

Transformative Learning and Activism: Individual Transformation as a Catalyst for Collective Action in the Soulaliyine Social Movement

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Abstract

This study investigates transformative learning within the Soulaliyine Social Movement in Morocco, exploring how learning processes catalyze activism and social change. While existing research on social movements predominantly focuses on resistance and power dynamics, this research addresses a critical gap by examining the learning dimensions that drive individual and collective transformation. Employing a qualitative narrative case study approach, the research utilizes in-depth interviews with two prominent activists, analyzed through Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory framework. The study centers on a land rights movement primarily initiated by women seeking compensation and recognition of their rights to collective lands. It provides a rich context for understanding how marginalized groups develop agency and challenge existing sociocultural structures. The research reveals three key findings: First, transformative learning leads to irreversible personal transformation, fundamentally altering activists' perceptions and frames of reference. Second, positive reinforcement from movement members significantly increases the likelihood of transitioning from passive members to active participants. Third, learning processes are crucial in challenging and reconstructing existing power structures. By exploring the intricate mechanisms of personal knowledge acquisition and identity reconstruction, this study provides innovative insights into how individuals transform from passive observers to active agents of social change. The research demonstrates that learning is not merely an intellectual process but a dynamic pathway to collective empowerment and social justice.

Keywords

Transformative Learning, Soulaliyine Social Movement, Activism, Land Rights, Identity Reconstruction

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Introduction:

Adults face challenges in every domain of their day-to-day lives, and learning has a dramatic and real impact on overcoming those challenges as well as stimulating self-transformation. Adults are pushed to learn in a continuous and transformative manner, ultimately gaining a lucid and coherent understanding of their lived experiences to cope with the increasingly volatile and complex world (Wright & Sandlin, 2008). In this world, people aspire to be better and have emancipatory dreams and objectives, and social justice movements are incubators for people's dreams. These may be dreams of an untroubled world or of a just society (Mundt, Ross, & Burnett, 2018). Oppression and marginalization are steady traits across this world, as are emancipation and resistance, and social movements have the potential to equip people with the necessary knowledge, strategies, and power relations to fight for their dreams and achieve social justice. Meanwhile, learning is a primary component in achieving social justice from within a social movement (Hall & Clover, 2005). The meaning perspective and identity of social movement activists change naturally as a result of exposure to different life experiences, and Mezirow (1991) considers this change a key element of what he termed Transformative Learning. Through long ethnographic observations, he noticed that in times of struggle, adults' attitudes, beliefs, and values change as a result of a dramatic alteration in what they consider to be true or due to real-life problems related to social injustice or inequality (Christie et al., 2015).

Transformative Learning and Activism

Social movements and social justice activism are important sites of knowledge production and learning (Choudry, 2020). The kind of learning that is produced through participating in social movements challenges what Brookfield (2000) called 'sedimented beliefs' or what Nelson Mandela referred to as 'tribal givens' that all adults share. In the context of this research, I followed the line of thought of Justin Walton (2010), who has shown that cognitive dissonance or tension stimulates aspects of learning. He recommended researchers use transformative learning as a framework to dig much deeper within the systems and dynamics of how tension mediates an active reconstruction of personal experiences. The 'Soulaliyine' social movement is one of the social movements that started in the Gharb region in Morocco to defend the right to collective land for both women and men. Through listening to the stories of these social movement activists, I have noticed some change in their actions and beliefs. For a period of one year, from 2021 to 2022, I conducted many informal interviews with different activists and members of this land rights movement, which was started by women claiming their rightful compensation from the sale or rent of collective land to private entities. After gaining their rights to land, in January 2022, the national commission of collective lands chose the motto 'there is no choice but to align' for their annual conference, as a clear indication to all land representative bodies – especially *Nouab*, tribal representatives – that there is no alternative for Soulaliyine, men and women, but to unite their

efforts to face what they call 'mafias' that threaten their right to land. Therefore, instead of expanding, this social movement turned inward to resolve internal problems and weaknesses. Through this process, many prominent activists emerged as leaders, putting their normal lives on hold to lend their voices to the movement. Therefore, the aim of this research paper is to analyze how social tension led members of this social movement to become activists and what factors led them to adjust their thinking and actions.

Central to this exploration is the critical interrogative: How do activists reconstruct their understanding of identity and rights through transformative learning? This question serves as a guiding analytical lens through which I examine the complex processes of personal and collective transformation within the Soulaliyine Social Movement. By unpacking how individual activists negotiate and redefine their identities and rights, we gain deeper insights into the mechanisms of social change and the intricate relationship between Transformative learning and collective action.

The first section of this article presents an overview of the theoretical framework and discusses its relevance to the topic at hand, followed by a presentation of activists' accounts. The third section focuses on analyzing the individual and social dimensions of those accounts. Finally, the last section provides theoretical and practical insights based on the research findings.

Transformative Learning in New Social Movements

The study of social movements is becoming popular among scientists from different disciplines, but the majority of the existing studies have focused on protesting powers, contesting hegemony, social change mechanisms, or social movement dynamics. Few studies have worked on learning dimensions in social justice movements, and very limited are those that worked on transformational learning that leads to activism, and activism as a means of self-transformation (Davies, Evans, & Peterson, 2014). The term 'transformative learning' originated and is most often used in the scientific discipline of adult education. It refers to an irreversible and significant alteration in the way a person conceptualizes, experiences, and connects to the world (Mezirow, 1991). I shall here refer to the importance of adopting a praxis view of transformative learning, where praxis means reflection accompanied by action. This reflection-action process is meant to be liberating, empowering, and status quo challenging (Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2016). Transformative learning is often understood as an adult's awareness of social injustice, which leads that person to become an '*enlightened adult*' who alters her/his frames of reference that consist of beliefs, values, and assumptions to challenge the status quo and act differently through a process of reflection-action. In the same line of thought, my regard for transformative learning, as located within Soulaliyine' activism, is placed within the context of understanding transformative learning components derived from members' perspective shifts that have led them to join the movement and act as activists and leaders. Thus, transformative learning is considered as activists' inclination to reason and adopt alternative solutions to land tenure problems through reconstructing how

they perceive themselves and their positionality within Soulaliyine' social movement. This view is rooted in Michael Welton's (1993) arguments, who sees social movements as '*privileged sites*' of transformative learning or emancipatory praxis, which goes in line with Mezirow's original theory of transformative learning. This theory argues that adults' learning is transformative in nature as they are able to detect deformities in their own socio-cultural assumptions and attitudes. This theory presents a ten-phase transformative process grouped into four stages that an individual must go through to some degree to claim transformative learning. According to Mezirow (1991), transformation starts when a person encounters a (1) disorienting dilemma, which is caused by a major life transition or life problem. This phase is considered an "activating event" (Keen & Woods, 2016). This disorienting dilemma or activating event serves as a stimulus for learning. Following this crisis or event, this person may encounter other phases and stages that are presented as follows:

The first Stage: Disorienting Dilemmas.

1. A disorienting dilemma

The Second Stage: Critical Reflection.

2. Self-examination with feelings of shame, fear, guilt or anger
3. A critical assessment of assumptions

The Third Stage: Rational Discourse.

4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building self-confidence and competence in new roles and relationships

The Fourth Stage: Reintegration.

10. Reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22)

It is important to mention that these phases are not meant to be linear, and the process of transformative learning may differ from one person to another based on the preferences, personality, and learning style of that person (Cranton, 2006). The importance of highlighting social movements as sites of learning and emancipatory praxis provides new ways to include social movements in adult education and enrich adult education with insights from social movement learning (Novelli et al., 2024).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design that integrates a Narrative Case Study Approach with a Qualitative Interpretive Study to explore the transformative learning experiences of activists within the Soulaliyine Social Movement in Morocco. According to Chamberlain et al. (2011), by combining these two methodologies, researchers can capture the richness of individual experiences while situating them within broader societal contexts. In the same line of thinking, Mason (2006) stated that this combined approach is associated with the ability to 'think outside the box,' thus fostering the logic of interpretation and analysis, thereby ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

The Narrative Case Study Approach allows for an in-depth examination of the activists' life stories because it helps in choosing and focusing on significant life transitions that catalyze activists' engagement in social activism. In simple terms, it involves selecting and combining different instances or sections from the original interview to help explain the phenomenon under study (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2011). Chase (2005) argues that narrative approaches allow researchers to explore how individuals construct meaning through their lived experiences, particularly in contexts of social movement participation. By focusing on life transitions and personal transformative moments, the approach enables a deeper understanding of the motivational dynamics underlying social activism (Riessman 2008, Patton 2015).

On the other hand, the interpretivist approach moves beyond the 'hypothetico-deductive method' (i.e., positivist research methods), which leads to 'yes-no' answers that reveal the 'why' behind certain phenomena, aiming for more complex understandings that cover not only the 'why' but also the 'how' by linking the content of interviews ('what') to social processes ('why and how') (Wiesner, 2022). In the same regard, denzin and Lincoln (2018) argue that interpretive approaches provide a comprehensive understanding of social phenomena by emphasizing context, meaning, and subjective experiences. This methodology allows researchers to deconstruct complex social interactions, thus revealing the underlying mechanisms of social change. Guba and Lincoln (2005) further suggest that interpretive research moves beyond objective measurement, focusing instead on the multiple realities constructed by social actors. Therefore, in the context of this research, the interpretive approach contextualizes the sections and instances derived from the interviews

within the larger social context through the categories derived from Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory.

Sampling

The sampling strategy employed in this research was purposive criterion sampling, which is particularly effective in qualitative research where specific participant characteristics are essential to address the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). This method involved deliberately selecting individuals who have been significantly involved in the Soulaliyine Social Movement, specifically focusing on well-recognized activists with at least ten years of experience. Such an approach ensures that selected participants possess rich and relevant insights critical for understanding transformative learning processes within the movement (Maxwell, 2013).

In this study, two prominent activists were chosen for in-depth analysis: Moulay Ahmed Guenoun, the chairman of the National Commission of Collective Lands, and Milouda Chrit, a former military aviation technician who has transitioned into a dedicated social activist. Their selection was informed not only by their active roles in mobilizing community members and advocating for land rights but also by their ability to articulate their transformative experiences effectively. Guenoun and Chrit's extensive backgrounds in both activism and community engagement position them as invaluable sources of information, allowing for a deeper exploration of the dynamics of social activism and learning within the context of the Soulaliyine movement.

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview was employed to collect data for this study. According to Burgess (1984) a semi-structured interview is a 'conversation with a purpose'; therefore, in this study, the interview items were predetermined and open ended questions derived from the TL theory and were tailored in a way that encouraged and facilitated the way for participants to share their accounts and transformative experiences.

Each interview lasted approximately 60-70 minutes and was conducted via WhatsApp recordings, facilitating a question-and-answer format that allowed participants to listen carefully to each question and reflect thoughtfully before responding. This method not only provided convenience but also fostered an atmosphere of comfort essential for eliciting candid responses (Sullivan et al., 2020). The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve the integrity of their narratives.

Following transcription, data analysis was conducted using a dual approach: narrative analysis and thematic analysis. Narrative analysis focused on examining the structure and content of each participant's story, identifying key themes related to transformative learning as outlined by Mezirow's theory (1991). This process enabled an exploration of how activists articulated their

journeys, including significant life transitions and critical reflections that led to changes in their perspectives and actions. Thematic analysis was also employed to identify recurring patterns across both activists' narratives through open coding to generate initial themes, followed by axial coding to connect these themes to broader categories within the transformative learning framework (Riessman, 2008). By analyzing narratives through this dual lens, this study aims to reveal how individual experiences are shaped by social tensions and how these tensions catalyze shifts in thinking and behavior among movement participants.

Experience and Self-reflection: Envisioning a New Self.

The Case of Moulay Ahmed Guennoun

A discussion of transformational learning in the context of the Soulaliyine social movement would be incomplete without a reference, first, to the incongruous and incomplete legal frameworks that have until recently served as reference texts governing the relationship between ethnic communities (e.i. Soulaliyine) and state regulatory bodies in land matters. These legal frameworks, namely the *Dahir* of April 1919, caused social unrest as tribal women were deprived of the right to land access and compensation. Second, to the conflicts within and between tribes, which result from some corrupted land representatives (e.i. Nouab) or state authorities, and the conflicts between tribes and what Moulay Ahmed Guennoun called grazing and real estate mafias. Gender discrimination (John, 2016; Laros, 2017) and social problems (Gregorčič, 2019) may be seen as examples of crisis circumstances that Mezirow (2000) considers potential disorienting dilemmas, which bring about and expedite critical reflection and, in turn, lead to perspective transformation upon which the individual acts.

Moulay Ahmed Guennoun stated that inter-tribal conflicts between Ibn al-Samim, the tribe to which he belongs, and Taleb Aqqa tribe led him to think he ought to do something to help members of his tribe get back their rights to land. Upon rebellion over a massive land theft, he was left with a serious head injury after a terrifying unprovoked assault by members of the Taleb Aqqa tribe in Ramadan 2000, while he was trying to redraw land borders between the two tribes (***Disorienting dilemma***).

When he came back home from Lfkih ben Saleh, where he used to work as an agricultural technician, all people started saying, "*The son of the tribe is back, indeed he came down to us from heaven.*" They were amazed at how he dealt with everything administrative, and how authorities responded quickly to his inquiries and letters. He was encouraged by members of his tribe to run for elections; he got elected as a tribal and regional counsellor. However, even though he was the tribal counselor, his opponents prevented him from attending tribal representatives' meetings without having the 'legal personality' – being a *Naeib* – to speak or act on behalf of his tribe. This was too much for him to contain. Moulay Ahmed started to feel anger grow within himself, and he

felt disappointed as he worked day and night collecting documents, participating in protests, hosting several crucial meetings at his house, and speaking on behalf of his tribe with the media. At this point, he started reflecting on what was wrong with the way he tried to resolve those inter-tribal conflicts. The shift in his beliefs was substantial as, before his coming back home, he used to believe that land is for everyone and there is no room for words like 'right holders.' He used to be a left-wing supporter and saw every aspect of life through the lens of left-wing principles. He said: "*I used to say, how can the government be a guardian over us when criticizing the 'Guardianship Clause'? Are we children?*" But after a period of time, he realized that his view was wrong, and he is no longer an opponent for the sake of opposition (***Self-examination with feelings of anger***).

His left-wing political background and affiliation with the workers' union in the Benimalal region, where he used to work as an agricultural technician, made him a radical who believed in achieving progress for the benefit of all Moroccan people and equipped him with the necessary skills to defend others' rights. "*My affiliation with the left party and my opposition from within it made me embrace the idea of good for all,*" he said. But the Ramadan event made him believe that even his good background in activism could not help him claim the rights of his tribe back unless he had legal personality. He soon realized that defending his tribe's right to land would only be possible if he joined the institution of Nouab – the community of tribal representatives. At first, he did not want to join the tribal assembly, but upon reflection, he decided to represent his tribe as a Naeib and started believing that those people – referring to members of his tribe – are also humans who need help. Instead of embracing the idea of helping all Moroccans, he started feeling the need to work for the benefit of his tribe. His great attachment to land and his old home revived his sense of responsibility towards his ethnic community and shifted his universal perspective on activism to a local and more flexible one (***A critical assessment of assumptions***). This experience instilled in him the willingness to forget about elections, dedicate his time to Soulaliyine's issues all over Morocco, and start a national commission for collective lands.

After 2010, Moulay Ahmed and other Soulaliyines from different regions of Morocco, who shared the same vision and convictions, decided that there was an urgent need to start a national commission for collective lands, especially with the government's adoption of a vision that depends on collective lands as a lever for development. On a local level, he tried to change the people's mentality to bypass the concept of 'jmaa' (tribe) and adopt the concept of 'jamaaia' (association). He emphasized that feelings of selfishness and unilateralism must be overcome and that all of them should work towards protecting land and making it a sustainable resource for future generations. On a national level, there was a major and multifaceted effort from Nouab from different regions to advance their cause. During the first meetings, they discussed how their experiences differed from one another to establish a common basis upon which they could build their collective vision. According to Moulay Ahmed, what was truly remarkable and distinct was the fact that Nouabs, each from their side, came with a promising and achievable project that could

contribute to a radical transformation of the productivity of collective lands, and even a transformation in the direction of making it an economic lever and giving it a human dimension in the service of people and the nation (***The process of transformation is shared***).

In the midst of his experience as a Naeib, Moulay Ahmed developed many relationships with local, national, and international NGOs, such as Oxfam Canada and ADFM—two prominent organizations dedicated to promoting equality and the equal dignity of men and women. The roles he played were crucial in regaining the right to land. He worked hard on building inter-movement solidarity, helping people understand new laws and regulations, collecting documents, writing reports, organizing regional and national meetings with authorities and other Soulaliyines, and speaking on behalf of the latter in parliament and in front of the media (***Exploration of new roles, relationships, and actions***). To do all these tasks, Moulay Ahmed explored and tried to understand changes in his behavior. He actively worked to understand, experience, and build self-confidence in these new roles and relationships by improving some skills such as leadership, boldness, rhetoric, listening, deduction, coordination, and writing skills. He was keen on getting constructive feedback, and the first source of this feedback was his nuclear family and friends. He stated that all members of his tribe felt that change in his behavior and started asking him questions like where he had learned all this (***Planning a course of action and building confidence***). He never missed an opportunity to attend workshops organized by national and international NGOs. "In fact, I attended many training courses on communication, and wrote many articles on issues related to Soulaliyine. I learned a lot from the meetings that I used to attend in all regions of the Kingdom; they were an opportunity for me to apply everything I had learned," he said. (***Acquiring knowledge and trying new roles***). He feels that he is a new person now; he is no longer a left-wing radicalist. He also said that his objective behind entering politics was to work on his own agenda and reach the parliament dome, but after this experience, everything has changed, as he now prefers to be that simple person who defends people's rights and clings to the earth (***Reintegration***).

The Case of Millouda Chrit

She is a former military aviation technician who suffered from gender discrimination in land tenure. Like all other ethnic women (Soulaliyate) working in the military service, Millouda was excluded from compensation for Guich lands – the army's land. These lands were historically considered Sultani's lands before the introduction of the 1919 law on collective lands, which redefined them as collective lands. She stated that all male military personnel benefited from land compensation, but she was denied this right because she is a woman. "The nature of my work was very difficult. I entered this male-dominated field at a young age. I spent all my time at work, dirty with aviation engine lubricants, working on aircraft parts, but all this did not intercede for me when I demanded my right to land," she said. She was very shocked and felt discriminated against and humiliated when her application was rejected because she is a woman. She could not get her right

to land, even though she held a military rank higher than her male counterparts who rejected her application (***Disorienting dilemma***). This problem led her to question the concept of 'woman' and the societal roles assigned to women. She said *"I started to question whether my role as a woman was limited to work and raising children. However, after my continuous and active communication with some civil society organizations, I came to believe that a woman can also be a community activist and a fighter for her rights."* Through her interactions with both supportive and opposing parties, she began to reconsider the traditional expectations placed on her as a woman. These discussions challenged her previous beliefs and allowed her to form a deeper, more refined understanding of her identity and her potential role in society. Every meeting she had with members of civil society who supported the cause of Soulaliyate and any troubles she had with the authorities led her to gradually and unconsciously question the sociocultural meanings ascribed to female roles. *"Whenever I tried to demand my right, I was met with a shocking response: 'Do not try, because you will not get anything. You are just wasting your time.'" She said. This counter and divisive criticism shook her assumptions about women's rightful roles and made her wonder whether the role of women in society is limited to household and 'prestigious' careers (***Self-examination with feelings of anger***).*

In 2006, Nezha Alaoui, a lawyer from the Kenitra region working on issues related to gender discrimination and violence against women, guided Millouda and other women through the process of claiming their rights. She helped them write detailed complaints and present them before a specialized committee consisting of judges, lawyers, human rights activists, and tribal representatives. Her intervention was broadcast on TV on the occasion of Women's Day. Millouda was chosen to present women's complaints before the committee, but unfortunately, some male lawyers – whom she described as 'lgheraqa' (trappers) – asked her trick questions and called her out on them. Members of ADFM, an independent feminist Moroccan NGO, saw her intervention on TV and invited her to join them at their headquarters in Rabat. During her meeting with ADFM members, Nezha Alaoui, and other women rights-holders, Millouda criticized the gendered implications of rural land dispossession and demanded that male trusteeship be considered illegal. As a result of mutual interest and coalition with ADFM, she was invited to attend numerous consecutive meetings to define the meaning of "Soulaliya" – tribal woman. Mrs. Rabia Naciri, the president of ADFM, worked with them throughout those meetings on defining the concept of "Soulaliya" (e.i. ethnic woman) and showed them strategies for claiming their rights. Millouda said, *"ADFM members were not familiar with the concept of 'tribal or ethnic woman.' Mrs. Rabia Naciri, the president of ADFM, worked with us on defining the concept of 'Soulaliya' and showed us some strategies to go about claiming our rights. ADFM's support fueled my strength to confront 'al-Qayid' – a representative of the Ministry of the Interior – but I was told that I am just a woman and have no right to claim."* At this point, this unequal treatment highlighted in her mind the activist role of women in fighting for equality, especially as she was encouraged to do so by members of ADFM and other women right-holders (***A critical assessment of assumptions***).

In coordination with ADFM, Millouda and other tribal women started visiting neighboring tribes and provinces to work on the sensitization and mobilization of other women who were suffering from gender discrimination. She said, "*We found other women who were willing to join us, and some who were prevented by their husbands from attending the meetings we organized. However, we were at least able to convey our ideas to them and make them aware that they have a right to defend.*" (***The process of transformation is shared***). Her house was open to all Soulaliyate from all regions; it became a meeting place where they exchanged experiences, stories, ideas, and studied new laws and ministry circulars. After some of them were inaugurated as Naibat – the first female tribal representatives in Morocco – by Zineb El Adaoui, the governor of the province of Kenitra, Millouda started visiting the women of her tribe to write down the formal lists of female right-holders and to know the demarcation of the lands under the guardianship of her tribe. Another major role she played was coordinating with other women of the same tribe to form an all-female representative body to present their complaints to local authorities and push for formal constitutional reforms that would extend women's rights to land. She worked on strengthening the emerging advocacy coalition around women's issues by building an effective bridge of communication between all Soulaliyate and other national and international human rights organizations, introducing their cause through TV and radio interviews, and organizing sit-ins in front of parliament (***Exploration of new roles, relationships, and actions***). They became fully aware of whom they needed to communicate with, in what way, and what documents were necessary to support their claims. She said, "*We know now that we need to hand the right-holder lists and complaints over to either 'al-Qayid', the guardianship council, the directorate of rural affairs, or the Ministry of the Interior. We also became very familiar with how to fight for our rights.*" (***Planning a Course of Action***).

Because of the nature of her military work and the regulations governing work within military barracks, she was prohibited from gathering in groups of more than three. She said, "*I felt isolated because of the limited interactions I had with other co-workers in my field of work. However, after my retirement and joining the Soulaliyate social movement, I felt like I was born again and took my first steps in learning.*" She learned a lot from other Soulaliyate' experiences and ADFM training courses. The organization taught them how to write complaints, where to find and how to analyze new laws, and gave them lessons in communication. At first, they did not know how to write a complaint or to whom to give it, but through the practical lessons they attended every Saturday at the organization's headquarters in Rabat, they learned how to communicate with authorities, lawyers, human rights organizations, and how to prepare for TV interviews. "*I felt like I was in school again. We had notebooks, and we wrote everything down. What I liked most was the practical part of each workshop. To practice what we had learned, we acted as if we were in a real situation in front of a local authority, and the mentors intervened whenever they felt something needed to be corrected.*" she said. (***Acquiring knowledge and skills and trying out new roles***).

Now, she is completely confident in herself. She speaks before the authorities and stands in front of the media with self-assurance. She said, *“I think I am now familiar with far more topics related to Soulaliyate’ issues than I used to be. I communicate effectively with all Soulaliyine of my tribe, especially marginalized women and men who are deprived of their rights because they have only daughters and as a result, they are unable to inherit collective land, which is traditionally passed down only to those who have male heirs, leaving women and families with only daughters excluded from their rightful share of the land. I show them how to speak for themselves, and even help illiterate male Nouab. Only then did the authorities become more confident in us – i.e., female tribal representatives, which made me feel even more confident in myself.”* (**Trying the Course of Action and Building Confidence**). *“Praise be to God, I got my right to land and helped many women and men to get their rights as well. My work in the military was a form of service to my country and to all Moroccans, but now I am fighting for the empowerment of women and the strengthening of their presence in our society. I cannot imagine myself doing anything else but helping these women, and now I believe that every woman should fight for her rights.”* (**Reintegration**).

Transformative Learning and Social Change: Clarifying the Relationship

Activists’ Individual Experiences

While learning at the most basic level is a matter for the individual, transformative learning ultimately impacts the community. The two previous cases confirmed Mezirow’s (1998, 2002) findings and demonstrated that transformative learning is fostered and established through the stages of critical reflection and rational discourse, respectively. Disorienting dilemmas in both cases played the role of catalysts for transformative learning, but critical reflection acted as an awareness-building tool, providing both activists the opportunity to revisit their past experiences and question their previously held assumptions. Through this process, they assimilate the ‘subjective reality’ and their ‘frames of reference’. A frame of reference encompasses “the distinctive ways individuals interpret experience or stereotypes they have unintentionally learned regarding what it means to be a woman, [...] a patriot or a member of a particular racial group” (Mezirow, 1993). When the old frames of reference no longer apply to make sense of some sociocultural aspects or interpret significant experiences in activists’ lives, they tend to create new meanings to guide their decision-making and action. At that point, the process of meaning-making becomes learning.

The findings showed that learning to react to or act upon what is given in a significant circumstance is more effective than learning to understand what is being communicated to oneself. Both cases demonstrated that interacting with other people, whether allies or opponents, during the first phase of critical reflection (i.e., self-examination), fostered transformative learning. Activists responded to alternative frames of reference by viewing their prior belief systems in different lights.

The self-examination phase, as a stimulator and driver of critical thinking, was initiated when new knowledge was internalized, leading to metacognitive sensitivity toward content knowledge, process knowledge, and premise knowledge. These three domains of knowledge, first established by Mezirow (1991, 1995) as fundamental types of reflection in transformative learning theory, helped activists address the imbalances and problems embedded in the sociocultural context surrounding them.

Content knowledge refers to what Cranton (2006) describes as the 'what' of learning - in this case, the laws regulating collective land and systems of power and exploitation developed by the Soulaliyine themselves and the state. Process knowledge encompasses what Kitchenham (2008) terms the 'how' of learning - the necessary skills and strategies that activists developed while struggling for their rights, particularly while participating in writing detailed complaints, engaging in workshops, attending local, regional, and national meetings and conferences, organizing protests, and participating in radio interviews. Premise knowledge involves what Taylor (2007) calls the 'why' of learning - how activists frame socio-cultural imbalances and problems, as well as their intended outcomes and goals. This aligns with what Brookfield (2000) terms 'paradigmatic assumptions' - the basic structuring axioms we use to make sense of the world.

Thus, their cognition sparks an internal dialogue at a metacognitive level, which, in turn, ignites critical reflection. This is necessary to assimilate content, process, and premise knowledge to fully understand the different epistemological dimensions of the sociocultural context and solve problems in a strategic way. According to Fleming & Lau (2014), building self-confidence in one's skills and knowledge is a direct indicator of high metacognitive sensitivity.

Thinking critically about their experiences as activists and the knowledge they assimilated during the self-examination phase led them to deeply assess their prior assumptions. From this perspective, however, based on the findings of this research, I argue that the phases of self-examination and critical assessment of assumptions happened simultaneously and continuously, rather than in a linear way. As a result, the critical reflection phase enabled both activists to correct 'distortions' in the assumptions on which their prior frames of reference had been built, as well as deficiencies in their ability to solve problems. Therefore, everything they learned was the result of adapting to new situations, altering their decision-making strategies, and ultimately making efforts to solve the problems they encountered.

In line with changing their prior frames of reference, the critical reflection stage helped activists move from the simple assessment of how and why they had felt, perceived, or acted, to considering the possibilities of how best to change their surrounding and social context. According to King and Kitchener (1994), both activists reached the highest level of critical reflection, in which they applied criticism and reevaluation to themselves, others, and their own solutions. They demonstrated two types of learning: instrumental and communicative learning, by immersing

themselves in task-oriented problem-solving, which was supported by critical reflection. Instrumental learning is about taking control of the external environment, which means, in this context, finding a way to gain their rights to land through making optimum use of all available resources, relations, capabilities, and skills. Communicative learning, on the other hand, refers to the way they communicate with and understand other activists and how they express their feelings and emotions about the specific cultural or social aspects surrounding land tenure. Thus, the findings of this paper echoed Mezirow's (2003) findings, demonstrating that these two types of learning played a major role in the transformative learning of both activists.

Activists' Social Context

Transformative learning experiences that are closely connected to the cultural context and fostered by critical reflection enhance and intensify socio-cultural awareness, as well as knowledge of oneself and others. They also alter and challenge culturally distorted and biased assumptions (Addleman, Brazo, & Cevallos, 2011; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 2016). Activists, through the rational discourse stage, specifically during the recognition of shared experiences phase, developed a sense of affiliation with other right-holders who share similar assumptions and goals. This shift from the individual to the social dimension of transformative learning necessitates a reconfiguration of the theory to go beyond the cognitive and rational approach adopted by Mezirow, to integrate social dimensions (Fleming, 2014), by privileging the relational, communicative, and collective elements of the social movement (Choudry, 2013). This can be achieved by adopting aspects from intersubjectivity theory to reframe transformative learning theory in a way that encompasses 'affective sharing' about the movement and among its members. Thus, it considers the rational discourse stage as an interpersonal process of understanding the self and relating to others, which builds self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem (Fleming, 2016).

Intersubjectivity, in the context of adult learning, represents what Yorks & Kasl (2002) describe as learning that emphasizes relationships with other members of the community through a process of striving to understand both the self and the other. Building on this foundation, Cranton & Wright (2008) further elaborate that intersubjective learning occurs through authentic relationships that develop when learners share their experiences and collaboratively construct meaning. Taylor & Snyder (2012) emphasize that this process involves not just cognitive understanding, but also emotional and social dimensions of learning through relationship.

Thus, in transformative learning, intersubjectivity refers to the mutual understanding and recognition that develop through interpersonal interactions within a cultural and social context—in this case, the social movement. Murphy (2013) argues that this intersubjective dimension is crucial for expanding the focus from individual cognitive processes to include relational and collective aspects of learning. This aligns with what Belenky & Stanton (2000) term 'connected

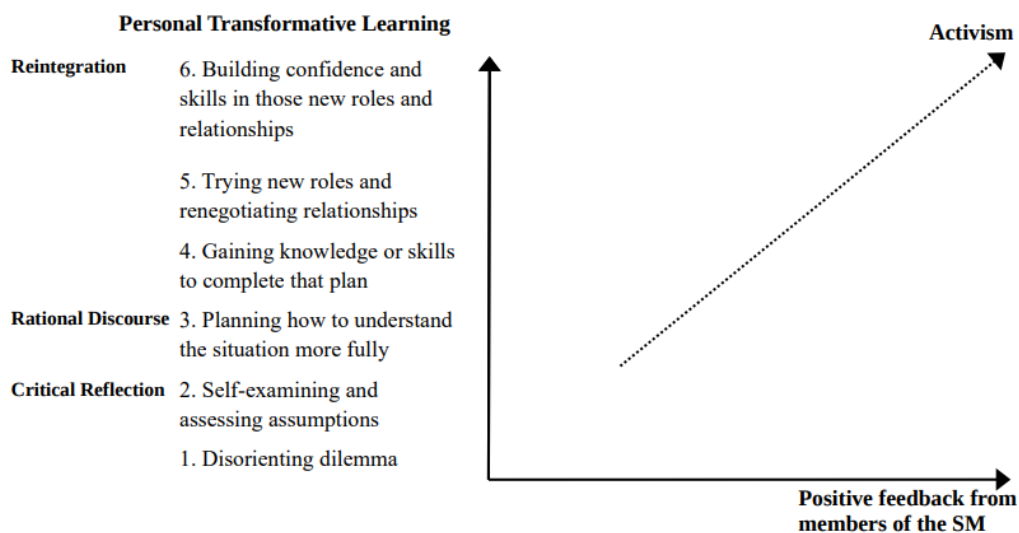
knowing,' where knowledge emerges through trying to understand others' perspectives and experiences rather than through isolated individual reflection.

In social movements specifically, Kilgore (1999) demonstrates how intersubjectivity facilitates collective identity formation and shared meaning-making that are essential for sustained activism. This collective dimension of transformation is further supported by English & Irving (2012), who found that women's learning in social movements is fundamentally shaped by relational knowing and collaborative meaning-making.

Again, metacognition plays a substantial role in connecting activists with other members of the social movement. It is used to regulate and monitor their own cognitive processes, as well as develop their own 'mentalizing ability,' which means the ability to perceive and interpret one's own and others' intentions, feelings, and behavior (Frith, 2012). When metacognition is applied to other members of the social movement, on one hand, it helps activists reflect on and justify their behavior to other members. On the other hand, it enables activists to consider the intentions, feelings, and knowledge of other members, thereby embracing what Frith (2012) calls a 'we-mode,' which reinforces collective action.

The adoption of the 'we-mode,' facilitated by metacognition, helps activists take on leading roles and try new ones as they receive positive feedback from allies and/or members of the social movement. This positive feedback enhances their self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem, motivating them to set shared goals and learn the necessary skills to solidify their new roles and confirm their new 'frames of reference.' *The above findings are reflected in the following emerging model:*

Figure 1: An emerging Model of Transformative Learning and Activism (TLA).



The emerging Transformative Learning and Activism (TLA) model builds upon and extends several theoretical frameworks. The critical reflection component aligns with Taylor's (2009) emphasis on the centrality of critical reflection in perspective transformation, while the progression from individual to collective transformation echoes Freire's (2000) concept of conscientization. The model's emphasis on positive feedback as a catalyst for sustained activism is supported by Gamson's (1992) work on collective identity formation in social movements, where he demonstrates how positive recognition reinforces commitment to collective action. The integration of metacognitive processes with social movement participation finds theoretical support in Eyerman & Jamison's (1991) cognitive praxis framework, which conceptualizes social movements as knowledge-producing enterprises. The transition from member to activist through strengthened group positioning aligns with what della Porta & Diani (2006) term 'activist identity construction' - a process whereby individuals develop deeper commitment through positive movement experiences. Furthermore, the model's emphasis on the relationship between individual transformation and collective action is theoretically grounded in Holford's (1995) analysis of how social movements serve as sites of both personal and social transformation. The iterative nature of the learning process depicted in the model reflects Melucci's (1996) understanding of collective action as a continuous process of identity construction and meaning-making. The role of positive feedback in strengthening movement commitment is further supported by Klandermans' (1997) research on the social psychology of protest, which demonstrates how positive movement experiences reinforce participation and leadership development.

Conclusion: Insights for Theory and Practice

Based on the findings of this qualitative research, a model of Transformative Learning and Activism (TLA) has emerged. This model suggests that when a person transcends the stage of critical reflection and begins searching for others who share similar values and beliefs—and who have undergone, to some extent, a change similar to their own—this individual is likely to undergo a transformation from a mere member to an activist and leader within the social movement. This transformation occurs if their position within the group is strengthened through positive feedback for all the efforts they make for the benefit of the movement. The opposite is also likely to be true. I recommend that future researchers test this model using quantitative measures to examine its validity and minimize researcher subjectivity. Additionally, qualitative in-depth interviews could be used to explore similar experiences in different social movements.

The results of this research indicate that the first stages of Transformative Learning Theory (i.e., self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions, and recognition that others have shared similar transformations) are the most important, as their impact has had the most significant influence on self-transformation compared to the other phases. Some of these phases occurred

simultaneously, so the emerging model shows a good fit in combining these phases with the less important ones, as shown in Figure 1. Therefore, it is recommended that further research be conducted on the most influential phases of TL theory with additional participants and in different settings. This would provide a robust understanding of how individuals move from one phase to another, how learning occurs during these phases, and how cognition, metacognition, and the affective components of interaction develop during each phase and stage.

I also recommend that civil society organizations and NGOs working for the promotion of human rights and equality design comprehensive workshops to empower marginalized and oppressed individuals, with particular attention to community input and cultural context. First, they should identify the values and assumptions that they want workshop participants to learn through collaborative community consultation, ensuring that the process is participant-centered rather than top-down instruction. Second, they should start the workshops with culturally relevant situations or narratives that challenge participants' prior assumptions and beliefs while maintaining psychological safety in discussions. Third, they should invite participants to comment on those situations or narratives in two ways: a) how they relate to these situations considering their local context and lived experiences, and b) what they would do if they were in such situations, taking into account systemic barriers and power dynamics. Fourth, participants should discuss their solutions and ideas in groups, fostering peer-to-peer learning and developing local leadership capacity through facilitated discussions. Fifth, different culturally appropriate skills and strategies to address the situation should be presented, and participants should be allowed to choose and adapt the ones that suit their specific needs and community contexts. Sixth, participants should be given new problematic situations relevant to their local reality and practice the learned skills and strategies to solve them, with ongoing support mechanisms for sustainable implementation. Throughout this process, workshops should actively address existing power structures, incorporate indigenous knowledge, and ensure cultural sensitivity in all activities. Indeed, Transformative Learning courses are valuable assets in empowering the oppressed and marginalized and require further research and insights from practical perspectives.

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