

Transformative Music Learning Experiences: A Chinese Immigrant in Northeastern Brazil and his Love for *Música Sertaneja*

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Abstract: This article uses the story of a Chinese immigrant in Brazil and his love of *música sertaneja* as a starting point to discuss his adaptation to a new society and the way in which his music learning played an important role in this process. Anchored in the ideals of Narrative Inquiry and inspired by Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, the article then extrapolates from this unique story to present a broad discussion that includes ideas about music education, immigration, identity, individual and social transformation, empowerment, and self-definition. The article concludes with reflections about the importance of music learning to the adaptation of immigrants in general, an idea that has wide applicability, being useful both for immigrants themselves, as well as for teachers and policymakers.

Keywords: Transformative Music Learning; Immigration and music; *Música sertaneja*.

EXPERIÊNCIAS DE APRENDIZAGEM DE MÚSICA TRANSFORMADORAS: UM IMIGRANTE CHINÊS NO NORDESTE BRASILEIRO E SEU AMOR PELA MÚSICA SERTANEJA

Resumo: Este artigo utiliza a história de vida de um imigrante chinês no Brasil e seu amor pela música sertaneja como ponto de partida para discutir sua adaptação a uma nova sociedade e a forma na qual seu aprendizado musical ocupou um papel importante neste processo. Ancorado nos ideais de Pesquisa Narrativa e inspirado pela Teoria do Aprendizado Transformador de Jack Mezirow, o artigo apresenta uma discussão que inclui ideias sobre educação musical, imigração, identidade, transformação individual e social, empoderamento e auto-definição. A conclusão fornece reflexões sobre a importância do aprendizado musical para a adaptação de imigrantes de forma geral, uma ideia que tem aplicabilidade geral, sendo útil tanto para os imigrantes quanto para professores e elaboradores de políticas públicas de educação.

Palavras-chave: Aprendizagem musical transformadora; Imigração e música; *Música sertaneja*.



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1. Introduction

This article explores how a Chinese immigrant living in Northeastern Brazil used his learning of *música sertaneja* as a powerful tool to help his adaptation to his new country. As many immigrants like him, Yan¹ decided to come to the other side of the world in search of adventure and better life conditions, starting a family in his new country, and working hard for more than three decades in order to provide for them, eventually owning his own restaurant. Throughout the years, Yan learned a vast repertoire of *música sertaneja* songs, often performing them in social situations, impressing people with his masterful renditions, which are perceived as both heartfelt and authentic.

Performing *música sertaneja* became a political instrument and an act of rebellion by Yan: his self-motivated, nonconformist, and autodidactic learning process provides a powerful example of the potential of transformative music learning experiences to help immigrants better cope with feelings of longing, alienation, isolation, and in-betweenness. Such a transformative learning process may result in a rearrangement of one's identity and a critical questioning of one's meaning perspectives, with the resulting intercultural identity being much more inclusive than the original (Mezirow 1991). The story of a highly motivated transnational individual involved in a lifelong music learning and music making process can provide valuable insights to music educators and music students alike about how to better utilize music as a tool to help immigrants reconcile the conflicting feelings of topophilia and topophobia towards their native and their adopted lands, while also empowering them to take control of their right to self-definition and to proudly claim their unique hyphenated identities. This article thus starts from an individual's story and hopes to glean from it some ideas and principles that can be widely used in relation to other immigration stories, an extremely relevant topic in the modern world.

¹We use his real first name with his permission, but chose to omit his last name.

2. Methodology

The research about Yan's life draws on ideas of Narrative Inquiry, which offer a unique opportunity to delve into people's complex and fluid experiences without oversimplifying them, by preserving the integrity of their narratives as constructed by themselves and narrated by their own voices (Clandinin; Connelly 2000). Narrative Inquiry is

a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that made up people's lives, both individual and social (Clandinin; Connelly 2000, 20).

An important benefit of narrative inquiry is its ability to create resonance among different people. Although this should not be perceived as its sole goal, "the power of narrative (...) is, perhaps, a function of its capacity to set in motion some kind of sympathetic vibration" (Bowman 2009, 217). Another benefit is that "the act of narrating a significant life event itself facilitates positive change, (...) lead[ing] to personal emancipation (...) [T]he narrator is his or her own audience, the one who needs to hear alternative versions of his or her identity or life events" (Chase 2005, 667-668). Narrative is truer and more important than the experience itself, since the latter would not be understood without the former (Freeman 2007). The study of narrative, thus, relies on the idea that reality is socially constructed (Stauffer; Barrett 2009, 20), according to the uniqueness of each person's points of view and interpretations. Meaning itself only happens as consequence of narrative. Or, as Bruner (1994) puts it, "life as led is inseparable from a life as told. (...) [L]ife is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold" (*apud* Webster; Mertova 2007, 2).

3. Yan's life in 3 vignettes

Yan shared his life story with us in great detail and seemed elated at the opportunity of narrating it. For the purpose of this article, though, we have chosen at first three episodes that represent essential steps in his story and that encapsulate how his music learning was essential to his sense of belonging and to the construction of his hyphenated identity as a Chinese-Brazilian. Later in the article, other parts of his story will be included as well.

3.1. Illegal border-crossing

"I was born in Taiwan in 1949. After working a few years as a sailor, I went to Paraguay in 1979, since I was not able to fulfill my dream of moving to the US. After a short while, I decided to come to Brazil, although I did not have a visa. Someone helped me cross the border, but I was caught by a policeman. In the police station, they gave me a piece of paper to sign, in which I admitted that I had entered the country illegally, and in which I said that I would leave. However, a guard talked to me in broken English: "Tomorrow, you, bus, São Paulo, 8 o'clock." I understood that, at this hour, I could enter Brazil again, maybe he would be in his shift and would let me go through. I gave him 50 dollars. The next day, I took the bus, and this time it worked, nobody bothered me. But that document I signed would come back to haunt me in the future".

3.2. Encountering his passion for *música sertaneja*

"In those early years, I once went to a bar with a friend. We were sitting with some Brazilian girls. Then, I clapped after someone finished singing a *música sertaneja* song. One of the girls said: 'Why do you clap if you don't even understand what you are clapping for?' I got irritated and told her one day I would sing all those songs. She thought I was joking. But, later, I was working in a big restaurant in São Paulo, a *churrascaria*, a place that could fit 400 people. They had live music. One day, the main singer didn't show up, and I offered to replace him. So, that was my 1st time singing in front of Brazilians. Then, I started to do it frequently and was getting famous; people knew that this restaurant had a Chinese guy singing *música sertaneja*, so they would go there because of me. One day, a producer from the Sílvio Santos show was in the restaurant and invited me to go to the show. So, there I was, singing *música sertaneja* in Brazilian national TV!"

3.3. Becoming Brazilian

"I had tried twice to get Brazilian citizenship but was rejected both times. The reason they gave me is that I had committed a crime, which was on my record. There was that document that I had signed, admitting to coming to Brazil illegally and promising to return to Paraguay. I thought: my only crime is that I entered the country illegally. I did not steal money; I didn't do anything terrible. I LOVE Brazil. I wanted to stay in your country, WHY do you refuse me? So, I decided to go to Brasília and made an appointment at the Ministry of Justice. This lady assumed that I did not speak Portuguese well at first. But I proved her wrong. Later in our conversation, she got a bit irritated with my insistence, so I said "let's not talk more, let's compete. Let's have a singing contest. If I know more Brazilian songs than you, I win and you give me an answer within 24 hours". She asked me what kind of music I sang. "*Música sertaneja*, 50 songs by heart". I started to tell her names of singers, then I sang parts of several songs. After this, she said that I would get an answer in a few days. But, as I was leaving, her secretary told me that, when her boss says this, usually it meant a good thing. In a few days, I indeed received my package with my citizenship certificate. It gave me such a feeling of stability, acceptance, of finally belonging to the place where I chose to live. I think, in a way, a person who chooses to be Brazilian should be more Brazilian than someone who just happens to be born here."

4. Yan and *Música Caipira/Sertaneja*: A dialogue of shared experiences of longing

What first attracted Yan to *música sertaneja* were its similarities to Chinese songs that he used to enjoy back in Taiwan, such as those by Teresa Teng (whose Chinese name is "*Deng Lijun*", 邓丽君). These similarities are both musical – the "lilting tones and leisurely tempo of Teng's music" (Shiau 2009, 271) sound indeed similar to some *música sertaneja* songs, and Yan also mentions a common tendency to prolong the last syllables of a verse – as well as thematic, with a common mixture of melancholia, longing and sweetness in the lyrics, sung by voices that seem to be at times weeping and pleading. *Música sertaneja* was thus not only a way for Yan to connect better to his adopted land, but also a way to keep him anchored to the musical preferences he had brought from his homeland. Nonetheless, some emerging themes found in *música sertaneja* also resonate with the context of an immigrant's life, and one may wonder whether these also made this style so appealing for Yan, even if at an unconscious level.

Both *música sertaneja* and the genre considered as its ancestor – *música caipira* – are intrinsically connected with rural life. As rural-urban migration intensified in the early 20th century in Brazil, *música caipira* was something that, more than anything else, connected migrants to their roots. The songs' lyrics would depict

the "bucolic, romantic and idyllic" (Zan 2008, 2, our translation) life at the countryside, thus providing the countryperson with the "permanence of a cultural matrix... [with] a social identity" (Machado; Gutemberg 2009, 1, our translation), while also gradually referring to his perplexity in face of societal changes. *Música caipira* came to represent the "stable rural world, of well-defined relations... as a prototype of the perfect and desired social order" (Dent 2009, 47), while the migrants were "longing for an unrecoverable past" (Murphy 2010, 418), imagining an "edenic field, distant and pure, to where one dreamt to return one day" (Alencar 2000, 6, our translation), and "criticizing an increasingly inescapable urban life" (Dent 2009, 312). Yan feels a deep affinity with this genre of music that is so "rooted in the experience of migration as a loss" (Dent 2009, 45), something that could also describe very well his own experience as an immigrant. One example of this longing can be found in the famous song *Luar do Sertão*, which praises the beauty of the incomparable moonlight in the countryside and presents the "typical beauty of songs of exile" (Siscar 1990, 50).

One can find similar themes of departure and longing in many of Teresa Teng's songs; for instance, The Country Person ("*Yuan Xiangren*" in Chinese, 原乡人) describes the experience of leaving the countryside behind, the painful memories, and the desire to return, all while idealizing elements from the nature. Shiao describes how this song "narrates a 'quiet' departure," which mirrors the experiences of many Chinese immigrants in foreign countries: "legally or illegally, they [leave] quietly, knowing that they would settle elsewhere and perhaps never return" (Shiao 2009, 268). In Yan's case, both musical and thematic similarities made him feel at home with *música sertaneja*. Therefore, this demonstrates how learning a music style that shares similarities with another one from an immigrant's past might be useful to straddle the path between old and new, bringing the immigrant closer to a new culture while keeping him/her anchored in his/her original one.

5. Transformative Learning Theory: Key concepts and their applicability to immigrants

Transformative Learning Theory is a useful theoretical framework to analyze lives of people whose learning experiences provided a catalyst for deep change. Mezirow defines transformative learning as a way of learning that "transforms problematic frames of reference — sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) — to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow 2003, 59). Transformative learning is based upon the constructivist belief that the meaning of reality is determined subjectively by the individual, rather than found in external sources, and that this meaning is mostly built through interaction and communication among people. Therefore, an important factor that aids the occurrence of transformative learning is when potential learners engage in dialogue about their experiences (Kitchenham 2008).

We have "approved ways of seeing and understanding, shaped by our language, culture, and personal experience, [which] collaborate to set limits to our future learning" (Mezirow 1991, 1). These frames of reference² are not transformed as long as new information we learn does not contradict them (Mezirow 1997, 7). Frames of reference are not necessarily negative, since we need them to "construe meaning by

² Frames of reference are also referred to as "the structure of cultural and psychological assumptions within which our past experience assimilates and transforms new experience" (Mezirow, 1985, 21).

attributing coherence and significance to our experience" (Mezirow 2006, 26). They determine how we think and act, but they remain largely unconscious for most people, since they are internalized as we grow up. If we encounter something that does not fit into our frames of reference, we tend to reject it as untrue. Questioning our assumptions can be a painful process, threatening our sense of self and undermining the foundation of our psyches. It is not surprising, then, that "we defend our social roles with the armor of our strongest emotions" (Mezirow 1978, 105).

Frames of reference consist of two elements: "habits of mind", which are broad assumptions that filter every moment of our contact with the world, and "points of view", which are "sets of immediate, specific beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and value judgments" (Mezirow 2000, 18). Points of view are more specific, and easier to change, whereas the transformation of habits of mind causes greater impact in a person's life. A distorted meaning perspective means that the learner experiences reality "in a way that arbitrarily limits what is included, impedes differentiation, lacks permeability or openness to other ways of seeing, [and] does not facilitate an integration of experience" (Mezirow 1991, 188). Transformative learning experiences can happen by different degrees, either through a simple exploration within existing frames of reference, or through the act of learning new frames of reference, which can include the transformations of points of views, or, for a more profound change, the transformation of habits of mind (Kitchenham 2008; Leung 2014). This deeper transformation is possible when a problem cannot be understood (and, therefore, cannot be solved) using current meaning schemes, requiring to be redefined before it can be tackled (Kitchenham 2008, 111).

In his attempt to systematize and better understand such a complex experience, Mezirow (1978) proposes 10 phases to transformative learning: a (1) disorienting dilemma: an experience that, by not conforming with an individual's normal expectations, creates a psychological sense of disequilibrium and works as the catalyst for transformation, leading to (2) a self-examination accompanied by feelings of guilt, shame, anger, fear, and to (3) a critical assessment of one's assumptions. The individual then (4) recognizes that the discontent she experiences and the process of transformation are shared among others as well, and (5) starts exploring new roles, relationships, and actions. She then (6) plans a new course of action, and (7) acquires the knowledge and skills to put this plan in action. After (8) provisionally trying out new roles, the individual (9) builds competence and self-confidence in these roles, finally (10) reintegrating the new perspective into her own life with these new conditions. Years later, Mezirow (1991) decided to add an extra phase, between (8) and (9), in which the individual renegotiates current relationships, as well as develops new relationships with others. This is a useful model, but, as a model, it necessarily simplifies and attaches labels to an experience that tends to be much richer and more fluid to people living through it. Thus, it is useful to try to encounter these separate phases in specific facets of one's life, but transformative learning experiences do not necessarily include all ten (or eleven) phases, and some phases might actually overlap with others, not being easily pinpointed in the midst of the turmoil of a meaning transformation (Leung 2014).

The field of Transformative Learning has tended to be mostly concerned with voices from the mainstream, therefore Taylor and Cranton (2012) urge researchers to apply its ideas and ideals to marginalized individuals and populations. Marginalized populations are "those excluded from mainstream social, economic, cultural, or political life" (Cook 2008, 495); immigrants often fall into this category. It is interesting to discuss how and why some individuals are able to overcome their limiting beliefs, whereas other people "struggle to forge new directions for their lives" (Nestor 2014, 99). Educators and researchers still do not have a complete

answer to explain this discrepancy in some people's ability to redesign their lives, as well as conceive their lives as "shapeable" — that is, capable of responding and adapting to the specific challenges faced by them.

Inspired by Freire's (1970) thoughts, Schugurensky (2002) believes that transformative experiences are particularly important for marginalized individuals, such as immigrants, especially when these experiences permit them to question authority, to develop critical thinking, and to engage in collective action. He distinguishes between three kinds of transformation: "transformation of individual consciousness, transformation of individual behavior, and social transformation" (Schugurensky 2002, 61). The first happens at the level of beliefs, the second at the level of attitudes, and the third begins when personal transformation spills over to affect other people. Even though these phases are related, it is not guaranteed that one of them will necessarily lead to the next. What might contribute to the connection between individual and social transformation is the presence of "a supportive social environment, a social reality that is susceptible of transformation (...) and a sense of community" (Schugurensky 2002, 62). Context is thus an essential tool for an individual's experience to be able to influence a much larger community.

6. Immigration and identity

It is interesting to reflect on Yan's life experiences keeping in mind the concepts of topophilia and topophobia — respectively, "love and attachment" and "negative feelings and unfriendly attitudes" towards a place — which illustrate how "diverse and contradictory" the life of an immigrant usually is (Ma 2003, 11). Since topophilia and topophobia tend to co-exist, "wax[ing] and wan[ing] [in relation to an immigrant's] homeland as well as hostland", an immigrant is likely to suffer from some kind

of spatial uncertainty. (...) Feelings of belonging to and longing for a place do not always coincide, which can greatly torture him as he struggles with the questions of national and local cultural identity and with issues of nationalism, citizenship, nationality, patriotism, ethnicity, loyalty, cultural assimilation, and social and spatial integration (...). He is frequently psychologically pulled apart by feelings of in-betweenness (Ma 2003, 11).

Immigrants are often torn between a desire to return, and a desire to fit in, to fully belong to their new environment. They are also prey to the myth of return, which gets stronger with the passing of time; as SAID (1999) writes, "they cannot return to the place they left, as they left it, [because] it too has changed. There are, of course, plenty of migrants who do return to the places from which they came, but even here the feeling of being 'out of place' may continue" (*apud* Baily; Collyer 2006, 171). Yan himself mentions the feeling, partaken by most immigrants, of never being able to feel at home; he will never be a total Brazilian, regardless of how many songs he may learn, but, when he goes back to Taiwan, people view him as a foreigner.

These feelings are certainly part of the subtext in Yan's narratives about his life. In the Brazilian context, it is also important to notice that "public acceptance of hyphenated ethnicity remains contested" (Lesser 1999, 169); it is as though immigrants are not seen as fully Brazilian, especially those whose "physiognomy often allows instant categorization" (Lesser 1999, 169)³. Immigrants everywhere wish to be able to have a

³Brazilian might use words as *árabe*, *turco* or *japão* to describe people from those ethnicities, "whether they [be] prominent ministers or local bookstore owners" (LESSER, 1999, 173). The society is thus multicultural but hyphenless.

hyphenated identity, which recognizes not only where they came from but also the place where they chose to restart their lives. Yan's love for *música sertaneja* is a genuine love for the music itself, as well as an attempt to overcome his hyphenless state: he wanted to be recognized by Brazilian society as being Chinese-Brazilian, not merely as a 'typical' Chinese immigrant. He desired to be recognized as Brazilian as well, even as he did not want to forget his roots. His attitude reverberates with Lesser's (1999) affirmation about how "hyphenated Brazilians [incorporate] many elements of majority culture even as they [remain] distinct" (Lesser 1999, 5). Music thus became an important cultural capital for Yan, allowing him to negotiate his new identity within Brazilian society, and acting as a window for him to better understand it, while also being able to reminisce about the kind of Chinese music he loves.

The fluidity of an immigrant's identity is nowadays much more accentuated than in the past. Due to technological advancements, in both travelling and communications, which have made the world smaller, there is much less uprooting, since many immigrants are usually able and willing to maintain constant ties between their native and adopted countries, thus establishing "multilocale attachments that stretch across national boundaries" (Miron; Inda; Aguirre 1998, 668).

Ang (2001) embraces wholeheartedly the concept of hybridity, but also warns that hybridity "can never be a question of simple shaking hands, of happy, harmonious merger and fusion. [It] is not a solution, but alerts us to the incommensurability of differences, their ultimately irreducible resistance to complete dissolution" (Ang 2001, 17). Because of her dislike of 'essentialized' identities, she feels that both multiculturalism and diaspora are concepts that are "ultimately limited by their implied boundedness" (Ang 2001, 16). That is, in spite of the fact that both ideas imply a certain sense of transgression ('diaspora' transgresses the boundaries of the nation-state by connecting groups of people all over the world, whereas 'multiculturalism' transgresses the traditional idea of national homogeneity inside a nation-state), both of them end up drawing other rigid boundaries around the groups they represent. She finds that an evolving notion of hybridity is thus better capable of dealing with the "complicated entanglement" of reality.

6.1. Transformative learning in immigrants' experiences

Although it might be simplistic to affirm that one unique, isolated experience might be the single "disorienting dilemma" that will disrupt a person's experiences and eventually cause a re-arrangement of his/her "meaning perspectives" (Mezirow 1978), one might wonder if some experiences indeed deserve to be called transformative, based on the sheer impact they might have on an individual's life. If so, immigration to a different country would certainly qualify, and the disorienting dilemma may "manifest itself as a general culture shock, the intensity of which depends on the breadth and depth of differences between the domestic culture and the host country" (Fursova 2013, 7). There are few other experiences with such a potential for totally upending one's notion of self.

At the same time, the broad experience of immigration is constituted of several smaller aspects in each immigrant's life, and this myriad of experiences is certainly too complex to neatly "fit" in some theoretical model. Although transformation might take place, its factors are not as clear-cut, and it is thus complicated to try to isolate a single disorienting dilemma, when there are, most often, multiple disorienting dilemmas operating simultaneously (Duchesne 2009). Furthermore, transformation might often even have positive and negative effects simultaneously, which make their analysis more cumbersome. Nonetheless, it is evident that many — if not most — experiences that an immigrant goes through in her new environment are

disorienting and disrupting, often contradicting the cultural capital she brought from her homeland, which may not be recognized as legitimate in her host nation (Morrice 2013).

The logical question is to ponder which factors may contribute for an immigrant's experience of transformation to be positive or not. The answer includes at least three essential elements: the individual's own acts, past history, and environmental influences. Whether an immigrant will use her disorienting dilemmas as catalysts for positive transformation depends partially on whether she will consciously use self-reflection to critically re-assess her condition, and to explore new possibilities, roles, and capacities for her life. This rational process emphasizes the individual's agency; however — and this dovetails with some of the criticisms to Mezirow's original theory (Taylor 2012) — one cannot ignore how the environment and the person's life conditions will affect her capacity to promote a "fundamental change in [his/her] personality", with "the resolution of a personal dilemma and the expansion of consciousness resulting in greater personality integration" (Boyd 1989, 459). One simple example of this relates to different economic realities; if an individual immigrated in a difficult financial situation, she might have a harder time adapting to her new environment, as most of her time will be spent simply making ends meet. Moreover, if the immigrant is in an environment that values her previously accumulated cultural capital, that fosters a truly multicultural society, and that provides immigrants with programs and tools to ease their integration into society, it is more likely that her transformation will allow the expansion of her frames of reference without causing the kind of "identity deconstruction" mentioned by Morrice (2013).

Music making can act as a way to protect an immigrant's right to self-definition. Karlsen (2013) presents a story about a Chinese student in a Finnish classroom: when his teacher hinted that he could present Chinese music to his classroom (as part of a project in which students were presenting different national musics to the others), he defied her expectations and chose to present Scottish music instead, a style about which he had no knowledge at the time. Although the author says that this student proudly identifies himself as Chinese, at the same time he rebelled against the kind of reductionist thinking that denies his right to a "multifaceted, plural, complex and even contradictory" identity (Karlsen 2013, 172). Music – and music-related activities, attitudes, and perceptions – are major environmental influences that may positively or negatively affect an immigrant's possible transformation. Phelan (2012) uses the concept of "sonic hospitality" to discuss how music – especially the act of making music together – can be used to welcome and bring together people of different origins, by overcoming linguistic barriers, and promoting diversity in a society which understands that, "in a world characterized by increased diversity and mobility, migrants occupy a unique position as cultural brokers and mediation figures" (Phelan 2012, 178). Higgins (2012) also concurs that community music activities can be used to welcome people from any origins, creating "a porous, permeable, open-ended affirmation" for everyone involved in "creative music making" (Higgins 2012, 137).

However, this was not the case with Yan: he did not benefit from any programs specifically designed to foster greater multiculturalism, and he does not feel that his Chinese cultural capital was valued by Brazilian society in any explicit way. Nonetheless, despite the fact his new environment did not foster a positive transformative experience (one that would not cause identity deconstruction), this positive transformation happened because of Yan's own actions – his desire to learn and master a Brazilian music genre, by purposefully reaching out to his new community, while also choosing a style that kept him connected to the kind of music that he used to enjoy back in Taiwan. His own actions were thus fundamental to his process of transformative learning.

7. Discussion: Mezirow's transformative stages reflected in Yan's case

Transformation can occur in both epochal and cumulative ways; more often than not, transformations of different degrees happen over an extended period of time, some overlapping with others, and each strengthening a broader transformation. The more complex a situation is, the more difficult it is to pinpoint a specific moment when transformation happens. Some dilemmas help an individual start a transformative process, if all the conditions — internal and external — are met. Other dilemmas might cause someone to go through a few of the stages described by Mezirow, but without creating a real transformation in the end; the individual might go to a “liminal zone” and then return to his previous “cocoon of meaning” (Green 2011). This might happen if the individual’s own agency was not persistent enough, if his/her abilities were not sufficient, or if environmental influences strongly disrupted the possibility of transformation, as it will be discussed later. Those dilemmas that do entice a transformative learning experience end up contributing to the larger cumulative transformation that the individual experiences over the years, as shown in Figure 1. The diagram below captures potential paths between disorienting dilemmas and their possible resolutions into transformative experiences, and demonstrates how several of these experiences gradually add up to a larger transformation.

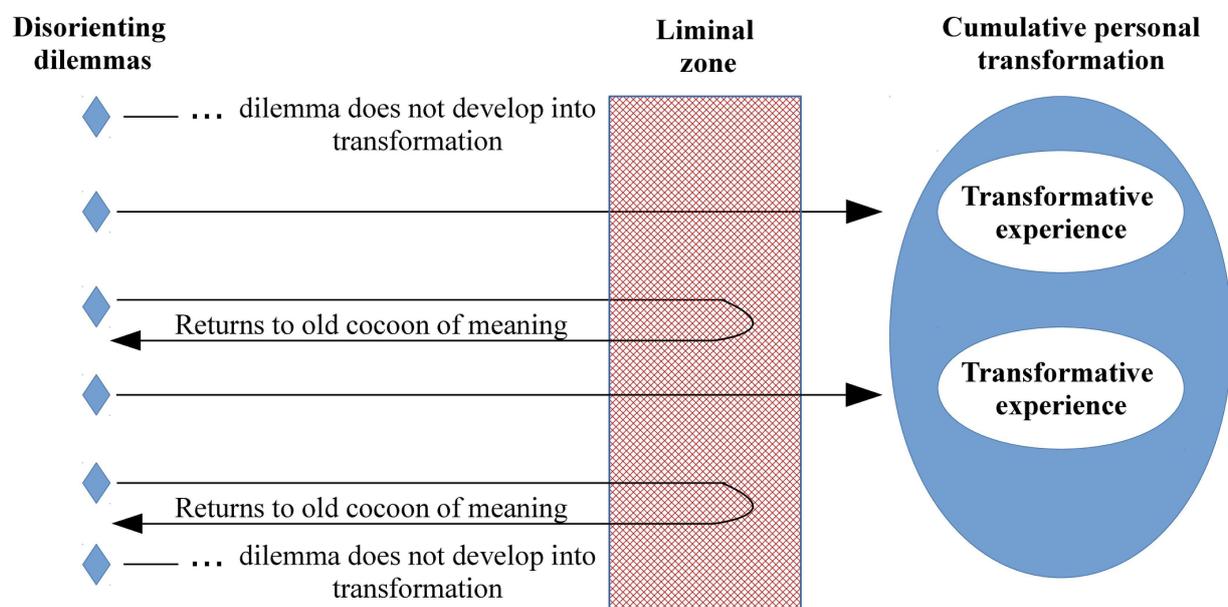


Figure 1 - Disorienting dilemmas, liminal stage, and transformative experiences.

A disorienting dilemma is the original trigger for transformation, presenting the individual with a situation that cannot be explained according to his/her current frames of reference, thus creating a state of disequilibrium that may eventually result in a durable transformation. In Yan's life, for instance, his most significant “disorienting dilemma” was certainly the experience of immigration itself, which provides a total upending of one’s sense of self, especially when the individual is faced with an environment that is radically different from his home country. At the same time, this larger disorienting dilemma can be broken down into several smaller ones, which he encountered in his daily life, throughout the weeks, months, and years after his original immigration.

A significant disorienting dilemma for Yan happened in that moment when some girls in a bar laughed at him for supposedly not understanding *música sertaneja*; this vividly remembered moment would spur his

transformative learning experience. At first, this experience was accompanied by immediate *feelings of shame and anger*, which Mezirow describes as part of his 2nd stage. As Yan told me:

I felt like I didn't belong there, I wanted to go hide somewhere! But I also felt challenged at that moment. I wanted to learn it. There's no rule that says that a Chinese person cannot sing *música sertaneja*, it's all inside people's heads. I wanted to mess with their heads, that's the dream I had at that moment (laughter). I wanted my voice to be heard by them.

Therefore, the disorienting dilemma and the feelings happened almost simultaneously, and Yan immediately started a process of self-examination, trying to understand why he felt shame for not knowing that genre of music. After all, he was an immigrant, not born in Brazilian society; therefore, from a strictly rational standpoint, he should not feel shame for not knowing *música sertaneja*. He was not only examining himself and his feelings, but also *critically assessing the assumptions* (Mezirow's 3rd stage) that were part of the societal fabric: he did not accept the assumption that a Chinese immigrant should not be able to understand or appreciate *música sertaneja*, pointing out the arbitrariness of such biased thinking.

Even more importantly, he felt challenged by what had happened. Different people might have reacted differently; not everyone would have had such a positive reaction after being subjected to a mocking remark. Others might have closed themselves further up into their "accepted" roles as immigrants, staying mostly within their immigrant communities. Yan's response, though, was the opposite: he wanted to learn that music style, mingle with Brazilians, and change their perceptions about him. Evidently, when he mentions this fantasy, he is not referring to those specific girls, since he would probably never meet them again. Rather, he took those girls to represent a significant part of Brazilian society, as symbols of the rejection he experienced on a daily basis in many of his interactions with Brazilians, and he became determined to prove them wrong:

I experienced so many things in my time in Brazil. I was once shopping in a supermarket in São Paulo, and I got badly hurt with some broken glass, and the supermarket then didn't want to compensate me, which I felt was because I was Chinese and my Portuguese was quite poor at the time. At a different time, when I was working in a restaurant, the owner's dog bit me, and nobody came apologize to me. I suffered a lot.

Examples of this sort might probably be narrated by almost all members of visible minorities; if one is mistreated, it is difficult to shake away the feeling that it probably happened because of one's ethnicity. With a recent immigrant who has not yet mastered the country's language, this feeling is obviously stronger. The fact that Yan has successfully proceeded through all transformative stages after his disorienting dilemma at the bar does not mean that he was always able to use the potential of other disorienting dilemmas, such as the ones in these other situations he narrated.

Much on the contrary, some situations caused the disequilibrium of a disorienting dilemma, and were followed by feelings of anger and shame (Mezirow's 2nd stage), but did not progress towards full transformation, due to limiting meaning perspectives directly connected to his status as an immigrant. For instance, Yan humorously told the story of how he met the three daughters of a tofu factory's owner. One of their cousins hinted to him, partially jokingly, that he should choose one of them to marry:

But, you know, I was an illegal immigrant, my self-esteem was so low, I didn't think I ever would have a shot at having them interested in me.... You know, they were a very

traditional family, the sisters were getting old, and they had to find a Chinese man to marry. But I was shy, I was poor, and I didn't think that could be possible.... After three months, I stopped going to their house so much. I had a younger co-worker at the restaurant at the time, he met them as well, and he ended up marrying one of them, and today he is rich, since that tofu factory became one of the biggest in Brazil! I imagine what would have happened if I had married one of them....

While today, in retrospect, Yan is able to understand how his feelings of inadequacy and shyness were related to his condition as an immigrant, evidently this was not the case at that time. Throughout his long transformation, which included his experience of becoming a *música sertaneja* expert, he gradually was able to acquire, through self-reflection, meaning perspectives that are more inclusive and faithful to reality. Today, one could not imagine Yan as being shy or ashamed of himself; he is proud of everything he achieved in Brazil, and of his multifaceted identity. He also learned from this experience; years later, he met Maria, a Japanese-Brazilian who had a university degree in mathematics from the University of São Paulo. He described falling in love with her, but again experiencing feelings of inadequacy because of their different backgrounds; however, he was able to quickly reassess his meaning perspectives about this situation, and they married, had two children, and managed successful businesses.

One might wonder what spurred Yan to take up the situation in the bar as a challenge, rather than suffering quietly and tacitly accepting to forever remain as an outsider in his new country, unable to understand or appreciate a typically Brazilian music style. The answers to this question are multi-layered. First, Yan's music background gave him the meaning perspectives of a musician; he had confidence in his music learning abilities, and his identity in his earlier life was deeply connected to his music experiences and preferences. Secondly, as it was discussed earlier, *música sertaneja* had thematic and musical similarities to the kind of music Yan used to enjoy in Taiwan, so he did not feel that this learning experience was totally foreign to him. This experience might also have worked as the straw that broke the camel's back: Yan had suffered many indignities as a poor illegal immigrant in Brazil, and that moment — which he describes with vivid detail, having become so ingrained in his mind — was the point in time when he decided to take a stand and prove his self-worth.

Another factor that influenced his transformation was the fact that, after learning some songs and performing them in public, he generally started to receive warm, positive feedback from Brazilians. It is a mixed feedback, certainly, since part of the reaction was still too focused on his ethnicity, since he was also a source of amusement for being Chinese and singing a typical Brazilian genre in Portuguese. Still, Yan did feel that most people appreciated his music making after the initial surprise, and this environmental support — even if combined with some negative connotations — created a virtuous circle that encouraged him to keep learning *música sertaneja*. Last but not least, engagement with music (and arts in general) does have a specific capacity to entice "deep personal transformation" (Hoggan 2010, 212); therefore, this experience had a special, aesthetic, emotional element that helped Yan proceed in his progression through the stages of transformative learning.

Empathy and recognition of shared experiences with others corresponds to Mezirow's 4th stage. As most immigrants, Yan liked to spend much of his time bonding with other immigrants from his country. He thus intimately knew that those feelings of not being fully accepted were common among others. At the same time, Yan also knew some Chinese individuals who had successfully adapted to Brazil; he mentions, for

instance, that owner of a tofu factory, who had come from Zhejiang, or the owner of a restaurant, from Shandong, both of whom were respected businessmen. Therefore, Yan knew role models of immigrants who had achieved a high level of success in their adaptations to Brazil, as well as those immigrants who faced the same difficulties he was facing, but were not capable of using these difficulties as disorienting dilemmas to fuel positive transformation.

Mezirow's 5th, 6th, and 7th stages often happen in a conjugated manner; by learning *música sertaneja* songs, Yan started *exploring new roles, relationships, and actions*, while *planning a course of action* for accomplishing this. For instance, he mentioned having a diary in which he would write the songs' lyrics, which he would practice at any free moment he had, even while "going to the bathroom". He gradually *acquired the knowledge and skills to put his plan in action*, and he constantly searched for opportunities to sing in bars and karaokes. As his knowledge of the genre grew, he provisionally *tried new roles in which he could display his skills* (8th stage), searching for new opportunities to perform to people, as in that time when he offered to replace the singer of a band in the restaurant where he was working.

He *renegotiated his relationships* with Brazilians whom he already knew, and he used his new skills in order to *develop new relationships* as well (9th stage). He gradually *built competence and self-confidence in his new "role"* (10th stage), which allowed him even to perform in a TV station in front of a national audience. Finally, and gradually, he *reintegrated his new perspective of himself into his life* (11th stage), no longer experiencing feelings of inadequacy, having a well-integrated hybrid personality, a pride in his musical knowledge and a newfound confidence in himself. His performance in front of the Ministry of Justice official is an example of how he used his new skills to influence the environment around himself. He persevered in trying to obtain citizenship because he desired the feeling of closure and full acceptance that he would gain from this act.

The description presented in the paragraphs above is certainly a simplification of a much more complicated process, but it is still useful to understand how an immigrant might experience a transformative learning process. It is possible for an immigrant to reach the 5th stage, for instance, but not have the persistence to plan a course of action, thus not completing the transformation, returning instead to his/her previous "cocoon of meaning". Or one might experience the feelings of rejection typical of the 2nd stage, without taking any actions to critically examine the root causes of one's feelings. Rather than surrendering to his feeling of rejection, though, Yan chose to use his experience as a source of motivation for him to learn and embrace his new country's culture, continuing his transformative process to full fruition. Yan's example also demonstrates the three common desires that spur people to engage in a learning process that may result in transformation: curiosity, virtuosity, and social gratification (Kristensen 2009). Yan was curious about this new music style from his adopted country, he had a desire to master and become completely fluent in it, and he also wished to achieve greater respect and acceptance from Brazilian society. His music learning provides valuable lessons for music educators and for society in general, as it will be explored in the following section.

8. Discussion: Individual and social transformation

It is important to notice how individual and social transformations, in any context, are inextricably linked: “fostering transformative learning [is] as much about social change as personal transformation, where individual and social transformation are inherently linked” (Taylor 2009, 5). Indeed, one fundamental point about transformation is how, after it begins within one’s consciousness, it may translate into a change of individual behavior, which may, on its turn, incite social transformation. However, one cannot expect a causal relationship between the steps of this progression, because they will depend on “factors such as the context, the need for additional information, and the required skills and emotional commitment to proceed” (Schugurensky 2002, 62). The diagram below (Figure 2) presents these systemic characteristics of transformative learning: changes to assumptions, attitudes, psychological attributes (all of which belong to one’s consciousness), and behaviors. As shown by the dotted arrows, transformations in one aspect may influence the others, but this is not necessarily a foregone conclusion.

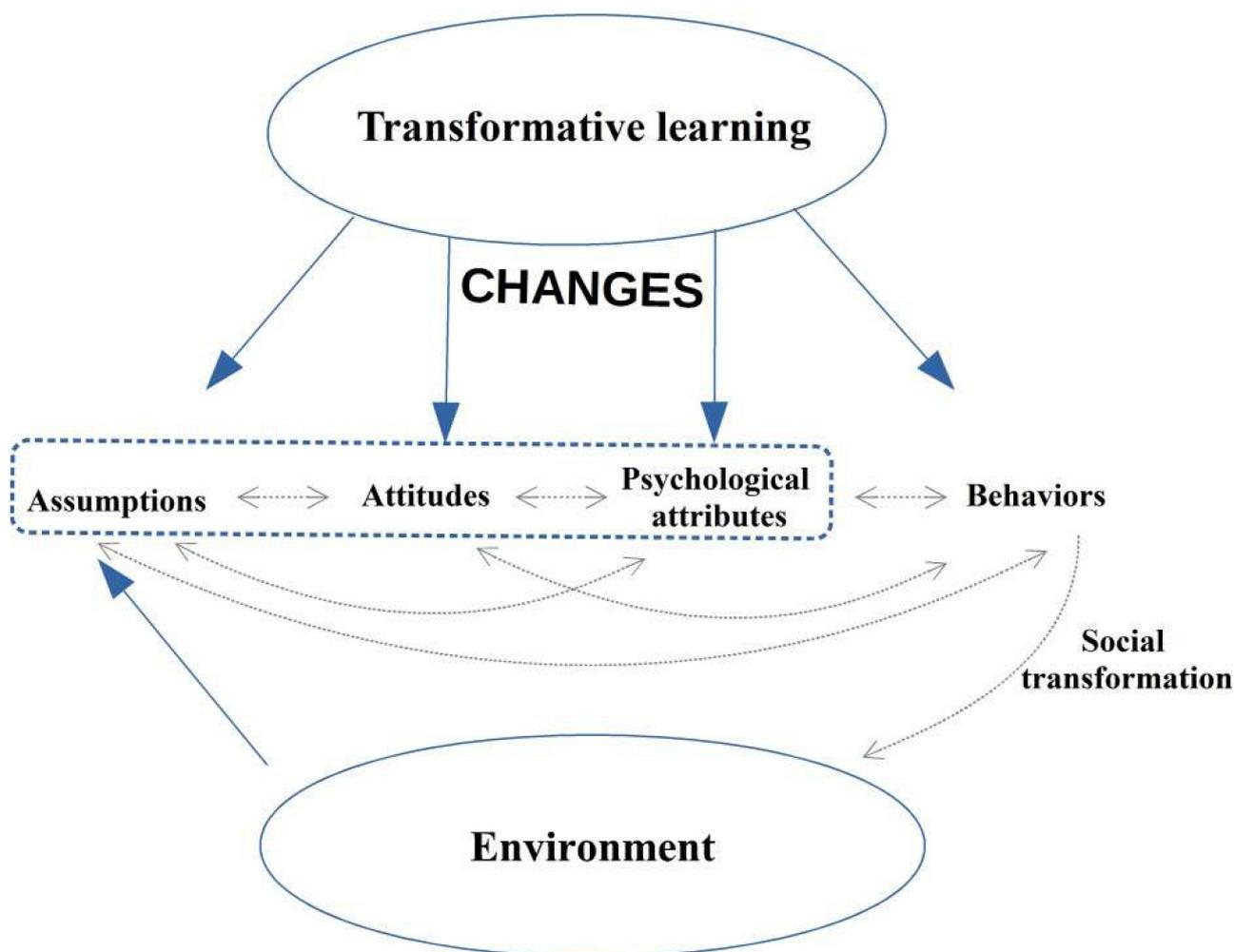


Figure 2 – Transformative Learning and Social Transformation

The diagram also shows how assumptions usually originate at the environment (that is, at the societal level), and then get accepted by the individual unconsciously, whereas changes in behaviors are individual but may create a ripple effect in the community. The environment provides the disorienting dilemmas and also influences the path towards transformation, either positively or negatively. An individual dilemma might lead a person to the liminal stage, as seen in Figure 1, and societal influences might then encourage or discourage her to complete the process.

People who undergo a personal transformation might have an overt desire to change other people's viewpoints. Yan, for instance, in his description of that scene in the bar, clearly directs his aim at society: "I wanted to mess with their heads". His personal transformation, originally spurred by a mocking comment, later helped some of his Brazilian listeners to overcome their own stereotypes about Chinese people and/or about immigrants in general, thus becoming a weapon against racism:

Usually, when I perform, people come talk to me afterwards, offer me a beer, and I am really happy at those people who don't even bother to ask the most common question: 'how come a Chinese can sing *música sertaneja*?' Sure, this is still the most commonly asked question! (laughter). But some people come talk to me about the music, about which songs they like the most, they ask me if I know such and such song. They treat me like a brother, like their countryman, they can see in me a fellow human being, not someone who is a foreigner. This makes me really happy. And a couple of people also come to me sometimes and confess: 'look, when I first saw you there, I thought it would be funny to see a Chinese singing *música sertaneja*, but, once you opened your mouth, I totally forgot that! You sang like a Brazilian, with so much feeling.

Mezirow's theory "tends to assign the responsibility for the transformational learning mostly to the person's own ability to confront his/her assumptions" (Qi 2009, 346), putting an emphasis on the individual's personal responsibility for his/her growth. Nonetheless, influences from the environment, including family and friends, cannot be ignored, as these can be instrumental in pushing an individual towards or away from transformative learning experiences. Individuals may undergo transformation partially because or in spite of environmental influences, but one cannot deny that they exist and exert a force in this process. Yan, for instance, did not initially experience an environment that was supportive of himself and of his plights as an immigrant. Rather, it was his own sense of agency that gave him the perseverance to pursue his transformative learning experience even in the absence of environmental support. At the same time, as he gradually developed his ability in *música sertaneja*, he started to receive some positive feedback from his environment, which motivated him to continue on his path. One can easily imagine that not all immigrants would have had Yan's inner strength to pursue this process against strong environmental influences. His example, though, also suggests how important it would be for society in general — and for music educators in particular — to offer activities and transformative learning experiences designed to help immigrants better adapt to their new environment, which could also hold the dual purpose of helping society to become more inclusive and appreciative of everyone's cultural capital.

Thus, personal agency and environmental influences from other individuals are both important factors behind a transformative learning experience, as shown in Figure 3 below. Nonetheless, the temporary absence of one element can be momentarily compensated by the other. The diagram below represents a symbiotic relationship between personal agency and environmental support, as both factors may feed on each other, spurring an individual towards transformation, and as one person's transformative learning influences other people's experiences, by helping to create an environment conducive for more transformation to occur, through social interaction. The dotted lines, which represent people who have not yet been affected, demonstrate the potentiality for further expansion and 'contagion' of transformative learning experiences. Education serves an important function to facilitate this process, by offering support to people who might not otherwise have a sense of personal agency strong enough to overcome the limitations of their environment.

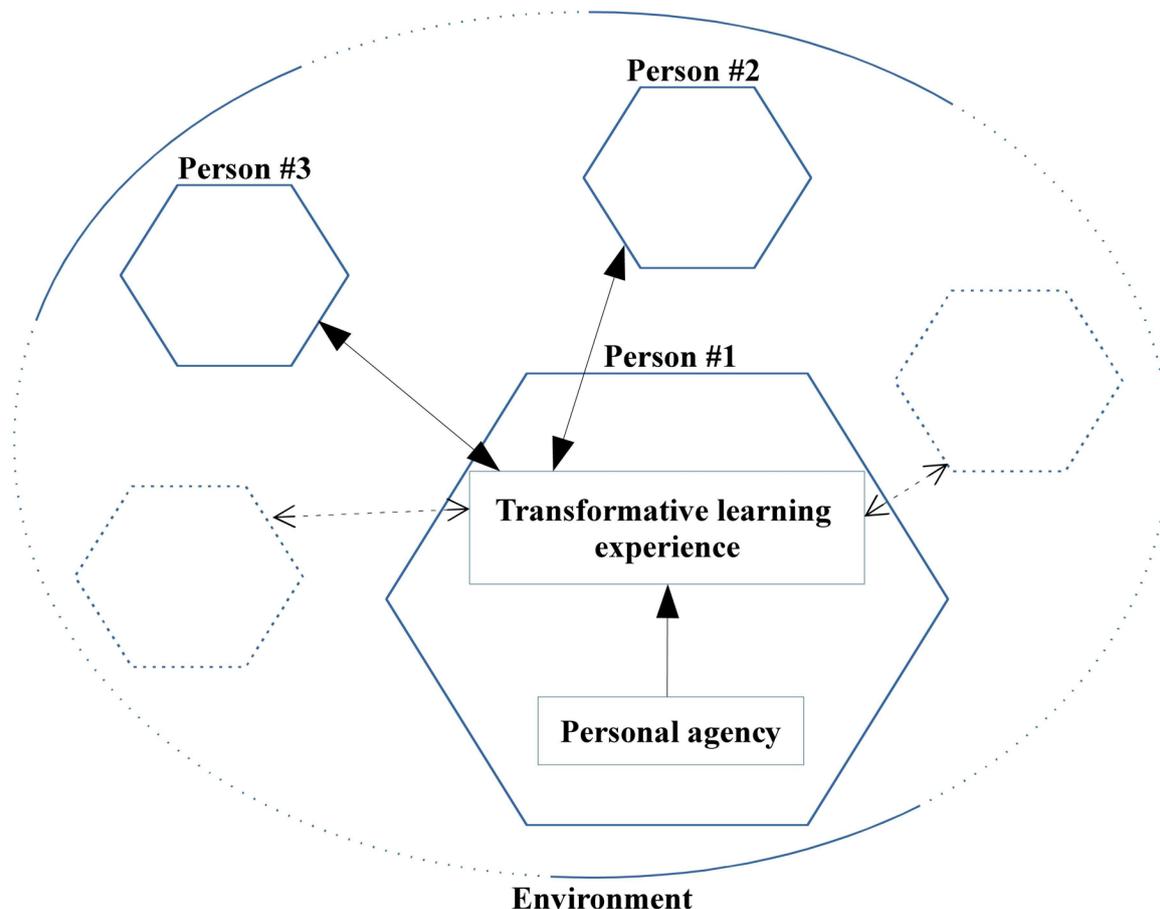


Figure 3 – Personal agency and environmental influences on transformative experiences

At this point, it is worthwhile to combine the previous diagrams in order to achieve a fuller picture, showing how transformation starts from a constellation of potential disorienting dilemmas, a few of which blossom into a full transformative learning experience (Figure 4). Several of these experiences gradually add up to a cumulative individual transformation, which creates changes in assumptions, attitudes, psychological attributes, and behaviors. These behavioral changes may then elicit social transformation, created along dialogical processes between several individuals as they also undergo transformative experiences. Community support (or lack of it) and one's sense of personal agency interact dialectically in order to influence transformations at the individual level, either positively or negatively (the latter are represented by red arrows in the diagram).

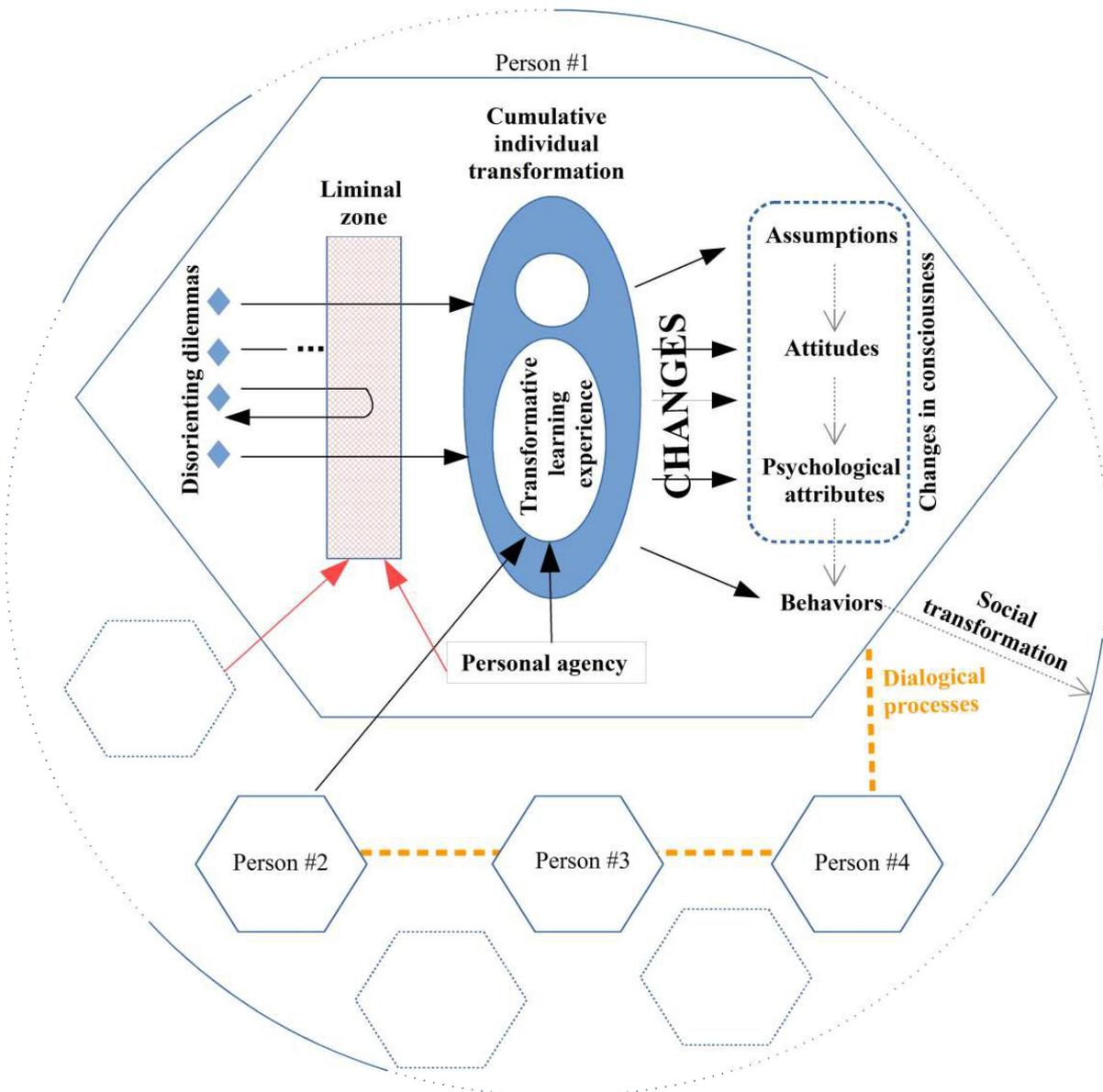


Figure 4 – Global view of transformative experiences

Transformative researchers can use this diagram in other contexts, in order to better understand how the individual and social aspects are deeply interconnected, and how a change in one of the factors may create a reaction in others, and improve the likelihood of a successful transformation. It is useful to understand that the process described within the larger hexagon (person #1) occurs in other individuals as well, represented by the smaller hexagons (although this is not represented in the graph, for the sake of space and clarity).

What distinguishes those individuals represented with solid lines from those with dotted lines is that the former were able to reach transformations from their initial disorienting dilemmas, and their changes in assumptions created a chain reaction in their attitudes, psychological attributes, and behaviors, allowing them to affect other individuals positively, thus creating social transformation. Each individual influences the others positively or negatively, depending on whether or not he/she encourages them to overcome their own liminal stages, in order to achieve transformative learning experiences. It is thus particularly important for educators to intervene with those individuals who, perhaps because of the limiting conditions imposed

by their social heritage, need an extra environmental support in order to achieve the emancipation that should be at the root of every educational endeavor.

8.1. Empowerment and self-definition

By singing *música sertaneja* to Brazilian audiences, Yan was first seen as an object of curiosity. However, as he gradually demonstrated not only to know a vast repertory of songs, but also to be able to sing them in a compelling manner, he then dispelled prejudiced notions that might have been present in the audience's mindset. For Yan, this acts as a political tool, to assert both his Brazilian-ness and his identity as a musician. Brazilians listening to him are often, in a covert way, becoming more tolerant towards other ethnicities, and learning that everyone can be able to transcend any preconceived notions that are commonly applied to them. "[P]eople use music not only to locate themselves in a particular social context but also to preconceive knowledge about other people and places" (Martiniello; Lafleur 2008, 1199); thus, by singing what is not expected of him, and with a mastery rarely seen within immigrants, Yan is thus able to subvert this knowledge, widening the scope of people's understanding and tolerance.

That moment in the bar, when some girls made fun of Yan for not understanding *música sertaneja*, became deeply ingrained in his mind. Despite seeming trivial at first, it clearly had a profound effect on him, becoming a symbol for him of the rejection he felt by a segment of Brazilian society. It would have been positive if they had offered him a higher degree of hospitality; however, in Yan's case, he willingly chose to claim his right to belong in Brazil's cultural tapestry, even though he had been denied this right at the bar.

As MEZIROU (2000) states,

Transformation theory's focus is on how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others – to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers (Mezirow 2000, 8).

Singing *música sertaneja* is thus also an act of rebellion by Yan, a way to protect his right to self-definition. In Yan's narrative, those girls who once laughed at him were denying his right to a multifaceted musical self. He took a stance against being defined by others, thus gaining control over his own life, and not allowing society to "foster conformity and impede development of [his] sense of responsible agency" (Mezirow 2000, 8).

9. Final remarks

This paper has explored how a Chinese immigrant in Brazil was able to gain control over his life by a self-motivated, nonconformist, and autodidactic learning process of a specific musical genre. The narrative of Yan's life – of which only a few illuminating vignettes were presented here – also provides a powerful example of the potential for music activities as a tool to facilitate immigrants' adaptation to their new environments. "Through creating or interpreting art, we can go beneath the surface to see aspects of the self that were always present but veiled or hidden from view" (76 *apud* Litsheim 2010. 76). By learning a vast repertoire of Brazilian songs, and performing them in public, Yan was able to see – and present to others – aspects of himself that might have remained hidden otherwise: his musicianship, which allowed him to deeply move other people in his performances, his intelligence, which allowed him to learn, memorize, and master songs in a foreign language and foreign style; and his personal strength, which made him not conform

to social expectations that others had of him. Yan uses *música sertaneja* as a powerful medium to claim his unique identity in an environment that had few possible roles that an immigrant could play. Thus, *música sertaneja*, when sung by him, assumes multiple meanings that would not exist when performed by a Brazilian singer: it becomes an expression of non-conformity, of hybridity, of longing for the past while embracing the present, of the right to self-definition, of strength, resilience, and defiance.

As Brazilian educators deal with increasingly diverse classrooms, it also becomes more important to encourage the transformative needs of immigrants, and nurture their specific needs for hyphenated identities, which should allow them to feel as full citizens in their new country, while also not disregarding their original cultural capital. Yan's example demonstrated the usefulness of learning the music from one's new country as an adaptation strategy, which also can create changes in the environment. Therefore, society should offer programs specifically designed to encourage immigrants to learn music from their new countries, as a tool to better integrate in its cultural fabric. At the same time, though, immigrants' cultural capital needs to be valued, and they should be invited to share elements of their own culture in the classrooms. In order to achieve these goals, it is important for society to be consciously aware of the specific needs of immigrants, especially those who do not possess a comfortable financial situation. Children of immigrants are often in a particularly difficult position, as they may have great difficulties adapting to a new language, environment, and customs; therefore, music education can help provide them with transformative music experiences that will help with their adaptation.

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