

The Role of Transformative Action-and-Inquiry in Dignity Studies: Beyond Personalized Education with Curiosity and Commitment

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In the past year, the Western Institute for Social Research (WISR) in Berkeley, CA (www.wisr.edu) has begun offering a course in Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies for students in three of our four degree programs—BS in Community Leadership and Justice, MS in Education and Community Leadership, and EdD in Higher Education and Social Changes. All courses are personalized, available online, with extensive student-faculty contact and student-student collaboration by Zoom, and all of our programs are infused with values and content emphasizing social justice and change, multiculturalism and inclusiveness, and qualitative approaches to participatory action-research. The course content, which is outstanding, has been designed by Evelin Lindner and Linda Hartling (who is one of our faculty, as well). So far, three of our EdD students have pursued this course. Subsequently, the first one to do so, Rosa Reinikainen, who is on this panel, has begun organizing and leading a quarterly seminar sessions on HDHS that has been very well received by students in all those three degree programs, as well as our students in the MS in Psychology program that leads to the California Marriage and Family Therapy license and the LPCC license. These seminars have been openly to the larger public and several professionals and community leaders participating have benefitted greatly as well.

Now, that three of our students have experienced the course, I'm beginning to learn more, and think more, about the opportunities and challenges in educating people about HDHS. Because of my 50 years' experience in promoting and trying to be engaged collaboratively with students in personalizing their education, I'm starting to think more about how to personalize HDHS. Here are some of my initial, imperfect thoughts.

The first two WISR EdD students to take the course learned more than I, or they, can easily put into words. The third student was traumatized by the course. I was shocked when she contacted me for "permission" to drop the course (almost unheard of at WISR, and the answer was of course, "ok" but also "why?"). This student who is an African American woman, an accomplished health education professional (who has worked with the disabled, with women in prisons and many various marginalized groups) said she was even having nightmares as a result of doing the reading for the course. We discussed it a bit, and although I'll share my very imperfect understanding of what I learned from this outstanding learner and leader, I'm also going to be posing some questions. It seems that for her the history of slavery and its impact is still very much part of her psyche, and in her case at least, she experienced the course as a sort of pressure to deal with a painful past of oppression that is also still very much alive today. If she were more privileged, less marginalized, and less conscious of the long history of racial oppression that lives

on today, she might “need” to be reminded of the importance of HDHS. She would agree that many others, especially those more privileged, and perhaps at least some who are quite marginalized but perhaps less deeply aware of their marginalization, might benefit from HDHS. Not needing motivation or awareness to take on issues of HDHS, and also being painfully aware of injustices and humiliation on an everyday basis, she found the course to be disturbing rather than enlightening. I suspect that she would acknowledge that not everyone in her situation would feel this way, but she did, and she tried for over a month to “work through it” and simply couldn’t.

Talking with her, and thinking about all this, has reminded of the importance of two things that I “believe” in: 1) personalized, learner-centered education (whether “in school” or “in life”), and 2) transformative action-research. Here are the lines of inquiry and action I wish to suggest.

I’m reminded of the value of engaging in action-and-inquiry on how to collaborate with people from **all walks of life and in varying circumstances** in learning more not only about the issues of human dignity and humiliation, but also about how various people come to learn more about it. Some people have much to teach and less to “learn.” Some of us can “teach” some things as we still “learn about” other things. As the grassroots activist and educator, Myles Horton once said, it is important that we learn to “listen eloquently.”

In this light, as we try to educate and take action, we will inevitable benefit from trying out different approaches, and with different people, and in different circumstances, and inquire into what happens and why? What works, with whom, in what circumstances, and why? What does each person have to contribute to the process? In what different ways can each of us benefit? Who can we learn from, and what and how? Engaging in this sort of action-and-inquiry builds on, and indeed requires, our curiosity and our commitments. I, and others at WISR, over the years, including Rosa Reinikainen and David Yamada, who are on this panel have tried to do this kind of transformative action-research over the past 45 years. (Further, I’ll shamelessly use this as an opportunity to promote, or at least mention, two books we’ve written on *Transformative Action Research* that will be published by Routledge Press in April 2021.)

So, here are a few more thoughts for directions for such action and inquiry. First, I suggest that we look for “exceptions to the rule”—especially positive things that often don’t happen (a few academicians refer to this as “positive deviance”). When do people who are, for example, aggressively and even violently racist undergo a major transformation? As food for thought, I’ll recommend two movies, the first a drama based on (and accurately) so a true story, called “Best of Enemies” (a black woman and white man in the KKK who became life-long friends after first opposing each other over school desegregation in their town in North Carolina). The second is available as a documentary, *Erasing Hate*, and more recently an accurate drama, *Skin* (2018). It is the story of the “conversion” away from White Supremacy of a Neo-Nazi skinhead, who eventually has the hateful tattoos that covered his whole body erased because of a fund-raising campaign to do so by the Southern Poverty Law Center. What can we learn from these stories? What can we learn from the story of the progressive African American activist-professional who

was literally traumatized by the HDHS course--not a “positive” deviance, but seemingly an unanticipated story that we must grapple with?

A few further considerations. This transformative action-and-inquiry must be informed both by our evolving understanding of human psychology and by sociological/cultural considerations as well. We are intervening with people and with circumstances/society when we try to become better a Dignity Studies. After World War II, there was the famous book, *The Authoritarian Personality*, by Adorno and others—an attempt to understand the psychological dynamics of people who will either promote or acquiesce in the midst of fascism. More recently, a very close friend of mine, the sociologist, Arlie Hochschild, spent months living with and interviewing tea party enthusiasts in rural Louisiana. She wanted to understand their viewpoints, and wrote the book, *Strangers in their Own Land*. Her main points are that we need to climb an “empathy wall” to understand other. These white people, marginalized in more than a few ways themselves, feel that others have unfairly “cut in line in front of them” and they are angry about it. With all due respect to Arlie, I think that “the empathy wall” is a starting point, but perhaps leaves out the circumstantial/cultural/social changes that need to go along with attempts to communicate over or through the “empathy wall.” In my view, at least, I agree that we should not dismiss nor simply disparage the views of the people whom she came to know and understand, and who invited her into their homes (although I would add that had she been African American they might not have so readily offered her tea—at least we don’t know that for certain). So, as we think about personalizing Dignity Studies, what do we need to learn and inquire into, as we take action, that was missed on the one hand by Adorno and others, and perhaps at the “other end” of some continuum, may have been missed by Arlie Hochschild, her valuable insights notwithstanding.

As one potentially promising direction for transformative action-and-inquiry, I would like to suggest that some of Vygotsky’s ideas about human development, and his notion of the “zone of proximal development.” Especially, from him, I think we should consider the importance of “social learning”—that even personalized learning must be seen in the context of the social/cultural realities of all of us who are learning about and trying to learn more about HDHS, and in the context of the differing realities in which each person lives and must learn, and then continue to live, but hopefully in transformative ways that promote and affirm human dignity.

Further Resources—Seminars and WISR and Videos from WISR seminars on Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies

Access to WISR’s series of Human Dignity and Humiliation Seminars (so far two from May and Sept 2020, others will be added quarterly)—videos with power points as well, go to: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1JmiObtceBuaqDb7rrbi4q9CUdzNMjvNI?usp=sharing>

Schedule of Upcoming WISR seminars—and we plan to have a quarterly seminar on HDHS (open to the larger community for free), go to: <https://www.wisr.edu/upcoming-seminars-and-events/>

Also, many WISR seminars including the May 2020 Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies seminar, as well as a Racist Policing panel and discussion (June 2020), and a discussion of addressing global trauma during the pandemic, among others is available on WISR's You Tube channel at:
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCwi3pKeyV51sJMjvxSAbDYw/videos?disable_polymer=1

Bio:

John Bilorusky (PhD, University of California, Berkeley) is co-founder of the Western Institute for Social Research in Berkeley. For 45 years, as a faculty member there, he has guided hundreds of student action research theses, dissertations, and projects, and consulted with dozens of community agencies and colleges on participatory action research—including the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency and three of the Bay Area Black United Fund's African American Health Summits. John's two forthcoming books to be published by Routledge Press in 2021 are *Principles and Methods of Transformative Action Research*, and *Cases and Illustrations of Transformative Action Research*. His academic background includes: BA cum laude, General Studies and Physics, University of Colorado, 1967. MA, Sociology of Education, University of California at Berkeley, 1968. PhD, Higher Education, UC Berkeley, 1972. In 1970-71, John taught senior thesis seminars in the Social Sciences Integrated Courses and Field Major, as a Teaching Associate at the University of California, Berkeley. From 1971-73, he was Assistant Professor of Urban Affairs and Senior Research Associate in the Institute for Research and Training in Higher Education, at the University of Cincinnati.