

## **Transformational Learning and the Role of Shadow in Quality of Life**

*Robin Gregory McLaughlin*

### **Abstract**

Shadow work may result in increased awareness and emotional and behavioral changes that influence the quality of life in the adult student. Using a semi-clinical, semi-structured, qualitative interview with 20 adult learners, this study investigated the role of shadow work following Kegan and Lahey's (2009) Immunity to Change (ITC) process in support of the adult developmental journey. Shadow work refers to one or more processes that a person may use to uncover, or bring to awareness, repressed aspects of Self. This dimension of wholeness (less fragmentation) compliments the concept of horizontal learning and vertical development.

Keywords: Adult learning, Adult development, Shadow, Transformational learning, Transformative learning.

### **Transformational Learning and the Role of Shadow in Quality of Life**

Selective results are presented from a qualitative study exploring the role of Jung's notion of shadow in relationship to adult learning and development with implication to student quality of life. Shadow may contribute to psychological distress that influence experiences. As part of one's subconscious, by definition, shadow is outside of our awareness. Jung (1958) described shadow as the part of the "Self" that is separated from the conscious ego through repression. Those aspects of Self remain repressed as shadow that impact us in ways that we struggle to see and understand. A person's shadow is mostly created during the formative years of childhood. Bly (1988) used the metaphor of a long, heavy, invisible bag we drag behind us as a metaphor for Shadow. He explained that "we spend our life until we're twenty" filling the bag with our shadows. Then, "we spend the rest of our lives trying to get them out again" (p. 18).

Although our bag of shadows is subconscious, we feel the burden of carrying it. Bly (1988) said that as a one or two-year-old child we have a "360-degree" personality; "energy radiated out from all parts of our body and all parts of our psyche...we had a ball of energy." However, by the time a person is 20, all that remains of the 360-degree personality is a "thin slice" of our former wholeness; the rest is now in the bag (p. 17-18). As a result, "the bigger the bag, the less energy...we can think of our personal bag as containing energy now unavailable to us" (p. 25). This implies that the meaning one made (the understanding she constructed) about what belongs in or out of her bag continues to inform her epistemology in adulthood. Most often, this is without her awareness. I suggest that the energy that is consumed by shadow and potentially liberated through shadow work can influence the adult learning and developmental journey in important ways.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Shadow***

Jung (1958) suggested that as an individual, one is conscious of one's ego and, perhaps, of one's persona, used to represent oneself to others. However, the ego knows only its own content and,

therefore, self-knowledge requires shadow (which by definition is subconscious) to be brought to consciousness and integrated (Jung, 1958). That is to say, to be complete (to be whole), one must bridge the subconscious and the conscious.

**Repression.** Shadows are the aspects of our Self that were repressed and denied while we were children in order to create and maintain the persona that others—those we look to as authority figures and for love—told us we should display. Shadow is not created by whether a repressed aspect is judged to be dark *or* light. Rather, it is created when dark *and* light aspects are judged to be socially unacceptable within our initial holding environments, such as our family of origin. This requires physical and psychological energy. This consumption of energy limits us; we cannot contribute fully to others and the world (Bly, 1988). Given this understanding of shadow, we may question the impact on learning and development of using energy to repress shadow instead of having that energy available for developmental growth.

### ***Adult Development***

Kegan's (1982) Constructive-Developmental Theory includes the influence of outer dimensions on one's development, such as the environment and one's social and emotional competency. Kegan's notion that the outer dimensions influence development throughout the lifespan is distinct from other theorists, such as Piaget, who suggested that development is an inner cognitive function limited to childhood and adolescence. In Kegan's model, developmental growth is identified using stages and sub-stages that mark the evolution in the complexity of one's organization of information and meaning-making.

Kegan (1994) has indicated that psychic functions "drain off energy" (p. 373). This is energy that could be redirected to support developmental growth. Although Kegan does not specifically address shadow, one might extend the concept of energy consumption and release to shadow. How might the energy one uses to keep aspects of Self repressed (shadow) be released and redirected to augment the energy one needs for vertical growth?

### ***Transformational Learning***

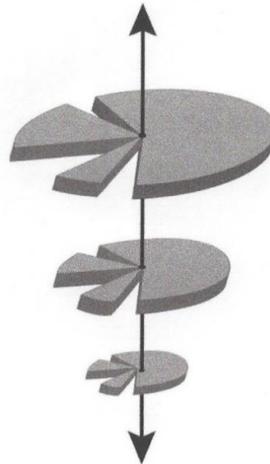
Mezirow (2000) defined a habit of mind as "a set of assumptions—broad, generalized, orienting predisposition that act as a filter for interpreting the meaning of experience" (p. 6). One's habit of mind combines with one's point of view, "sets of immediate, specific beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and values judgments," resulting in a frame of reference, which is a "meaning perspective" (p. 18). An individual is usually aware of his or her point of view, but unaware of his or her habit of mind. This makes a habit of mind more difficult to change and more difficult to negotiate. Mezirow indicated that a change in one's point of view or habit of mind represents *transformative* learning. Mezirow's theory differs from Kegan's in terminology and corresponding understanding of the learning process. In Kegan's (2000) terms, *transformational* learning changes the complexity of the form or structures of meaning-making: "We do not only form meaning, and we do not only change our meanings; we change the very form by which we are making our meanings. We change our epistemologies" (p. 52).

Mezirow's concept of transformative learning shifts the understanding of learning away from an emphasis on just the addition of content (horizontal development) toward the meaning that one makes of the content. But Kegan's concept of transformational learning shifts this understanding

even further by establishing a connection between the meaning that one makes of the content and the structural complexity of one's meaning-making. That is, to Mezirow an individual's premises, values, and beliefs are the learning lenses through which meaning is made; to Kegan, premises, values, and beliefs are themselves understood through an individual's structural developmental lens of meaning-making. Kegan emphasizes the influence of vertical development on horizontal development and understands this as adult learning. Vertical development and keeping shadow repressed both require energy that may influence the student quality of life.

### ***Horizontal Learning and Vertical Development***

Cook-Greuter (2004, 2007) has described two dimensions of development, respectively, using the terms vertical development, or increasing complexity, and horizontal development, or expanding content. Figure 1 visually represents the stages of complexity (vertical development) using the position of discs on a bi-directional line. A specific stage of complexity is indicated by that disc's location (disc height). A higher disc location represents greater complexity. Horizontal development is represented by the disc width. A wider disc indicates a greater amount of content—i.e., information, knowledge, and skills.



*Figure 1. Horizontal Learning and Vertical Development*  
(adapted from Cook-Greuter & Soulen, 2007, p. 183)

### ***Influence of Shadow on Horizontal Learning and Vertical Development***

Becoming whole—by learning about one's shadow and projection through shadow work—is a form of horizontal learning. The missing slices from each disk in Figure 1 illustrate the repressed aspects of the Self. They represent what we have hidden in the long heavy bag we drag behind us, which restricts our being a 360-degree whole Self. Shadow work, including self-reflection and dialogue, is horizontal learning that may catalyze vertical development. Becoming more whole may release energy that, in turn, would then be available to augment one's climb toward increasing complexity.

There is scant literature on how adult learning theories, Constructive-Developmental Theory, and shadow intersect and interact with one another. The role of shadow in adult learning and adult development needs to be further explored. This qualitative study used a semi-structured semi-

clinical interview with twenty adult graduate students. The findings illustrate quality of life elements participant experienced in becoming aware of shadow

## **Methodology**

### ***Population and Sample***

This research study was guided by a constructivist orientation and a qualitative inductive approach (Creswell, 2009). Twenty participants were adult learners enrolled in a Master of Arts program. These participants engaged in an Immunity to Change (ITC) workshop (Kegan & Lahey, 2009) followed by shadow work. The average age of participants was approximately 40 years old. To ensure anonymity, no additional descriptive statistics are provided, and all gender references to participants have been eliminated from the interview excerpts.

### ***Data Collection***

Private, individual, face-to-face or telephone interviews were conducted with each participant and digitally recorded. Interview space was mutually selected and agreed upon in order to optimize the participant's comfort and anonymity. After reviewing the informed consent, addressing participant questions, and obtaining the participant's authorization to participate, a semi-structured, semi-clinical, qualitative interview was conducted. Open-ended questions were asked to elicit the participant's experience and insight during an ITC and shadow work workshop, including questions about their awareness of strong energy (Kvale, 1996).

Interviews ranged from 21 to 61 minutes and averaged 43 minutes. A digital record of each interview, stripped of all identifiers and labeled by participant number, was professionally transcribed. After random checks identified several significant errors, each transcription was checked word-for-word against the audio recording for accuracy.

### ***Analysis of Data***

Data analysis was completed through inductive reflection and by following Moustakas's (1994) outline for empirical phenomenological methods. As a first step in the analysis, the verbatim transcripts were read to obtain a general sense of the data and to make memos in the transcript margin (Creswell, 2009). The transcripts were then read a second time for statements that seemed significant. During this open coding, each statement was considered as potentially meaningful to the original inquiry and of equal importance (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002).

During the third reading, each relevant statement was labeled for meaning and clustered into temporary and flexible themes and categories of similar concepts (axial coding). As the themes emerged, labels were changed or added using language from the participants themselves to reflect emergent differences and distinctions. This resulted in a more in-depth analysis of labeling (Creswell, 2009). Finally, a fourth reading was used to explore the emergent themes for textural and structural descriptions. These themes were then supported with examples from participant interviews. This process enabled the essence and meaning of phenomena to emerge through the integration of textural and structural descriptions.

### *Credibility and Quality*

Strategies to ensure credibility and quality included paraphrasing responses during the interview to verify understanding and to qualify scope and context of the participant response. This enabled the participant to confirm, refute, clarify, or expand their expressions, ensuring shared understanding and functioning as a real-time participant verification check. In addition, transparency and clarity of the researcher bias was maintained and negative or discrepant information were presented (Creswell, 2009). Lastly, the researcher remained open to new understanding and changes in thinking, which served as reflexive validity and discussed the research process, raw data, analysis and interpretation with selected colleagues to serve as peer reviewers (Merriam & Tisdell, 1998).

## **Findings**

### *The Self and Shadow*

Table 1 presents the various ways participants described what they had learned about themselves and their shadow. Pat (the pseudonym for an exemplar participant) realized how people were pushed away in personal and professional settings by behavior that “provided some chaos, a wake behind me. People have all said, ‘there’s no middle ground with Pat you either love Pat, or you hate Pat. It’s all black, or it’s all white.’” Participant 12, who assumed “one must never question or speak truth to authority,” linked associated shadow to the participant’s father indicating that “even if he says the sky is purple, and its blue, it’s purple because he said so because he is the boss.”

Table 1

#### *Learned About Self and Shadow*

<u>Categories</u>	<u>Participant</u>	<u>Number</u>
I tried to control outcomes because of the influence of shadow	p6, p8, p9, p10, p17, p20	6
My behavior pushed people away	p1, p3, p4, p7, p12, p13	6
Shadow made me feel insecure, bad, angry	p2, p5, p11	3
I don’t have to react, opportunity to understand self better	p15, p19	2
Clueless what real shadows are	p14	1
Shadow is obstacle to forward progress	p16	1
Everyone doing best they can	p18	1

As presented in Table 2, when the participants were asked to describe what they noticed about themselves following the ITC process and shadow work Pat noted the change in energy that had been bound up in the father-child relationship. Pat stated:

When I would pass his car, it would cause physical energy. I mean I’d go home, and my blood pressure’s up. My heart rate’s up, and my [partner] would say, “You saw your father”... looking at that shadow, allowed me to arrive at a place where the energy has dissipated. Yes, the feelings are there. I don’t like my 20 years of living with him. I don’t like all the things that happened – that didn’t happen – but I don’t have that elevated energy level when someone brings up his name.

Participant six experienced self-forgiveness: “it just made me be more forgiving of myself and not beat myself up over things that I’m really probably just creating in my head.”

Table 2

*ITC Shadow Work Experience*

<u>Categories</u>	<u>Participant</u>	<u>Number</u>
Release, affirmation or self-forgiveness	p2, p3, p6, p8, p14, p16, p18	7
New awareness or differentiation	p4, p6, p7, p13, p17	5
Openness in thinking or understanding	p1, p9, p10, p12, p20	5
More in control, empowered	p5, p15, p19	3

***Shadow and Adult Development***

In describing how change has influenced their interaction with others, Pat expressed, “I’m more relaxed, more patient, [a] better listener, and those three things together have obviously made me, I think, a better person, in all situations, conflict and otherwise.” Participant eight indicated, “I’m so much more willing to forgive, so much more willing to ignore and not make things so significant, so big a deal.”

Table 3

*Interactions with Others*

<u>Categories</u>	<u>Participant</u>	<u>Number</u>
More tolerant of others	p8, p11, p12, p13, p15, p17, p18, p20	8
More willing to engage	p1, p5, p7, p8, p10, p13	6
More confident; comfortable	p2, p4, p6, p9, p14, p16	6
More Patient; relaxed, calm	p1, p4, p6, p19	4
Better Listener	p1, p3, p4	3
Better use of time	p5, p8	2

***Shadow and Adult Learning***

Participants were asked how they had been influenced as adult learners by the experience, insight, or understanding gained through the shadow work. Pat indicated “I feel more confident that what I have to say has some value. I’m learning how to say it better depending on the environment.” Participant eight stated, “I now find myself having less of a clear demarcation between academic work and real life or the application to living on a daily basis.”

Table 4

*Influenced as Adult Learner*

<u>Categories</u>	<u>Participant</u>	<u>Number</u>
Daily application not future oriented	p2, p4, p8, p10, p11, p12, p13, p15	8
Invested and engaged - empowered, confident, passion	p4, p6, p9, p16, p17, p18	6
Intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation	p1, p7, p8, p10, p17	5
Bigger, deeper, more open,	p1, p2, p9, p20	4
More accountable less procrastination	p5, p13	2
More integrated mind, body, spirit	p14, p17	2
more insight learning from others	p2	1
Continuous does not stop	p3	1
Unlearning	p19	1

### **Discussion**

Though Kegan (1982, 2000, 2001) had already linked disruptive learning and energy to development, his focus was not on shadow. This study illuminates the role of shadow work in increasing horizontal learning and releasing energy in support of vertical development. This study did not measure vertical development, but it does provide a context for its discussion. By creating new insight, and releasing energy, the horizontal learning of shadow work may support vertical development by serving as or initiating disruption to equilibrium. With shadow work, an individual may be able to use the new perception of wholeness and the new insight and information gained to create new choices when she experiences a challenge. In experiencing a wider range of available choices, she may become less defensive in her approach. Instead of engaging the challenge in a way familiar to her, she may pause, and—informed by new insight and choice—engage in a new and different manner. With persistence over time, she may begin to relate to challenges differently, with greater complexity. The capacity to take in and create greater complexity is vertical development. Based on the participants' reports, shadow work may thus act as a catalyst of horizontal learning that supports increasing complexity.

### **Conclusion**

Adult learners face challenges to academic entry, persistence and completion and they may hold critical scripts regarding the ability to succeed. A student's perceived quality of life and experiences may be negatively influenced. Providing a resource for students to understand and reintegrate shadow may help to improve quality of life by directly addressing and balancing emotions, thinking and behavior or by enabling the students to better balance challenges. Quality of life elements that emerged from this study include increased capacity to engage without trying to control outcomes, being more open and forgiving with self and others, increased confidence, and being intrinsically motivated. These categories reflect changes in awareness, emotions, and behaviors that influence meaning making and the quality of life experiences of the adult student.

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**Dr. Robin Gregory McLaughlin** earned his Doctor of Philosophy, specializing in Adult Learning and Development, from Lesley University School of Education in Cambridge, Massachusetts. For the last 18 years he has served as an educator, administrator and practitioner. His work focuses on the intersections of adult learning, adult development, conflict resolution, leadership, and change management to support wholeness, expanding information (horizontal growth), and deepening understanding (vertical growth).