one’s own thinking: “I have also been sedated—drugged—so that I don’t even realize my restricted plight” (ibid.).

In sum, indoctrination, as a part of totalitarian systems, impedes cognitive maturation and development of the individual and impairs the processes of autonomous opinion formation. It creates permanent dependence and is a huge hindrance

for the possibility of perspective transformation, even if the necessary disorienting dilemma takes place. Siegel also points out that indoctrination adds epistemic harm because the indoctrinated human being does not understand the need for a careful examination of evidence and thus is not armed against the flaws in his judgments. Siegel's conception shows that a person with stunted or undeveloped rationality is particularly ill-equipped to engage in the processes Mezirow deemed necessary for perspective transformation; her incompetence is determined by her inability to rationally judge the usefulness and defectiveness of her knowledge, information, and experience.

I argue that indoctrinated people are partly incapable of perspective transformation. Based on Siegel's concept, indoctrination can be defined as follows: X was indoctrinated if he or she thinks that P is true without needing any evidence or that he or she considers robust evidence against P to be irrelevant (despite disorienting dilemmas). However, if a person represents beliefs without justification but at the same time is willing to critically examine evidence against conviction (and considers a possibility that he or she needs to change their beliefs as a result of the critical examination), then he or she is not indoctrinated. The "outcome" of indoctrination is therefore a close-minded person which Taylor (2017) characterizes "as one who: (1) lacks the broad motivation to pursue knowledge and understanding, and (2) lacks the specific motivation to give due regard to available evidence and argument when forming new beliefs and understandings and when maintaining or revising already established beliefs and understandings" (p. 47).

In a post-totalitarian society, I also refer to obstacles toward perspective transformation as epistemic injustice. To do this, I first turn to the approach of Miranda Fricker in order to clarify forms of distorted perception and opinion formation. Fricker (2007) distinguishes between two forms of epistemic injustice: the "testimonial injustice," in which a person in his capacity as a knowledge producer is treated unfairly, and the "hermeneutical injustice," in which a person has been discriminated against in his capacity as a subject of social understanding. The first form of epistemic injustice, the testimonial injustice, appears when certain prejudices induce the listener to doubt the credibility of the speaker. Fricker's example of this form is how police a priori distrust a Black person because of his skin. Testimonial injustice is the case of irrational, biased credibility denial. A person's arguments are judged not on the basis of the truth-based claim but on the speaker's affiliation to a particular group.

Hermeneutical injustice occurs when, due to a gap in collective interpretive resources, someone is disadvantaged because his or her experience or suffering cannot be put into words and thus remains unrecognized. Fricker (2007) gives the following example for this second form: a person experiences sexual harassment in a culture that lacks the critical concept for it (p. 1). Fricker's concept of hermeneutical injustice shows that in social discourse, an epistemic injustice can arise because individuals lack a concept for describing their experience or because existing ideas are inadequate to facilitate understanding. Hermeneutical injustice is inevitably



difficult to detect. Fricker's approach testifies that the question of individual responsibility regarding perspective transformation cannot be rendered in terms of the absolute. The questions of justice and the question of how to attain knowledge in order to expand one's perspective depend on social context and structures. Totalitarian societies strive to produce a sort of homogeneity (in the case of Soviet Union, the "socialistic personality"). There is simply a lack of alternative concepts that can foster perspective transformation. The Finnish philosopher Puolimatka (2004) emphasizes the need of structural plurality and differentiation of society as means against indoctrination in a society: "The existence of a plurality of voices diminishes the chances for the development of one totalitarian voice that overpowers all others" (p. 32–34).

Thus, social heterogeneity and plurality are important conditions for perspective transformation. A society that has been homogenized and experienced epistemic injustice often lacks the conceptual foundation needed for critical inquiry of their assumptions, norms, and behaviors. Mezirow (2009) seemed to anticipate this kind of objection and put the concept of imagination into equation:

Imagination of how things could be otherwise is central to the initiation of the transformative process. As the process of transformation is often a difficult, highly emotional passage, a great deal of additional insight into the role of imagination is needed and overdue. As many transformative experiences occur outside of awareness, I have suggested that, in these situations, intuition substitutes for critical self-reflection. This is another judgement that needs further conceptual development. (p. 95)

Here, the problem is that indoctrination might also undermine the capacity of imagination. Tan (2004) defines indoctrination precisely as the paralysis of one's own intellectual imagination, resulting from the inability to justify one's own beliefs rationally and to perceive alternatives (p. 264).

But the plurality of perspectives alone is also a not sufficient precondition of perspective transformation. From my interviews, I learned that after the collapse of the socialist camp, a "flood of opinions and points of view" led to excessive demands and to the distress of the citizens. This process did not result in perspective transformation but apathy, frustration, and annoyance.

People were almost frustrated by the flood of opinions. They were not prepared to make a choice [ . . . ]. In the past, the media was quiet, they unanimously praised the party. [ . . . ] We were not used to the fact that the plurality of opinions was a normal thing, that it is natural to have different attitudes [ . ]. Through the collapse [of the Socialist block-TK], we have opened ourselves to the world; the world came to us, but we were not prepared for it. (Interview\_P01, Abs. 22)

One of the important preconditions for perspective transformation in post-totalitarian societies is the fostering of communicative competence through promoting discussion, arguing, listening to other positions, and justifying one's own views.

## Creating Preconditions and Fostering Transformative Learning

As Feinstein (2004) notes, critical reflection and reflective discourse “are two processes that are used to facilitate transformative learning. Without these processes, it is unlikely that an act of learning will be truly transformative” (p. 109). These capacities cannot be presupposed in the societies with a long and still vivid tradition of totalitarianism; they are often damaged through pervasive indoctrination and propaganda.

Mezirow (2000) himself admitted that there are several preconditions for the possibility of transformative learning such as “maturity, education, safety, health, economic security” (p. 15). But he sees no acceptable alternative to critical discourse. So, Mezirow (2003) speaks about the crucial role of adult education to create or to facilitate the conditions “for and the skills of effective adult reasoning and the disposition for transformative learning—including critical reflection and dialectical discourse” (p. 62). Likewise, in Freire’s (1970) emancipatory pedagogy, liberation (or even previously conscientização) seldom occurs without a so-called revolutionary leader. Therefore, it is the task of adult educators (and furthermore adult education institutions) to create preconditions to make perspective transformation possible after the long period of unfree and inserted instruction.

In the post-totalitarian state, it is necessary to create *specific* conditions to facilitate perspective transformation. These conditions include a reevaluation of power structures (including self-concepts), acknowledgment of societal heterogeneity, and development of (new) communication strategies. These can be understood as preconditions of perspective transformation. Without these prerequisites, disorienting dilemmas, which Mezirow identifies as the first phase of transformative learning, will not be perceived as a dilemma that a person can act on but as a stroke of fate, a structural trait of the society, or predestination that one should learn to accept.

Mezirow (1991) differentiated three types of reflection on personal experience (content, process, and premise reflection), but only one of these, premise reflection, can lead to transformative learning. To foster perspective transformation, there is a need to focus on premise reflection: in our case on reflection that involves examining long-held, socially constructed assumptions, beliefs, and values about the totalitarian experience including the origins and implications of the “homo sovieticus.” Premise reflection, or critical reflection on assumptions, can be about assumptions regarding the self (narrative), the cultural context in which we live (systemic), our ethical decision-making (moral–ethical), or feelings and dispositions (Mezirow, 1998). The transformation process, according to Mezirow (1991), “*always* [italics added] involves critical reflection upon the distorted premises sustaining our structure of expectation” (p. 167).

According to my interviews with adult educators in Eastern Europe, the special challenges for perspective transformation can be described through three dimensions: determination/redefinition of the relationship between the state and the individual, acknowledging pluralism and plurality of values, and the challenge of

promoting a culture of dialogue. Addressing these issues is important for both the perception of the disorienting dilemma and for becoming aware of assumptions that have been accepted unquestioningly so far.

*New self-concept: Relations between the person and the state.* An important dimension of perspective transformation in the context of dealing with past experiences refers to redefining the relationship between the state and the individual. An Ukrainian adult educator strongly emphasized the impact of humiliation and devaluation of human beings by the totalitarian state:

The most important for us is to return to the people the feeling of their own dignity, which the totalitarian state has taken away from them. The dignity of man is like a red thread that runs through all our events. To rethink the past means also to respect themselves and others. (Interview\_U13, para 33)

The respondents argue that for some citizens, the state still represents a strong power and is superior compared to a single individual. The primacy of the state in comparison to the individual is part of the legacy of a totalitarian past.

The very first thing we did was we wrote a book about the past, in which the human being is put in the first place. It is the most important task: to place the human person into the center, a person with his or her rights at the first place, followed by the society, and then the state. (Interview\_U16, para 23)

Many of the respondents understand reevaluation of their prior experience in “dealing with the past” as empowerment, the ability to oppose and the capacity for civil disobedience against the power of the state. This could be considered the first step of overcoming the damage of indoctrination (according to Siegel: harm to autonomy) and the testimonial injustice (while gaining the credibility as a speaker).

*Acknowledging pluralism: Confronting the homogenous “homo sovieticus”.* The difficulties of democratization and the development of civil society were and still are partly due to the political and social attitudes of the population, which were caused by the Soviet system’s strict regulation and indoctrination of the public and private sphere. The adult educators observe a continuation of the “homo sovieticus.” The homo sovieticus and its ongoing influence is made responsible for deficiencies in the development of a democratic society. The interviewees state a need for accepting the notion that there is plurality of reasonable and morally acceptable concepts of life. They aspire to further a new awareness of diversity, truth, and lies. They develop a critical attitude toward knowledge transmitted by the media, and they search for new concepts and terms in order to be able to explain their perspectives. This could be perceived as a way of overcoming “hermeneutical injustice” and the inability to describe one’s own experience and point of view due to the lack of concepts.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, with its powerful ideological propaganda, opened the opportunity to free oneself from Soviet ways of thinking and Soviet ways of life and to discuss “new” worldviews and corresponding ways of behavior. Another adult educator speaks of the need for radical change in the “models of living together”: “You have to bring our thinking into completely different tracks. On the tracks, [ . . . ] where one learns to think about the position of the others, where one grants the right of the other side to their own interpretation” (Interview\_U03, para. 68).

Living in a pluralistic society implies admitting and tolerating different opinions, beliefs, and conceptions. The life in a pluralist society is opposed to the dogmatic unambiguousness that was propagated by earlier formal educational approaches (see Interview\_U25, para 9). In his extensive investigation of the Russian “Red Terror,” Baberowski pointed out that Soviet culture had been striving to be a “culture of unambiguity.” According to Baberowski, the Soviet Union was to be transformed into a “culturally homogeneous zone” which allowed for no plurality and no differences. In almost all spheres of life, an intensive and extensive attempt was made to spread a unified image of the so-called Soviet personality as formative and obligatory for the entire population. Any difference and ambivalence in the individual were repressed and fought against as a deviation from the norm or even as “sabotage” (Baberowski, 2003, p. 12–14).

*Communication strategies: Promoting the culture of dialogue.* Mezirow (1994) underlines the necessity of rational discourse in order to generate the possibility of perspective transformation as such. The individuals in different societies try to provide validity or justification for their beliefs, and there are three ways to do it, but only the third one enables a transformative/emancipatory learning:

One is to turn to authority figures, like the priest, wise man, leader, teacher, or expert. A second way is to turn to force—through politics, the courts, or brute force. The only other option is to validate the problematic belief through rational discourse. (p. 225)

Thus, after accepting plurality, the next step is promoting deliberative skills in how to deal with differences, ambiguity, and ambivalence within a rational discourse. It is in this line of thought that several adult educators explicitly underline the goal of “promoting the culture of dialogue.”

Even people with the same value system do not hear each other. Because they simply cannot. Not because they are bad or uneducated, but simply because they aren’t able. There has never been such a practice. This is a serious legacy of the Soviet Union [ . . . ]: The inability to conduct dialogue even between like-minded people, the inability to engage in dialogue as a community. (Interview\_R34, para. 19)

The interviewed adult educators deplore people's general inability to have controversial rational dialogue, an inability which is regarded as an inheritance of the Soviet system.

You have to bring our thinking on a completely different track, a track, where, among other things, the interests of the other person, the other side are taken into account, where the opinions of others are listened to, where one learns to truly think about the position of the other, where one grants to the other side the right to have his/her own interpretation. (Interview\_U03, para 68)

Let me draw an interim conclusion: Turning back to the dimensions of individual growth defined by Bagnall, there is a need for liberation from ignorance (through learning new concepts to understand the world and to describe it), from dependence (through reassessing of hierarchies, new relations between individual and the state), from constraints (through deliberating feelings of powerlessness and irresponsibility), and/or from inadequacy (through obtaining communicative skills and engaging in dialogue). Education is a process of liberation, through the pursuit of autonomy. Mezirow (2000) writes that "fostering greater autonomy in thinking is both a goal and a method for adult educators" and "achieving greater autonomy in thinking is a product of transformative learning" (p. 29). This liberation cannot be done externally but must be done individually.

The state and society also have the responsibility to create structures and institutions (including adult education institution) that enable and facilitate perspective transformation as fundamental to (deliberative) democracy. It is our job as adult educators to create preconditions for critical reasoning that have been seriously damaged by the totalitarian system because these preconditions provide the foundation for other personal transformations of an individual's frame of references.

## **Outlook**

This article began by pointing out that perspective transformation is not only an internal process but also has a public dimension and implies public responsibility for the assessment and adaptation of norms and collective assumptions of the respective society. Transformation on both levels (individual and social) is closely interconnected and benefits from each other. Each perspective alone is insufficient for understanding such complex human development, especially after a big social upheaval.

Perspective transformation in changing societies means developing one's own action strategies in light of the given social and political situation: by recognizing one's own situation with its demands in what is given and by perceiving ways (alternatives) of improving one's own world. Through the use of the critical capacity in our everyday life as a citizen in a democracy, we are able to be cocreators of democratic society and to liberate ourselves from inadequate or obsolete concepts. In this sense, education does not mean the mediation of knowledge, but the

development of autonomy and self-directedness—the postulate that has its roots in the emancipatory tradition of adult education in general and more specifically in perspective transformation.

To extend the understanding of perspective transformation in post-totalitarian societies, the following areas of investigation should be addressed:

- How can readiness and motivation for critical inquiry and therefore for potential perspective transformation be supported over a long period of social transition?
- How do issues of power and control interact with fostering critical reasoning and perspective transformation?
- Can a transformation be considered as irreversible? Are there factors that drive a situation back to a previous form (this question is of special interest in the context of rising of autocracy in Russia)?

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### **ORCID iD**

Tetyana Kloubert  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5744-5295>

### **Notes**

1. I use in the article the term “perspective transformation” rather than “transformative learning” because this article is focused on Mezirow’s specific theory rather than the broader range of theories aggregated under the term “transformative learning” (see Hoggan, 2016).
2. The herewith mentioned research referred to three countries: Poland, Russia, and Ukraine. This article concentrates on Russia and Ukraine while approaching the particular historical experience of living under the Soviet system.
3. On the distinction between perspective transformation and other types of transformation, see Hoggan (2016).
4. The participants in this research seldom refer to themselves as “adult educators,” but they perform the work of adult educators regardless of how they may denote it. They have worked at least 4 years in the domain of civic or historical education and can share a lot of

experiences from their everyday practice. The interviewees represent different types of educational institutions in different regions within the countries.

5. The empirical basis of this metaphor of “homo sovieticus” is an extensive representative opinion survey carried out by the well-established “All-Union Center for the Survey of Public Opinion” carried out in Russia using standardized questionnaires since 1989 (Levada, 1993). Overall, 2,700 people in many regions of the (former) Soviet Union responded to more than 100 questions that included everyday attitudes toward work and family life, religion and tradition, love and violence, as well as political views, opinions, and expectations.

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## Author Biography

**Tetyana Kloubert** is an acting professor and deputy chair for adult education at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Eichstätt, Germany, and a faculty member at the University of Augsburg, Germany. E-mail: tetyana.kloubert@ku.de