Lost in travel or a different conception? (Mis-)appropriation of transformative learning theory in the Republic of Korea

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Abstract Theoretical thought on adult and/or lifelong learning in the Republic of Korea has been largely indebted to Western theoretical frameworks in the past few decades. Academic journal articles and doctoral dissertations dealing with the topic of learning in adulthood flooded with Western, typically North American, theories and concepts. Is it indeed unproblematic to use Western frameworks in understanding domestic phenomena of learning in adulthood? To tackle this question, we looked into 15 academic journal articles in the Republic of Korea, which are explicitly taking Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory as a theoretical framework. We chose Mezirow's theory because its undoubted status as a solid theory has recently faced serious challenge in Western scholarly communities. In the analysis of the chosen journal articles, we focus on how those articles used Mezirow's theory in terms of its core elements. We concluded that Mezirow's theory has been largely misappropriated. We used Edward Said's concept of "traveling theory" to discuss possible reasons for this (mis-)appropriation. We suggested that sociocultural and historical influence should be taken into consideration in theory-use as well as theory-making.

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Introduction

A social scientist at work is not suddenly confronted with the need to choose one's values. He is already working on the basis of certain values. The values that the disciplines now embody have been selected from the values originating from the Western society: *elsewhere social science is an import*. Of course some do talk as if the values they have selected 'transcend' Western or any other society; others speak of their standards as if they were 'immanent' within some existing society, as a sort of unrealized potential. Yet, surely, it is now widely agreed that the values inherent in the traditions of social science are neither transcendent nor immanent [*italics added*] (Mills 1959, p. 178).

It is an undeniable fact that the Republic of Korea has imported modern scientific disciplines, including social science of which education research is a part, from the West for the last several decades. Both authors were exposed to Western concepts and theories from the first day of our college years. Perhaps we have thought that the concepts and theories we learned contain transcendental values that all human kinds share one another. However, Mills reminded us that what we immersed unconsciously through learning those theories and concepts is not common human value. It is "an import" from the West. Yet, Korean education researchers inevitably depend on the Western value. Therefore, we would like to ask ourselves.

Do we, Korean education researchers, have non-Western or East Asian or Korean values embodied in our research? Do we really conduct research with such value that distinguishes us from the Western social scientists?

Theoretical thinking about learning in adulthood in the Republic of Korea is overwhelmingly dependent upon Western theoretical frameworks. Academic journal articles and doctoral dissertations on adult learning in the past few decades flooded with Western, typically North American, theories. Both established scholars and novice graduate students cannot but use Western theories or concepts—*andragogy*, *experiential learning*, *community of practice*, or *transformative learning*, just to name a few—to describe or explain the domestic phenomena of learning. If there exists scientific research on adult learning in the Republic of Korea, it is surely an import from the West. Korean researchers seem to have theories only moved from the West to the East.

Said (1983) once named this movement of theory from one time and place to another as a “traveling theory,” raising interesting questions:

whether by virtue of having moved from one place and time to another an idea or a theory gains or loses in strength, and whether a theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation. (p. 226)

Said took an example of Georg Lukacs’ 1923 book, *History and Consciousness*, that firstly conceived in proletariat revolutionary Hungary. Lukacs put forward the proletariat’s class consciousness, which is a will to resist and change capitalism. In three decades, Lukacs’ theory moved to France by his student Lucien Goldmann, who used it in his 1955 work of *Le Dieu caché*. Goldmann put Lukacs’ theory of class consciousness to an interpretation of the seventeenth century French high intellectuals’ collective consciousness and their writings. This, according to Said, “removes from [Lukacs’] theory its insurrectionary role” (p. 235). Even though Goldmann seems to have misread or misunderstood Lukacs by disregarding the core of Lukacs’ theory, Said argues that Goldmann’s interpretation is not wrong, and that situational differences between Lukacs and Goldmann are sufficient enough for this interpretation to happen. Said defends it as a creative misreading.

[T]he only possible alternative to slavish copying is creative misreading and that no intermediate possibility exists.....it seems to me perfectly possible to judge misreadings (as they occur) as part of a historical transfer of ideas and theories from one setting to another. Lukacs wrote *for* as well as *in* a situation that produced ideas about consciousness and theory

that are very different from the ideas produced by Goldmann in his situation. [*Italics in original*] (p. 236)

So if we look into a traveling theory used in different time and place from its birthplace, we should be able to understand more about the “theory itself—its limits, its possibilities, its inherent problems” (Said 1983, p. 230).

Based on insights from Said (1983) and Mills (1959), we aim to investigate how Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (Mezirow 1978b, 1991, 2009), as an import and traveling theory, has been appropriated in the Republic of Korea. Transformative learning theory is one of the most influential theories in explaining adult learning in North America. It has been also used to study significant changes in adulthood in the Republic of Korea since late 1990s. We selected and analyzed empirical research articles from the Republic of Korea, only published in nationally acclaimed journals with two questions: (1) How did the articles deal with transformative learning in terms of its core concepts? (2) How did the articles prove and report the outcome of transformative learning? In the following part, we briefly review Mezirow’s theory and its recent development. Then, we introduce the method we used in the analysis. After presenting the result of the analysis in terms of the core concepts of Mezirow’s theory, we opted the perspective of Said’s traveling theory, and discussed how Korean scholars appropriated Mezirow’s theory.

Transformative learning theory

Among diverse aspects of changes related to learning activity in our lives, Mezirow’s transformative learning theory especially heeds to and holds more importance on perspective transformation. It explains how one could transform one’s habitual assumptions—which frame our perceiving, thinking, feeling, and acting—to new meaning schemes or meaning perspectives in adulthood. Learning through perspective transformation, according to Mezirow, is the most significant aspect that may occur in adult learning. Perspective transformation leads to more fully developed meaning perspectives, resulting in changes within the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions in which one’s past experience assimilates into new experience. Based on Habermas’ ideal learning conditions, Mezirow presents two major elements, critical reflection and dialectical discourse, which play a crucial role in meaning-making and agreement-seeking to transform meaning schemes and perspectives.

Since its first conception in 1970s through the study of college re-entering women’s experience in US, Mezirow’s transformative learning theory has been elaborated and

expanded through critiques/debates on its core concepts (for brief summary and topics, see Cranton 2006, pp. 51–62; Kitchenham, 2008) and a large number of empirical studies (for essential selections, see Mezirow and Associates 1990, 2000, 2009). The term, transformative learning, has been a kind of linchpin that enables North American adult education scholarship to explore diverse perspectives including Jungian psychology, critical theory, complexity theory, existentialism, gender, positionality, culture and spirituality, and the like (see part two and three in Taylor and Cranton 2012). It became a kind of traveling theory as it came to use in different places—disciplines and fields other than adult education, such as agriculture, archeology, religious studies, health care, critical media literacy, and spirituality (Taylor and Snyder 2012). However, the theory's geographical travel seems to be limited. A relatively small amount of research have been done in Europe where strong academic traditions on adult and lifelong education exist (Kokkos 2012; Taylor and Cranton 2013).

Even though Mezirow's theory seems firmly established in the field for the last few decades, more serious critiques have emerged recently. Interestingly, these critiques are from scholars from outside of North America. Australian researcher Newman (2012) questions whether transformative learning theory is indeed a different kind of learning. He contends that transformative learning can be adequately comprehended as *good learning* with already-existing concepts such as knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Moreover, Newman points out that validation of the learner's perspective transformation in real life is extremely hard as most of the empirical research solely depend on the learner's subjective retrospective interviews. Newman goes on to say that transformative learning only exists in theory, not in reality. Furthermore, Australian researchers Howie and Bagnall (2013) even deny its status as a theory. They argue that it is a mere conceptual metaphor. At the heart of this recent critique, there is a suspicion that most of the empirical studies on transformative learning use the term, transformation, without much clarification. Any meaningful change confessed by the learner could be treated as transformative. Danish researcher Illeris (2014a, b) shares a similar concern that transformative learning in North America has been losing its status as an academic concept. He diagnoses, "the situation seems to be that everybody in the field more or less agrees that Mezirow's original definition of the term as relating to meaning perspectives, frames of reference and habits of mind is insufficient" (2014a, p. 2). Unlike Newman, or Howie and Bagnall, Illeris proposes a new definition of transformative learning—"all learning which implies changes in the identity of the learner" (2014b, p. 40)—as a solution.

Among other responses from North America to recent critique and concern (Cranton and Kasl 2012; Dirkx 2012),

Hoggan (2016) proposes that transformative learning should be treated as a meta-theory of which Mezirow's *perspective transformation* is a subset. In order to avoid unclarity, he suggests stricter typology—depth, breadth, and relative stability—should be considered to judge outcomes of transformative learning—worldview, epistemology, ontology, and behavior. It is not our purpose here to evaluate whether Hoggan's proposal can successfully save Mezirow's original idea about transformative learning, but it is worth emphasizing his main argument. That is, only after confirming the outcome is truly transformative is the learning process which caused such outcome meaningful. Hoggan's strong emphasis on transformative outcome, along with Newman and other critiques and concerns, made us think that Mezirow's theory revealed its inherent problems as it traveled to other time and place—especially, when it is used as a theoretical frame to interpret qualitative data. At the same time, while traveling, it also shows different possibilities of conception regardless of maintaining its status as a solid theory. In the following analysis, we tried to uncover problems and possibilities in Korean empirical studies that explicitly used Mezirow's theory.

Method

To investigate how Mezirow's transformative learning theory is appropriated in the Republic of Korea, we searched on the Korean citation index, administered by Korea Research Foundation, with the keyword 'transformative learning.' We located 29 journal articles published until 2015, out of which 9 adopted theoretical and conceptual approach, 3 adopted quantitative or mixed research design with a survey, 15 adopted qualitative research design, 1 adopted document analysis, and another developed an educational program with the theory. All 29 studies explicitly used Mezirow's transformative learning theory as a key framework. All had devoted a section to review the theory itself along with related empirical studies. In this study, we only focused on the journal articles taking a qualitative design. Qualitative studies were expected to well depict the process and aspects of transformative learning. The other studies only intended to understand the transformative learning theory per se rather than to demonstrate transformative learning process with empirical evidence. 15 Qualitative studies somehow followed what Taylor and Cranton (2013, p. 42) described as typical methodology of transformative learning research; "the researcher interviews a small number of individuals in a specific context or related to a specific issue (retrospectively), does a thematic analysis of the interview data, and reports on four or five themes that appear in the data." The

Table 1 A summary of the empirical studies

Nos.	Empirical studies	Purpose	Methods
1	Lee (1999)	Tried to find out the meaning and possibility of transformative learning with 20 elders participating in elder's learning center	Participant observation, interview
2	Park (2003)	Examined the nature of changes in meaning structures among 25 international graduate students from East Asia attending at Christian higher learning institutions in the US	Interview (once for each for 50–90 min)
3	Lee (2007)	Explored triggers for the cross-cultural adaptation and transformative learning of two Korean-American immigrant families	Interview (once for each for 60–120 min)
4	Lee and Na (2009)	Explored the meaning of newly formed viewpoints of six married female immigrants who successfully settled down in Korea	Participant observation, interview (twice for each)
5	Jung (2009)	Attempted to analyze frame of reference of four early childhood teachers who participated in a multicultural teacher training program	Non-participant observation, interview, document analysis
6	Park and Jo (2009)	Explored the meaning and possibility of transformative learning with 42 pre-service early childhood teachers who had been engaged in vegetable gardening	Group interview (once for each for 40–60 min), document analysis
7	Park (2009)	Examined how the culture of higher education shaped the meaning-making process with 30 middle-aged women in a higher education	Interview (once for each for 60–90 min)
8	Park and Jo (2010)	Explored how five early childhood teachers understood learning experience and made up their own meanings with transformative learning theory	Non-participant observation, interview (five or six times for each), text analysis
9	Cho (2010)	Examined the (re)construction of learning experience and identity of 11 North Korean immigrants in the process of adaptation to the Republic of Korea	Interview (once for each for 120–180 min)
10	Kim et al. (2013)	Investigated adult learners' learning experiences in classrooms that were designed to facilitate transformative learning with four international doctoral students	Interview (twice for each), document analysis
11	Kim (2013)	Examined relation of transformative learning and moral development with eight current or former female politicians who experienced social activities	Interview (once for each for 120 min), document analysis
12	Park (2013)	Explored the possibility of transformative learning with 22 pre-service early childhood teachers taking a course in the university	Group discussion, document analysis
13	Kim and Na (2013)	Describe the turnover experience of eight executive secretaries and their transformative learning process	Interview (two or three times for each)
14	Jun (2014)	Explored the sociocultural transformative learning experience of 10 Social Network Service Users	Interview (once for each for 60–120 min), document analysis
15	Kim (2014)	Examined the process of cognitive transformation in the life of three feminist women who majored in women's studies by looking at critical life events	Interview (five times for each for 180–240 min)

basic information of 15 qualitative studies is summarized in Table 1. Every article was written in Korean except Park (2003), published in English.

We looked into the articles with four fundamental concepts from Mezirow's theory—disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, seeking agreement, and taking actions. In the original study of re-entering women (Mezirow 1978a), Mezirow delineated a sequence of learning activities with ten phases of perspective transformation. The ten phases are (1) a disorienting dilemma, (2) self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame, (3) a critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions, (4) recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change, (5) exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions, (6) planning of a course of action, (7) acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans, (8) provisional trying of new roles,

(9) building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships, and (10) a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.

Although the sequence of perspective transformation is not tied up to invariable developmental steps, transformative learning is a process “that begins with a disorienting dilemma and concludes with a changed self-concept (Mezirow 1991, p. 193).” Thus, disorienting dilemma, which is a starting point of transformation process, and taking action, which is an outcome of reintegration by new perspective, could be considered as core concepts in perspective transformation. Moreover, undoubtedly, critical reflection is an essential concept of transformative learning. Seeking agreement, in other words rational discourse and consensus building for a validity testing, is also a very important concept in the emancipatory paradigm where transformative learning theory is grounded (Mezirow

Table 2 Tri-level category of four core concepts

Symbols	Disorienting dilemmas	Critical reflection	Seeking agreement	Taking action
O	Involving problem-posing	Involving premise reflection	Involving rational discourse and consensus building	Involving changed actions integrated with new perspective
Δ	Identifying with a (negative) event	Involving content or process reflection	Involving only received agreement or communication	Involving a changed action in a specific context
X	No convincing evidences	No convincing evidences	No convincing evidences	No convincing evidences

1991, 1996). Both critical reflection and seeking agreement become crucial in making new meaning.

In terms of these four fundamental concepts, we classified each article into a tri-level (O– Δ –X) category. We put mark, category ‘O,’ to a research that fulfills Mezirow’s theory successfully. Category ‘ Δ ’ means similarly but not exactly follow the Mezirow’s theory. Category ‘X’ was given to articles that no such concept was convincingly supported by evidences. The tri-level category of each concept is explained in detail in Table 2. Cho (2010) and Kim and Na (2013) have two different marks at the same time as these studies have multiple participants that were interpreted differently. This categorization allowed us to effectively synthesize the given studies’ appropriation of the theory in spite of simplifying and de-contextualizing complex research findings.

Analysis result

We found all the given studies claimed outcomes of either changes in the participant’s perspectives or at least indications of a sufficient likelihood of new perspective formation—for example, more active, positive, accepting, and reflective attitude, or increased stability, happiness, and satisfaction in life, or an intimate, collaborative, and trusting relationship. According to Mezirow, these are descriptions of more fully developed frame of reference that is more inclusive, differentiating, permeable, critically reflective, and integrative of experience (Mezirow 1991, 1996). Although the specific contents that had changed vary across the studies, what the studies presented are generally consistent with Mezirow’s description of the outcome of transformative learning. We did not evaluate the studies’ claim in terms of Hoggan’s (2016) strict call for transformative learning outcomes, since we were unable to meet the participants of each of the studies. Yet, we cannot but acknowledge that these studies have enough reason to put forward transformative learning as its framework.

We assigned tri-level indicator in terms of four key components of transformative learning—disorienting

dilemmas, critical reflection, seeking agreement, and taking actions (see Table 3). Eight out of 15 studies have at least one lowest-level indicator. That is, there are studies which lack at least one component of Mezirow’s theoretical core concept even though they used it as a theoretical frame. Only four studies had more than two clear highest-level indicators—two of them, though, simultaneously had a lowest-level indicator. We could not locate any article marked with the highest-level indicator in all of the four key components. In the following, we will present how the given studies used Mezirow’s theory in terms of its four core concepts. In each section, we will begin with introducing Mezirow’s words on the meaning of the four core concepts, and then present our analysis on the given studies.

Disorienting dilemmas

Mezirow (1991, p. 168) argues that perspective transformations “occur either through an accretion of transformed meaning schemes resulting from a series of dilemmas or in response to an externally imposed epochal dilemma.” In dilemmas, one encounters, either unexpectedly or accumulatively, disorientation from oneself and this triggers transformative learning. It is similar to what Freire (1970) once called problem-posing, which means problematizing our taken-for-granted social roles/expectations and the habitual ways we act and feel. A disorienting dilemma, however, does not simply refer to a specific event that we face up in our lives. Rather, it is an act of perceiving the anomalies of sociocultural assumptions and touching the personal assumptions that sustain the self while we experience the event. By questioning our habitual assumptions or frames of reference, “which selectively shapes and delimits perception, cognition, and feelings” (Mezirow 1996, p. 163), a wave of confusion emerges. This is somehow very painful because it “often call into question deeply held personal values and threaten our very sense of self” (Mezirow 1991, p. 168).

Most of the given studies, 12 out of 15, presented disorienting dilemmas with description of specific events or

Table 3 Result of analysis

Nos.	Qualitative empirical studies	Disorienting dilemmas	Critical reflection	Seeking agreement	Taking action
1	Lee (1999)	Δ	X	Δ	Δ
2	Park (2003)	Δ	Δ	Δ	X
3	Lee (2007)	Δ	Δ	X	Δ
4	Lee and Na (2009)	Δ	Δ	Δ	Δ
5	Jung (2009)	O	O	X	Δ
6	Park and Jo (2009)	X	Δ	X	Δ
7	Park (2009)	X	X	X	Δ
8	Park and Jo (2010)	O	O	Δ	Δ
9	Cho (2010)	O/ Δ	O/ Δ	X	O/ Δ
10	Kim et al. (2013)	Δ	Δ	Δ	Δ
11	Kim (2013)	O	Δ	O	O
12	Park (2013)	Δ	Δ	O	Δ
13	Kim and Na (2013)	Δ	Δ /X	O/X	Δ
14	Jun (2014)	X	Δ	Δ	Δ
15	Kim (2014)	O	O	Δ	O

situations, which the research participant experienced difficulties in their lives. However, the descriptions of seven studies did not reach the point where the participant perceived anomalies of assumptions and touched those assumptions. They simply described a situation and declared the initiation of transformative learning without presenting participant's troubled assumptions. In the study of marriage-immigrants, Lee and Na (2009) marshaled the participant's difficult life events with their own voices. For example,

Life in Korea is much different from that in China. Farming skills and life style are different. And, as I don't know anyone, I cannot communicate with anyone. Even I couldn't understand what my mother-in-law talked to me, not a single word. It's really hard. (p. 14)

After presenting various hardships, Lee and Na defined them as cultural shock that could be interpreted as disorienting dilemmas. Disorientation was a core mechanism evoking critical reflection. Most of the given studies tended to identify existential problems and challenges as disorienting dilemmas from the participants' circumstances—such as cultural adjustment and social discrimination, language constraints, changes in environment, and so on. They did not capture the participants' assumptions. Difficult and embarrassing life events may work as a catalyst for a transformation. However, those events themselves are not a synonym of disorienting dilemmas. Among the given studies, five studies (Jung 2009; Park and Jo 2010; Cho 2010; Kim 2013, 2014) described the presence of

participants' existential internal confusion convincingly. For example, Jung's (2009) description showed an early childhood teacher training the participant's disorienting dilemma.

In the last training, I really thought again about various cultural standards after listening to a story that we recognize president-elect Obama as a Black man while he is considered as a White man in South America. And, we also read <Sarah get on the bus> and the reading is connected to White-centric world history rather than Blacks or other races. So, I ask myself. Do I make the student have a cultural bias by considering the subject of multiculturalism as knowledge that always has a sole answer? (p. 244)

Three studies (Park and Jo 2009; Park 2009; Jun 2014) did not present the disorienting dilemma explicitly. These studies connected the initiation of perspective transformation with positive experiences such as encountering similar-minded group (Jun 2014), nature (Park and Jo 2009), or positive emotions (Park 2009). They did not consider these positive life experiences as a source of disorienting dilemmas. Perspective transformation does not necessarily require disorienting dilemmas. For example, Park (2009) found that 30 middle-aged women participants of his study did not experience dilemma from sudden event or shock. Park argued, "in terms of ten stages of Mezirow's perspective transformation, the middle-aged learners did not report the first stage at all" (p. 46).

Critical reflection

Reflection is a process of critical assessment to interpret experiences and make meanings, which is categorized into content reflection, process reflection, and premise reflection (Mezirow 1991). Premise reflection is distinguished from the other two kinds of reflection, as it involves “our becoming aware of why we perceive, think, feel, or act as we do and of the reasons for and consequences of our possible habits of hasty judgment, conceptual inadequacy” (p. 108). In other words, premise reflection is an activity that searches for an alternative meaning perspective by (re) assessing the reason for an existing psycho-cultural way that serves as a foundation of one’s life. It can be replaced with the equivalent terms, critical reflection, or theoretical reflectivity (Brookfield 1986, 1987; Broughton 1977; Mezirow 1991). Critical reflection is the core process of transformative learning. It evaluates meaning perspectives or frames of reference retroactively and leads to more fully developed meaning perspectives that are more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, critically reflective, and integrative of experience.

Among the 15 studies we analyzed, quite a few failed to present critical reflection. Two studies (Lee 1999; Park 2009) even claimed that perspectives have been successfully transformed without describing reflective process. Others depended on related studies to justify the presence of critical reflection. For example, Lee (2007) postulated any changes experienced in a foreign country involve transformative aspects depending on Taylor’s (1994) study —“intercultural adaptation is transformative learning process” (Lee 2007, p. 4). From the viewpoint that subjective factors such as intuition, emotion, and relationship play an important role in transformative learning (Taylor 1997), Park (2003, p. 125) simply declared that strong emotional distress prompted critical reflection.

When Soo-Young had unpleasant experience with her American [missionary] roommate, she began to think and question on her assumption on American missionary. She reported, “She said with angry tone, when are you going to bed? It hurt [sic] me. So I was thinking wow! A missionary and she is ten years older than me. Why?”

Park (2003) only described a situation in which the participant’s feeling was hurt by a 10-year-senior roommate’s blunt words. It is an overreach to regard the last why-question as an assessment of an assumption or a belief system.

About half of the studies considered process reflection or content reflection to have caused perspective transformation. For example, Lee (1999) reported, in her case study of an elderly learning center, “By participating in a

conversation with peers...The peers played a role of a ‘critical mirror’ that reflects one another. Old people reflect on each other’s wrong behavior and words in their own behavior. This enables them to realize their own faults and be cautious with their behavior” (p. 188). This is a kind of process or content reflection on how to adjust to specific situations. There is no sign of looking at one’s own premise.

Since a meaning scheme is a part of a meaning perspective, a strict distinction between them might be impossible. Nevertheless, the two concepts were often used without scrutiny in describing and demonstrating transformative learning. In the study of four graduate students’ transformative learning through the pre-designed classroom program, Kim et al. (2013) cited Soyeon and concluded:

“A good outcome of relationship was getting a favorable feedback by satisfying the others’ demands. So I often felt burdened. Sometimes I thought the owner of my life was another person, not me. But perspective transformation from an employee to a learner lead me to relieve my burden and see the other person as a learner. And I could endure and tolerate the others as well as myself.” Soyeon said she could transform a perspective of looking herself through learning, and there was also a change of perspective of seeing the others. (Kim et al. 2013, p. 45)

Because Soyeon’s social status changed from an employee to a learner, it affected her viewpoint toward relationship. Although the authors took the above excerpt as an example of perspective transformation, we could not find a description how Soyeon critically analyzed her assumptions that had made her live based on an employee perspective.

The descriptions of premise reflection have been observed in five studies (Jung 2009; Park and Jo 2009; Cho 2010; Kim 2013, 2014). For example, Park and Jo (2010) studied a female teacher named Hwang. When introduced to various viewpoints on early childhood education in a graduate class, Hwang “got stirred up” about the national curriculum which directed her orientation and belief in teaching and learning. Hwang “recognized the presence of the ‘framework’ – the canon of early childhood education that she has believed true” (p. 205).

Seeking agreement

As perspective transformation is an emancipatory process, rational discourse is as important as critical reflection (Mezirow 1991, 1996, 2009). Following Habermas, Mezirow emphasizes dialectical synthesis of the objective

paradigm and the interpretive paradigm in the domain of communicative learning (Mezirow 1996). This involves critical reflection based on intersubjective communicative competence. Rational discourse allows us to test the validity implicit in our statements or acts by communicating with one another; only then can we comprehend the concepts of meaning, understanding, and interpretation. Consensus building through rational discourse is an ongoing learning process. Consensual validation should be a provisional agreement because new evidence or new information could always emerge from anywhere. If transformative learning does not involve the process of seeking agreement by evaluating justifications and rational discourse, reflective action in a strict sense does not occur and learning cannot go beyond thoughtful action or introspection. Non-reflective action remains within preexisting schemes and perspectives, and has a great risk of self-deception (Mezirow 1991).

The 15 studies showed two kinds of mutual agreement—*seeking agreement* and *received agreement*. Only a few studies showed seeking agreement through rational discourse and consensus building (Kim 2013; Kim and Na 2013; Park 2013). It is an act of self-directed meaning-making and validity testing of contested meanings. Learners should freely express vivid voices, raise questions, exchange accurate information, challenge others, and finally “accept an informed, objective, and rational consensus as a legitimate test of validity” (Mezirow 1991, p. 78). It involves active conversation, discussion, sharing, modification, and mutual feedback. The studies containing communicative learning process reported how the participant gained confidence in new understandings through conversation, discussion, and group activity. For example, Park (2013, p. 154) described and analyzed verification process through communication in the context of facilitating transformative learning in the classroom.

Pre-service early childhood teachers realized diverse perspectives and voices. What is important is that they were not restricted to merely understanding the existence of diverse perspectives, but also identified their own perspective, connected it to the others, and were open to possibilities of change. Communicating perspectives and beliefs with one another is a basis for communicative learning among pre-service teachers. They were in the process of making a rational discourse community.

Most of the studies reported received agreement. It is an accommodation to suggestions from other people. In a received agreement, the participant is a one-way recipient or a sympathetic audience with no active engagement in communication. They depend on other people and taken-for-granted social roles and expectations. Most studies were not able to depict the process of rational discourse

because received agreement was a dominant form of consensus building. For example,

Comparing their own experiences with other married female immigrants, they came to understand that they all experienced similar difficulties. Understanding that other immigrants underwent similar difficulties enabled them to think that they were not isolated. With this identification with other married female immigrants, they could overcome their difficulties. (Lee and Na 2009, p. 18)

Making an effort to take after professor or others who had a positive influence on them in higher education institution, the learners are greatly changed. “I felt that professor tries to live in accord with what he teaches. That’s strong challenge to me.” (Park 2009, p. 45)

The day we gave feedback one another in the meeting, I felt that all human beings had problems, which was very normal, not strange. Receiving feedback from colleagues, I realized that difficulties I had were common problems that any foreign students experienced. I also realized that finding people and systems that help my problem rather than blaming my incompetence is a wisdom. (Kim et al. 2013, p. 42)

Although all studies gave their best effort to present the result of transformative learning, they failed to demonstrate why certain changes in personal point of view are perspective transformation. There was no valid evidence in many studies to guarantee that the new perspectives are more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, critically reflective, and integrative of experience.

Taking actions

A transformative learning outcome, which is driven by critical reflection and rational discourse, should guide one’s future action (Mezirow 1991). Action here is “not only behavior, the effect of a cause, but rather praxis, the creative implementation of a purpose” (p. 12). A transformed meaning scheme or perspective requires the learner to take different actions—revising a point of view, reframing or solving a problem, modifying an attitude, and producing a change in behavior (Mezirow 1991, 1996). In other words, taking action involves practical expressions or new social relationships to be reintegrated within the context of a new perspective. An association with others who share a new perspective with the learner plays an important role, because it can help the learner sustain the new action (Mezirow 1978a). When the previous belief system or assumption is not found to be distorting or inauthentic, action could not be deemed as transformative since it still remains in the past perspective.

In the empirical studies, actions were manifested variously such as having a new attitude (Kim et al. 2013), asking around for help (Lee and Na 2009), connecting with religion (Park 2003), attending an education program (Kim 2014), building a union (Cho 2010), attending social activities (Lee 1999), and participating in politics (Kim 2013). Most studies tended to focus on a specific action in order to prove transformative learning. However, it is hard to argue that those actions were based on the participants' changed meaning perspective. For example, Jung (2009) analyzed how four early childhood teachers got into new actions after taking a multicultural teacher training program. According to the author, there was no convincing evidence that the teachers' frame of reference was changed. However, the author presented concrete action as a transformative outcome of the training. One teacher invited a parent to the class to talk about life in Hong Kong. The teacher said, "sometimes I worry about that my knowledge could lead my students to have prejudice" (Jung 2009, p. 246). The teacher somehow changed in teaching practice but it is not so clear that this change is based on the teacher's perspective transformation.

Among the 15 studies, Cho (2010) and Kim (2013) adequately depicted how taking action operated in the overall context of life. For example, Mr. Park, one of the participants in Cho's study, had constantly tried to come up with a variety of plans and activities to help North Korean refugees adapt to the Republic of Korea—planning and establishing financial unions and social enterprises, training entrepreneurs, supporting start-up loans, etc.

While preparing for a credit union, Mr. Park, first of all, came to think that the market economy education for North Korean immigrants is very urgent. He started teaching the immigrants market economy that he had learned from university and various occupational experiences. This was because he thought that knowledge and skills as well as will to stand on their own feet are the foundation for getting out of "free rider" of welfare system and supporting themselves. "The settlement support system makes people stupid. Because government's support system solely focuses on welfare at this moment, North Korean refugees completely became free riders. They only thought about receiving.....So, I thought I had to teach market economy" (pp. 192–193).

Kim (2013) emphasizes the importance of associations with others to sustain the actions. In Kim's study, female politicians experienced perspective transformation through social activity such as labor movement, and then entered politics to maintain their belief and keep on working for others, especially for the disadvantaged. It is a decisive action "for the value to which she devoted her entire life" (p. 120).

Discussion

The strength of Mezirow's theory is in its explanatory power. It helps us understand why and how personal changes happen from the perspective of learning in adulthood. It presents a clear beginning point—disorienting dilemma—and an end product—taking action—of human learning. The four key elements we used in this study are essence of Mezirow's transformative learning process. From our analysis of 15 empirical studies from the Republic of Korea, we found that most of them did not fully reveal the key elements in their description of transformative learning process. Although almost all the studies claimed transformational outcomes, it is hard for us to determine whether those outcomes were the end products of transformative learning. There are other theorists who presented different processes of transformative learning from Mezirow. Yet, we think the core elements we used in our analysis are fundamental to Mezirow's transformative learning theory itself. Once you deny those elements, you may deny use of Mezirow's theory as a theoretical frame. What we found is that most of the studies did not use Mezirow's theory convincingly.

We may consider our finding as a misappropriation of Mezirow's theory in the Republic of Korea. That is, many authors of the given 15 studies misapplied Mezirow's theory to their empirical studies. We may simply argue that they misunderstood the theory by dropping the essence of it. However, this is anything but blaming the authors, which may require more evidences to claim. We did not and will not be able to chase the authors to interrogate their level of understanding Mezirow's theory. Instead, we would like to see that the 15 studies reflect academic communities' dominant way of importing Mezirow's theory in the Republic of Korea. As an import from the West, it carries a certain value as Mills (1959) once noted. We assume that the Korean appropriation could show the limits and possibilities of the theory due to its carrying value. We also assume that there is no true or false way of appropriating the traveling theory (Said 1983) and that the 15 studies revealed a kind of (mis-)appropriation of Mezirow's theory in the Republic of Korea. So why did those 15 studies (mis-)appropriate Mezirow in such way?

One possible reason for this (mis-)appropriation is the uncritical dependence on imported—translated—Western concepts. Mezirow's key concepts such as critical reflection and discourse per se convey different meanings in different theoretical fields: meta-cognition in psychology, reflective observation in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, reflection-in-action (Schön 1983), or mindfulness (Langer 1989) are all related to critical reflection. Reflection and discourse tend to be used without

clear distinction from other similar concepts in Korea. Even different English concepts were often translated into the same Korean terms; reflection, deliberation, (re)thinking, (re)consideration, introspection, meditation, and repentance are often translated into the same Korean terms, *seong-chal* (성찰). So are discourse, story, talking, conversation, communication, and public opinion into *dam-ron* (담론). Translation is the first step to import foreign concept and theory. Korean researchers who think with Korean language are likely to fail in a full adoption of English terms as they were used in their original places. Translation/importation of Western concepts could be a chance of creative misreading in that those borrowed terms should be reified as a representation of everyday realities in the Republic of Korea. It has been inevitable that Korean researchers use Western social theories and concepts to think of and work on realities of modern Republic of Korea. To Korean researchers, social science itself is given as an import (Mills 1959). What we need more is, as Said (1983, p. 241) suggested, “the critical recognition that there is no theory capable of covering, closing off, predicting all the situations in which it might be useful.”

Unfortunately, we think that most of the given 15 studies failed in creative misreading of Mezirow’s theory with critical recognition. Fourteen out of 15 studies reported that there were transformative learning outcomes. Eight out of the 14 studies, however, did not present convincing evidence in at least one of three core concepts of transformative learning process—disorienting dilemmas, critical reflection, and seeking agreement. We do not know whether the authors of the studies had recognized this or not. Once they began to treat Mezirow’s theory as the frame of their studies without critical recognition, it probably would have been extremely hard for them to suspect the theory itself. They were confined in the theory and never got out of the borrower/consumer status. From our analysis and judgment, Mezirow’s theory was not able to cover all the situations that 15 Korean empirical studies dealt with. This is a moment and/or place where creative misreading is needed if possible. Creative misreading can challenge a traveling theory seriously. For example, Cox and John (2016) introduced ‘orienting dilemmas’ instead of disorienting dilemmas to understand post-apartheid South African young adults’ experience of non-formal program participation. Before joining the program, the participants had undergone continuous disruption in their lives due to high levels of crime, violence, HIV/AIDS, and xenophobia. The non-formal program was designed to equip “young adults who experience difficult circumstances with positive and healthy life choice” (p. 306). The authors critically recognized that Mezirow’s disorienting dilemmas have two aspects—‘disorienting’ and ‘dilemmas.’ Disorienting, which is the other side of normality and stability, is never a

useful concept to understand South African context where unstable, disrupted lives have always been normalized. Disorienting is a concept out of somehow stable, ‘normal’ Western context. Dilemmas emerged much later in the participants’ learning trajectory as they faced challenging questions presented in the program. The authors argue that significant transformative learning among young adults were catalyzed by orienting dilemmas. This study convincingly shows the limits of Mezirow’s theory as a traveling theory in South Africa. The authors dismantled Mezirow’s theory in South African context through creative misreading. One of the core concepts of Mezirow’s theory was disputed and reversed. Maybe this study is an eloquent example of Newman’s (2012) problematizing of North American empirical studies based on transformative learning theory. Newman argued that most of the claimed transformational outcomes could be understood as simple acquisitions of knowledge, skill, and attitude that positively functioned in participants’ life. As Newman argued, acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes through the well-designed program just functioned positively in the lives of Cox and John’s study participants.

Another reason for (mis-)appropriation of Mezirow in the Republic of Korea can be traced to the Confucius notion of learning. Confucianism has influenced Korea and other East Asian countries for more than a thousand years. The Confucian virtues emphasize learning as a way of life. *The Analects* of Confucius begins with, “Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?” (Confucius, Kindle Locations 63–64). Even Confucius looked back on his own life in terms of learning when he was over 70 years old.

At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning. At thirty, I stood firm. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven. At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth. At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right. (Confucius, Kindle Locations 126–128)

This is a short self-report on how learning had transformed one’s being in the world throughout one’s own life. To Confucius, a series of renewals within oneself is an explicit product of learning in life. Learning, however, is not defined clearly in terms of its process. Another well-known phrase from *The Analects* describes learning as transmission and acquisition; “If a man keeps cherishing his old knowledge, so as continually to be acquiring new, he may be a teacher of others” (Kindle Locations 146–147). Confucius considered contemplating the old knowledge as learning. It is hard to describe what happens while contemplating. Learning seems to be very personal and extremely cognitive, which takes place inside the effortful learner. From the

Western viewpoint, it might be regarded as mere rote learning or repetition for memorization. Although the process is hidden and ambiguous, the product of learning is very clear and visible. Confucius presented a series of life stage that he had achieved as outcomes of learning. The Confucius notion of learning—continuous acquisition of a new life stage—considerably influenced the outcome-oriented conception of learning in Korea and East Asia. The tendency of appropriating Mezirow's theory in terms of focusing on outcomes rather than process of learning might have something to do with this Confucian conception of learning. From this perspective, it is quite easy to be supportive of Mezirow's theoretical framework since it claims fundamental changes of the learner as an outcome of learning, unlike other influential learning theories such as the experiential learning theory (Kolb 1984). Although Mezirow's theory coincides with the Confucian conception of learning in this regard, the two are far different from each other in the process point of view. Mezirow's theory is loaded with cognitive psychological concepts that describe learning as a linear process, which reflects a typical Western value of Cartesian dualism. Mezirow's detailed 10 stages manifested it. The process and product of learning could be seen separately at least from the theoretical level. The Confucian conception of learning does not have detailed psychological descriptors of learning to describe the process. As we acknowledge that social science is an import to the Republic of Korea, what is traveled from the West are these detailed psychological descriptors in the case of the transformative learning theory. Moreover, these descriptors are ambiguously translated as we have discussed before. If the authors of the 15 Korean studies were keen to the underlying difference in conceiving learning between the West and the Confucian in the Republic of Korea, would "creative misreading" (Said 1983, p. 236) of Mezirow's theory have been possible? We guess it could have been. At the same time, we think they might have not needed Mezirow at all. This is because delineating the process of transformative learning could have been meaningless if they had acknowledged that the continuous renewal of oneself is the process of learning in itself.

Concluding remarks

In her chapter of *The Handbook of Transformative Learning*, Ntseane (2012) shows how the African worldview and value played differently in understanding transformative experiences in life. Dreams and visionary experiences that are often treated nonsensical in Western culture are very important in African culture. The concept of *ubuntu*, "which involves sharing, compassion, respect, commitment and sensitivity to the needs of other, patience, and

kindness" (p. 278), symbolizes Afrocentric, communal, collective, spiritually oriented understanding of learning and knowledge making. Transformation is beyond personal, cognitive experience from the African perspective. Ntseane argues, "adult learning theories need to respect communal forms of living that are non-Western and create inquiries based on relational realities as well as forms of knowledge that are predominant among non-Western [people]" (p. 275). Theory-building to understand and explain adult learning phenomena in the Korean context may demand this kind of sensitivity based on its history and culture. What we, as East Asian researchers, need more than social theory—as an import and traveling theory—is a keen situational insight to appropriate it creatively.

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