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# Women Living History: An Exploration of Transformational Learning in a Living History Group

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## Abstract

*Although transformational learning (TL) has been studied in numerous contexts (English & Peters, 2012; Foote, 2015; Mezirow, 1990; Mezirow, 1997; Nohl, 2015), one area worth further exploration is the activity of living history. Living history, as defined by Anderson (1982), is essentially the simulation of life in another time. The present study focuses on a group of women in a small living history organization and how their participation in this group has changed them. Participant observation and interviews were used to determine what the women gain from their participation and to uncover some of the reasons they continue with the group. Specific findings include the importance of education and instances of transformational experiences that come from being a part of the organization. Future research should continue to explore education and transformational experiences in living history groups, especially for women, and how these types of organizations facilitate this process.*

*Keywords:* women, transformative learning, gender, history

## Introduction

In an effort to merge the study of living history, first identified by Anderson (1982) as “an attempt by people to simulate life in another time” (p. 291), and transformative learning (TL), the present research combines case study and ethnographic techniques to detail the experience of women in a predominantly male living history organization. Consistent with case study and ethnography methods, the primary means of data collection were observations and interviews, because the goal of the study was to detail a specific group of individuals, find out more about their behavior in the context of the organization, and better understand their experience (Yin, 2014; Sangasubana, 2009; Wolcott, 1987). The question of what women gain from their involvement is answered, in part, through the analytical lens of TL and a dominant theme of the importance of education. Since the living history experience, though varied, offers potentially endless opportunities for personal transformation, it would follow that this is an area open to those interested in furthering the study of TL, especially as it applies to women.

There is a degree of ambiguity surrounding the phrase “living history” (Coles & Armstrong, 2008) and it is often grouped with the term “reenactment” because they both describe the popular hobby connected to the American Civil War (Turner, 1990). Distinctions between the two are not great, but it may be said that reenactment represents a broader range of activity, covering everything from living history museums to Hollywood and television programs (Agnew, 2007; Cook, 2004). Living history, on the other hand, represents a specific period in time where the actors are portraying individuals who lived

during that time under certain conditions (Hunt, 2004) in either the first or third person (Magelssen, 2006). Participation is often tied to a group, the qualities and characteristics of which vary greatly.

While reenactment is generally a male hobby, owed to the misconception that women were not involved in battle during the Civil War, living history often affords more flexibility because of the variety of representations that are open. Some women prefer living history as it offers opportunities for direct interaction with the public as well as role-playing a specific individual. In groups studied by Hunt (2004) and Turner (1990), women's involvement was minimal and often downplayed as "marginal" (Turner, 1990, p. 131), which underscores many of the overall feelings surrounding female participation. In spite of this, these groups offer social outlets for individuals and families with camaraderie being a primary finding of Hunt's (2004) study.

In reenactment and living history organizations, much attention is devoted to authenticity to the point where those who do not adhere to the standards of the group are referred to as "farbs," which stands for "far be it for me to tell them what they are doing wrong" (Agnew, 2004; Farmer, 2005; Gapps, 2009; Hall, 1994; Turner, 1990). These are individuals who have either just started participating in the hobby or who do not appear to care about an authentic performance. Authenticity is often used as an argument against women's participation in battles, although those who "do not appear obviously female" (Turner, 1990, p. 64) are more accepted on the battlefield. In reenactment groups, individuals do not always take on a specific persona, but instead portray a generic soldier; with living history, where the primary aim is to educate the public about the life of a specific person, this is not always the case. Regardless of whether one has a persona or not, authenticity is taken very seriously in groups of this nature and it is through a desire to portray a more authentic individual of the past that learning, and transformation, takes place.

### **Literature Review**

Much of Mezirow's (1978; Mezirow & Marsick, 1978) work revolved around the transformational experiences of women, but areas specifically studying women, gender, feminism, and learning still have room for exploration. Gender has not yet been recognized as an area of emphasis for those researching TL (English & Peters, 2012), and the living history literature, too, does not typically focus on the experience of women, but rather the "marginal roles" (Turner, 1990, p. 131) they hold as camp followers or the controversy over them participating in battle reenactments (Hunt, 2004). Still, there are many in the living history literature who emphasize the educational nature of the hobby (Coles & Armstrong, 2008), stress that it is easier to learn by doing than reading secondhand (Hall, 1994; Pahl, 1994), and underscore the importance of the activity as a multisensory experience, adding a uniquely enriching element to further one's learning (Anderson, 1982; Gapps, 2009; Pahl, 1994; Turner, 1990). Any woman who is involved, regardless of the extent of her involvement, will be in an ideal position to learn from her experience and possibly be transformed by the information to which she is exposed.

As reenactment and living history are generally considered to be male hobbies, women are usually expected to engage in roles behind the scenes (Hall, 1994; Hunt, 2007). While many women enjoy demonstrating crafting or cooking techniques (Coles and Armstrong, 2008), many others have an interest in battle reenactment. In order to present an authentic picture, those women on the battlefield may bind their breasts and walk around with a perpetual squint (Agnew, 2004), but this is often not enough for those who do not believe they should be there. Some women are met with a great deal of resistance from other group members when they express a desire to take on more "masculine" roles and this resistance does not only come from men (Farmer, 2005).

The level of dedication that women have to this hobby is no different from men, as they too feel personally connected to the time period and work to fuse their own identities with that of the individual they portray (Gapps, 2009; Lamb, 2008). In many instances, the learning that takes place for women, as for men, would not have occurred otherwise if it were not for their involvement in a historical hobby (Coles and Armstrong, 2008). And, as is commonly understood, transformational learning theory's focus is on how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings and meanings—rather than those that have been uncritically assimilated from others—in order to gain greater control over our lives

as socially responsible, clear thinking decision makers (Mezirow, 2000). By whichever means the women have come to be involved in living history, they render a choice through their participation that not only changes their perception, but enhances their perspective on their own lives in personally meaningful ways.

When it comes to adult education, TL can be seen in a variety of contexts. Foote (2015) described “Aha” moments while Nohl’s (2015) interviews revealed a “nondetermining start” where the participant knew that something had changed in his/her life, but was largely unaware of it for quite some time. Similarly, participants of living history often undergo various unexpected changes as they gradually fuse their identities with the personas they portray (Handler & Saxton 1988; Lamb, 2008). Because learning is part of everyday life and common social interactions (Fenwick, 2008), many types of experiences can spark a transformation. Fenwick’s (2008) study of women laborers in the garment industry showed how learning gave way to solidarity which produced networks and collective identities that were integral to the women’s existence. Since women’s learning very often happens through connection (Cooley, 2007), the hobby of living history provides multiple levels of opportunities for learning with connections not only to adopted personas, but also fellow living historians. Both Cooley (2007) and Fenwick (2008) emphasize the potentially transformative power of the group connection among women, but unlike the present study, their research focused on women-only environments.

In the realm of living history, Mezirow’s (1978) idea of “perspective taking” takes on a whole new meaning as the individual is not simply taking on the perspective of another person in his/her life, but rather has adopted the views of someone from a different time period entirely. Mezirow (1978) found that transformation involved a critical re-thinking of the individual, his/her relationships, and all that is required for attitude formation; judgment and learning through living history is no different. Each living historian must engage in considerable research to portray his/her character (Coles & Armstrong, 2008), which can inevitably introduce new information into that person’s knowledge base. This is similarly seen in museum education where the visitors are “influenced by what they already know and who they believe themselves to be at the time of the visit (Garner, Kaplan, & Pugh, 2016, p. 341).” The learning that happens for living historians, just like visitors of museums, is a collaborative experience between the material, the history or the exhibit, and the individual. The goal is not just for the individual to learn something, but to use what he/she has learned in everyday life. When the information is personally relevant, making meaning is natural and there is tremendous value in how an experience changes a person’s perspectives and perceptions (Garner, Kaplan, & Pugh, 2016). Invariably, TL has the possibility to effect change on an individual and organizational level (English & Peters, 2012) as does the learning one engages in as part of a living history organization.

Just as the term “living history” is seen as ambiguous, the idea of authenticity is also difficult to pin down; many authors struggle with a definite definition just as different reenactment and living history organizations struggle to be “authentic.” It is difficult, even for historians, to know everything about a given time period (Hunt, 2004) and the reality is that no matter how authentic one might be, reenactors and living historians are typically symbolizing the past, rather than re-creating it (Handler and Saxton, 1988). Occasionally, individuals will go to extremes, such as jeopardizing their physical health, in order to be more authentic (Sparrow, 2007). The “farbs,” mentioned in the introduction, then, are often the cause of great divisions among historical groups due to their perceived lack of attention to historical detail (Agnew, 2004; Gapps, 2009; Lamb, 2008). Nevertheless, those individuals in these historical hobbies are hoping that, through simulating another time period, they will find out more about themselves (Handler and Saxton, 1988). Arguing that authenticity is bound to culture, Lin (2006) reminds us that the ways, practices, and procedures in which individuals conduct and participate in living history matters. Those “farbs” lack authenticity because they are perhaps somewhat careless, or at least not as careful or caring in their actions and disposition in coming to the *project of history*. Those who attempt to get the period right, in dress, manner, action, and reflection, as part of their essential praxis, begin to find a deeper understanding of themselves in their own everyday living.

### **Researcher's Statement**

As an active participant in the organization described in this study, I (A.S.) acknowledge the inherent bias that comes with my position and personal investment both in the group as a whole and in the individual members themselves. I have made concerted efforts to maximize confidentiality on both the individual and group level as much as I have attempted to minimize my own subjectivity. Much like the other women presented in this study, I, too, have undergone an extensive transformation since I began my involvement, which played a large role in the formation of this research. At times, information is intentionally vague so as to offer the participants as much protection as possible as they entrusted me with very personal information. I (A.S.) did not receive any compensation in any form for conducting this research and presently maintain an active role with the organization.

### **History of the Organization**

Military Officers of the Civil War (MOCW) is a pseudonym for a small living history organization that began in 2002 and operates in the northeastern United States. While the founding of the organization essentially rests on one man, the original male members all believed in the importance of educating the public about the Civil War from a first-person perspective. Their signature program involved discussing various battles fought during the Civil War and how each general acted and reacted during them. According to one of my participants, the original members were very dedicated to authenticity and they did not socialize a great deal outside of the events they attended. Women were considered “eye candy,” which is a phrase quoted to me by more than one participant. In the early years of the organization, the women were adorned with nineteenth-century attire, but were seated separately from the men during their presentations. They did not take on any nineteenth-century personas like the men did, and they spent all of their time in the background.

A philosophical rift began to grow among the men in the group about how they should be presenting information to the public; some wanted to focus exclusively on battles and tactics while others wanted to address more personal information. The men in the group who wanted to pay sole attention to the battles felt it was unacceptable to increase female involvement in the group, which supports the findings of Hunt (2004) and Turner (1990) who noted the frequent distaste for female involvement. As was noted earlier, this reflects a historical inaccuracy because it is known that many women participated in the war in a variety of ways, including disguising themselves as men on the battlefield. This disagreement eventually led to what is now referred to as “the split,” which occurred when a portion of the membership announced they were splintering off to form their own organization. The effects of this division are still felt today as there was “such a sense of betrayal” and “it was akin to an ugly divorce that has left many scars” (quotes from “Caroline”).

Since this division, the group has changed significantly, going from one with exclusively male personas to one where female and civilian personas are actively portrayed by its members. The turning point year for the organization was 2013; this is when a significant number of women began taking on different personas and devising ways in which women could participate more frequently. Each of the women who described the split noted that the organization has grown exponentially since it happened and has only become stronger. This is evident in the fact that there are now several female members who entered the organization entirely on their own in order to portray well-known nineteenth-century women. At the present time, there are approximately 40 individuals who belong to the organization in one way or another and both male and female membership continues to grow.

### **Method, Data Collection, and Participants**

As noted earlier, the primary methods involved in the present research were observations, generally participant observation, and interviews. After presenting the idea of this research to the group, an email was sent to the 20 women who participate with the MOCW which included the initial interview

questions and a participation letter. Of these 20 women, only eight are actively portraying a persona instead of a background or supportive role. The level of each participant is indicated in Table 1 where her level of involvement went from being in the background to a more active role, was always an active role, was and remains a background role, or went from an active role to a background role.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Role in Organization</b>	<b>Persona</b>	<b>Entrance into Organization</b>
Cordelia	mid 60's	background → active	officer's wife	through husband
Violet	early 60's	background	officer's wife	through husband
Gertrude	early 60's	background → active	officer's wife	through husband
Portia	mid 60's	background → active	officer's wife → distinct	through husband
Gwen	early 40's	active	distinct	on own
Miranda	early 60's	active	distinct	on own
Clara	early 50's	background	officer's wife	through husband
Grace	mid 60's	active → background	distinct → officer's sister	through husband
May	mid 60's	active	officer's wife	through husband
Caroline	mid 50's	background	officer's wife	through husband
Rose	late 50's	background	officer's wife	through husband

Through this initial email, the women were informed that their participation was voluntary and their choice to become involved with the research (or not) would not have any effect on their group membership, nor would it impact their relationship with the primary researcher. The initial questions asked the women to elaborate on their general experiences with the organization, the struggles and rewards they have had, and whether or not their participation has changed them in any way. They were also asked if they had had any “peak experiences” and to describe what they were and how they were affected by them. The women were instructed to return their responses via email before a deadline at the end of August that year. While the responses trickled in, participant observation took place at six events that had the MOCW representation from April until August. While at these events, I (A.S.) was often able to speak directly with the participants and ask them follow-up questions to their initial responses.

The 11 women who participated in this study come from a variety of backgrounds although the most heavily represented area is education. Six of the women are educators, or have been at one point or another, all of them are middle-aged, and four of them are currently retired. Three of the women are currently portraying a persona that has something to do with either their professional life or what they studied in college. With regards to membership, one woman is considered an honorary member in the organization, one is a probationary member, eight are part of a family membership with their husbands, and one is a member on her own. Nine of the women became involved because of their husbands while two entered the organization on their own. The average amount of time they have been involved with the organization is three years and the majority entered after the rift and split occurred. In order to continue the confidential nature of this article, all names of the participants have been changed to pseudonyms and have no relation to anyone in the organization. Ultimately, 9 of the 11 women who agreed to participate were interviewed further in either face-to-face situations or via telephone. (See Table 1 for other information.)

Since interviews are one of the major categories of data collection in an ethnographic study (Sangasubana, 2009; Wolcott, 1997) as well as in case study research (Yin, 2014), this was a major source of information. Both English and Peters (2012) and Nohl (2015) conducted interviews in order to gain the richest, most informative data they could; using open-ended questions consistent with feminist

interviewing techniques (English & Peters, 2012) and allows the participant the freedom to tell his/her own story in a biographical, though not necessarily factual, way (Nohl, 2015). Although much of what was expressed in each follow-up interview remained the same as the initial response, the women were also free to include a significantly greater amount of detail than what they had typed before. Out of the nine follow-up interviews, six were recorded, transcribed, and later coded for themes. Two interviews were conducted over the phone and not recorded, but the detailed notes that were taken during these conversations were converted into a narrative that was sent back to each participant to validate. The remaining interview took place while both the participant and researcher were in nineteenth-century attire at a living history event in full view of the public, which made any attempt at recording impossible. A similar process for this interview was followed as in the case of the telephone interviews. The interview narratives were coded in the same process as each of the other interview transcriptions. The primary researcher followed the initial coding process outlined by Saldaña (2013) where similar words and phrases were first identified and later grouped together under different titles. It was from these titles that the major themes of this research emerged, with those being relevant to the present topic discussed below.

## **Findings**

### **Learning and Education**

The primary question driving this research had to do with what the women in the MOCW are gaining through their participation. One might be inclined to ask why anyone would want to don a nineteenth-century outfit several times each year, regardless of the weather, but more importantly, what benefits do women have when participating with an organization that was previously exclusive to males. In her initial response, Miranda mentioned that learning or education in some capacity is the reason for her continued participation in the organization. She said she is “learning more with every event” and “it has been a positive decision” in her life. This was true for three other women, one of which, Cordelia, said it is an “ongoing teaching AND learning experience [emphasis hers].” Cordelia went on to say she appreciates that one can “never be done learning” through both her own research and by listening to the stories of other members as part of this organization. May’s experience is somewhat different because she specified that this is her “husband’s hobby” and though she feels passionate about telling the stories of both of their personas, she would not be participating if he were not participating. Unlike most of the other women, Portia has undergone quite the transformation since joining the organization. Finding her persona almost by accident, she learned as much as she could about her through both reading and visiting areas associated with the woman’s life. As it stands now, she really embodies the persona she chose and enjoys the events where she’s “most teaching.” She said, “I want people to understand really what women did and what it was like for women during that period of time,” which is a testament to her dedication to learning about and teaching about her persona.

Clara has found a “new appreciation for history” thanks to her participation in this group and she admitted she “had no appreciation” prior to her involvement. She is enjoying learning the history that she “was reluctant to see as important as a young adult,” but prefers not to have more than a “background” role as her husband’s wife. Grace noted that her “knowledge of the period and of various historical personae of that era has been enriched” simply by sitting through the presentations made by the organization. Similarly, May noted that one of the greatest rewards she has had through her involvement with MOCW is in seeing how knowledgeable the other members are. Learning in this group does not always come naturally, however; the findings indicate that there is a learning curve upon joining the organization, but those who love history do not find it difficult to undertake the necessary research.

The “desire to educate oneself,” as Grace put it, is very important to the individuals in this organization and many have been inspired to do more research since joining. This has helped the women to understand more about women’s roles during the period as well as added to their general understanding of the Civil War era. Unfortunately for many of the women, conducting research can be challenging because information on each specific persona is not always readily available. One woman sees this as an advantage, however, because “if very little is known about the person, it’s hard to do something wrong.”

From the perspective of authenticity, however, this is not always desirable because it is very easy to get caught up in the contemporary and forget the details specific to the nineteenth century. None of the women will deny that it is a great responsibility to represent another individual and they do not take this responsibility lightly.

When Portia first joined the group, she “had no interest in history and knew very little about the Civil War.” She said she was told by other women in the group that all she needed to know was how women dressed during the period and how to behave according to nineteenth-century customs. When she was reprimanded by other women in the group for her attire, she began researching different outfits worn by women during the Civil War period and brought pictures of them to support her claim that she was just as authentic as they were. Still, they chose not to accept her and she knew that if she was to continue in this group, she needed to find a reason beyond the study of authentic fashion. Another group member gave her a book about a nineteenth-century woman who she immediately felt a connection to and the more she learned about this woman, the more compelled Portia felt to tell her story. Since 2013, Portia has studied and portrayed her persona in an effort to raise awareness about women’s activities during the Civil War. Portia has found a renewed passion for her involvement with the organization as she is able to “discuss all the social issues related to women” and promote “the ideas of where women came...where they are and how far they still have to go.” Portia added: “I love teaching. I teach anyway, but I love it.”

Though she has not gone through the same type of transformation, Cordelia said something incredibly similar with regards to teaching: “I love to teach and I love to learn; I guess it’s a perfect combination.” Other women in the organization also recognize the natural connection between teaching and learning, which is why their participation is so rewarding. The women who prefer to remain in the background, such as Violet and Clara, nevertheless recognize the importance of good teaching when it comes to the audience’s learning. Still other participants, such as Gwen and Miranda, find that learning about their personas fills a need they both have to continue their own education on an individual level as they have been out of college for some time. They see teaching or presenting to the audiences as a sort of examination that all of their research has prepared them for and they welcome the challenge that acting as someone else brings to them. Since so many of the participants are or were professional educators, it makes sense for them to look for a hobby where they can continue to develop their passion.

### **Transforming Identities**

Another question of interest was how participation in the MOCW affects each woman’s identity, particularly if she has chosen a persona to portray. Some have not seen any major changes in themselves; several of the participants have mentioned that it is easier to portray their persona the longer they do it, but since it did not come naturally to them, or they did not outright choose their persona, they do not feel they are any different because of it. One participant did indicate that she has become more self-aware since she became involved with the organization, but most of the women who are “tag-alongs” to their husbands did not emphasize any major personal changes.

Two of the women indicated in their interviews that they believe they have created a “hybrid persona,” taking some factual information from the lives of the women they portray and blending it with factual information from the nineteenth century. Because of this, these women often struggle with their identities in persona because they are dealing with the complexity of human beings who lived more than a century ago. For each of these individuals, it seems as though when they are in period attire attending an event with the organization, they are halfway between themselves and their personas, or at least what they know about them. This is an interesting space and one in which it is not always comfortable to be; it is here that transformation can occur, when a woman loses track of where her persona ends and she begins. In spite of this, there were still those participants who felt a strong identification with their personas due to the similarities in their lives.

Portia, who started with no interest in history, is the individual who seems to have been most changed by her portrayal of her persona and she said that both the group and her persona are “now so much part of [her] existence, [she] couldn’t imagine life without them.” “She’s definitely taken me over,” she added, indicating that she has gotten “better and better” at portraying this woman and expressing her



persona's mannerisms which are not wholly unlike her own. Portia also mentioned that when she dresses as her character, she is "more outgoing and aggressive," and acting this persona has helped her in "plain clothes to be a little more outgoing." For her, finding this persona awakened parts of herself that have been dormant for a long time and this connection has empowered her in ways that other areas of her life have not.

### **Transformational Learning in Living History**

The findings have indicated several important factors when it comes to transformation through living history, particularly with regards to the persona one has chosen. Although this might not fit neatly in Mezirow's definition of TL, I do believe that transformation has taken place in at least two of the women in this organization based on certain criteria. First, if a woman picked a distinct persona to portray, she had to find enough information available so as to form a connection to that persona. Second, the persona must be similar to who the woman is in personality, opinions, etc. so that is akin to seeing herself as she might have acted in a different century. If both of these factors are in place, the woman is more likely to experience some kind of transformation; at the very least, she will find herself feeling a greater connection to the time period and the women who lived through the nineteenth century.

Other changes have taken place within these women that had nothing to do with the personas they chose but rather their involvement in the group itself. Cordelia spoke of how she learned from the presentations of others and how these presentations specifically affected her views of the Southern position. "This is so much deeper than I expected this experience to be in my life," said Cordelia, recalling what she thought when she first started learning more about slavery. Hearing a specific story told by one of the other members was "just really transcendent because he could capture emotion so deeply" and it was "almost life-changing" because it will "stay with [her] forever." This participant stated that she now reacts very differently around those who continue to support the tenets of the Southern cause. For her, issues of race and social class have been made more salient than ever before thanks to the powerful portrayal of the only black officer in the MOCW.

In keeping with the variation of experiences had by these participants, Miranda went from having no understanding of living history at all to feeling as though she chose a nineteenth-century version of herself when she settled on a persona. Now, she has come to a point where she could easily slip back and forth between her twenty-first-century self and her nineteenth-century self in her written response and in her interview. Though perhaps not to the extent of change that Portia has experienced, Miranda showed that her twentieth-century self has been modified by a woman who lived a century and a half earlier simply through an amount of dedicated research. She thinks this must be what it is like to "really get into your role" as the more she dives into her persona, the more like her she becomes. Miranda was once recorded during a presentation and when she watched her performance, she was astonished: "I could hear it in my voice. It was like I was there." Her husband, who was in the audience at the time, reiterated this for her and indicated that she truly seemed as though she and her persona were one and the same. Soon after, she concluded that, "it feels like we're actresses without a script, if that makes any sense...and a really good actress, you know, there's no disconnection between the two."

Without exception, the women who participated in this study identified a time when something happened that changed them in some way while participating in this hobby. Some have struggled to fit in with the group, but once they found a niche, usually something similar to a hobby or talent in which they engage currently, they felt that transformed their overall experience. Others have had subtler experiences, either at a parade or while listening to period music being played on a battlefield, but are nevertheless changed on some level by what they have seen or heard. This is in line with Nohl's (2015) nondetermining start where the parade or concert acted as such and was followed by successive shifts in the participant's views and beliefs. Grace and two other women had experiences like this on or near the battlefield and while listening to portrayals of other living historians. Sitting in period attire especially enhanced those experiences as the women felt as if they were watching the *actual* battle take place or listening to the *actual* individual conduct a speech. Both women were forever changed because of their experiences and know that they are luckier than most because they had them.

## Discussion

The present study indicated that women's participation in a male-dominated living history organization produced various degrees of transformation, both through learning about history and self-identification, as well as provided a means for continuing education in adulthood. Nearly all the different types of learning described by Mezirow (1978) are present in some form in this organization as the participants learn how to act in the nineteenth-century style, how to behave with one another, and learn more about who they are as individuals. The participants asserted that there is just as much education for them personally as there is for any audience member and the source of this education varies from books and other research to listening to the stories presented by other group members. The following sections will reflect on the transformative power that participation in this organization has had for these women.

### The Importance of Learning

It may be true that an individual who loves to learn would be naturally drawn to an organization that essentially requires learning, but most of the women in this group were brought in by their husbands, not on their own. Nevertheless, even women like Clara, who neither liked nor appreciated history upon entrance into the group, have taken an interest in discovering new things about the past. For those women who prefer to remain in the background, without regular speaking roles, it provides them with an opportunity to learn at their own pace without the pressure of having to know every detail about another person's life. The fact that so many of the women experienced personal changes, whether large or small, is reminiscent of Nohl's (2015) "nondetermining start" and the idea that something definitely changed in their lives, but it was more of a gradual change than an "aha" moment (Foote, 2015). Similarly, because their perspectives changed, the findings fit in well with Mezirow's (1978) idea that we all have certain assumed understandings that are developed through our experiences and we do not question them until we are forced to. Many of the women in this study, especially Cordelia and Portia, were challenged by their involvement with the MOCW to rethink what they had known previously about the Civil War and especially the women living during that time period. This in turn has ignited a passion in many of them to not only further their own knowledge, but to inspire the public to challenge *their* perspectives and reconsider what they know about nineteenth-century women. Further, it has made them appreciate their current lives more when they stop to think about what both men and women dealt with on a daily basis and especially during the turmoil of the Civil War.

### Transformations

The hobby of living history offers numerous avenues for TL. For those women who do not wish to participate beyond a background role, they must still engage themselves in some amount of learning about the time period in order to represent the group appropriately. Even though Clara wishes to remain in the background, being part of this organization gave her a "new appreciation for history" for which she admitted she "had no appreciation" prior to her involvement. She also mentioned that her involvement has made her more self-aware, which may have been responsible for her finally discovering a new niche within the group.

For other women, sitting in on presentations made by other group members is enough to ignite a transformation, as is the case with Cordelia. In her interview, she said:

I just remember sitting there thinking this is so much deeper than I expected this experience to be in my life...it was just really transcendent because [the presenter] could capture emotion so deeply and I mean I can't imagine ever forgetting that.

From the researcher's observations, the presenter mentioned here repeatedly left the audience speechless, thus Cordelia may not be alone in her feelings.

Many reenactors and living historians have transformational experiences on or near a battlefield and this is what happened for Grace. The first time she heard someone singing a Civil War anthem, she

said, “In that moment, my husband and I were transported to a different time and place and we thought of all those young sons long ago in their tents on the eve of battle.” In a similar vein, Gwen described an event during which she and a number of others, dressed in period attire, played games and danced to period music by the light of lanterns. This allowed her to feel closer to the period, almost as if she was living in it, because there was virtually no “modern” interference. Moreover, although anachronistic in nature, Miranda’s transformational experience occurred when she watched a recording of herself doing a first-person presentation. As quoted earlier, as she was watching herself she felt as though she was watching someone else, someone who came from that time period and had those experiences. As with the women who develop hybrid personas, sometimes it is difficult to define where the persona ends and the twenty-first century individual begins.

From what is known about Portia’s life, she and her persona experienced nearly identical types of gender-related discrimination, 150 years apart, and had to struggle in order to be accepted as women in their chosen professions. Moreover, Portia and the persona she chose have similar beliefs and ideas, something Portia discovered through her extensive research of this woman. It quickly became clear to her that the story of this persona needed to be told, which helped facilitate Portia’s transformation; in her personal and professional life, Portia has become slightly more assertive and outgoing, traits that are required for her to portray her persona accurately. Portia’s connection with her persona is definitely a passionate one and it gave her new meaning when it comes to participation with the organization.

Beyond these persona-related transformations, all of the women indicated that there was at least one time during their participation where a moment at an event touched them in ways that were difficult to describe. This alludes to a spiritual perspective that, as Habito (2005) argues, can be at the center of a process of transformation activated by symbols, social relationships, feelings and states of consciousness. These peak experiences, consistent with the process of TL outlined in the literature (Cooley, 2007; Mezirow, 1997; Nohl, 2015), were reflected upon carefully and intentionally, which effectively initiated the process of TL. Although they go by many names, “magic moments” (Handler & Saxton, 1988), “time warps” (Turner, 1990), “wargasm” and “period rush,” referenced by Agnew (2004) and Farmer (2005), they are sought after and appreciated by those in the living history hobby and are often the sole reason that many continue to participate (Handler & Saxton, 1988; Turner, 1990). This is true for the women in this study who, though they have dealt with various challenges, continue to involve themselves because their efforts do not go unrewarded.

Because so many of the participants have teaching backgrounds, it is not difficult to believe that they find a great deal of satisfaction in interacting with the public in this manner. Though not formal in nature, the varied experiences of a living historian or reenactor are nevertheless deliberate in the ways they invite change and inspire the individual to further his/her understanding of history. As Taylor (1998), noted, the essential practices of conditions for transformative learning are evident in the living history environment; a sense of safety, openness, and trust are promoted, and conditions for effective transformative methods of participant autonomy, and collaboration with other enactors is inherent. Living history highlights the importance of activities that encourage the exploration of alternative personal perspectives, problem posing, critical reflection, and engagement with others; all elements that contribute to a context prepared for the nurturing of transformative experiences that impact participants’ lives.

## **Conclusion**

While there has been much progression in this organization since its inception, especially in the past five years, there remains considerable room for improvement. Although it was observed that this group strongly embraces women participants, this is an interesting observation because until 2013, there was only one woman who was considered a full member by the standards of the organization. To this day, there are no women on the board nor are any women responsible for organizing and planning events. When decisions are made, they are made almost exclusively by men even though they involve both men and women; one major example of this was the present study where permission to speak to the women of

the organization was granted by the male president after the researcher presented the idea to the entire male board.

Not a single participant in this study referred to herself as a feminist or expressed the idea that the promotion of feminism is a motivation for her desire to make women's issues more salient; however, it may be argued that this is implicit in the transformations that some of the women have experienced. Because these women are not only promoting and educating about the women who dared to be different in the nineteenth century, but also showing the lives of women who assumed the cultural standards set forth for them, one can see how this activity is feminist in nature. Given the general age-range of the participants, it may be the case that the word "feminist" carries a negative connotation, one which they are not willing to associate with, and this is the reason it was missing from their interviews. Whether they know it or not, those women who participate in presentations as an active representation of a Civil War woman are acting in very feminist ways, especially in the face of a male-dominated organization.

Since TL involves changing one's "frame of reference" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5) by reflecting on our previously held beliefs (Mezirow, 1990) and generating new meaning from the changed ideas (Cooley, 2007), it is not only the women in the organization who experience this, but also the men and the audience members who attend presentations and interact with the group. Thus, one area for future research would be to uncover more about the men in this organization specifically as well as finding out how audiences feel about the presentations they watch. It may be the case that watching first-person portrayals is similar to visiting an interactive museum where both are designed for optimal transformation. This would be especially true for those audience members who have a personal connection to the Civil War period, either through family or lifelong interest (Garner, Kaplan, & Pugh, 2016). Although there is a significant body of research surrounding living history and reenactment, especially when it comes to the male participants, TL is a niche worth exploring for both genders.

The greatest area for future research lies within the living history/reenactment communities that are represented in the literature mostly through large organizations where women are not prominent members. The women who participated in this study support the idea that transformation occurs only after one changes his/her frame of reference (Polizzi & Frick, 2012), but it was not only the women in this group who underwent a change. The transformation of MOCW from an entirely male-dominated group to one where women have an increasingly prominent role is a path that other organizations can follow or perhaps are following, but unless there is research conducted on these groups, whether the process is similar to the one followed by MOCW will remain unknown. Since this study was conducted with women specifically, other future research might want to look at men in similar organizations or both men and women to compare and better understand the transformational process of education in this type of organization.

Finally, because the active portrayal of a persona involves acting, whether or not one has actually trained to be an actor, it is worth looking at different forms of acting through the lens of TL. Taken a step further, for women specifically, it is important to see if and how taking on different roles changes a woman's perspectives about herself and other women. The women in the MOCW were willing to open up about their unique experience in this group and it has led to a greater understanding of the circumstances under which learning and transformations are possible for them. This may inspire women in other living history groups or reenactment organizations to tell their stories and fill the gap about women in this hobby in the literature.

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