




Discovering Early Experiences that Correlate to an Empowered and Flourishing Adulthood: An Ontological/Phenomenological Exploration

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BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

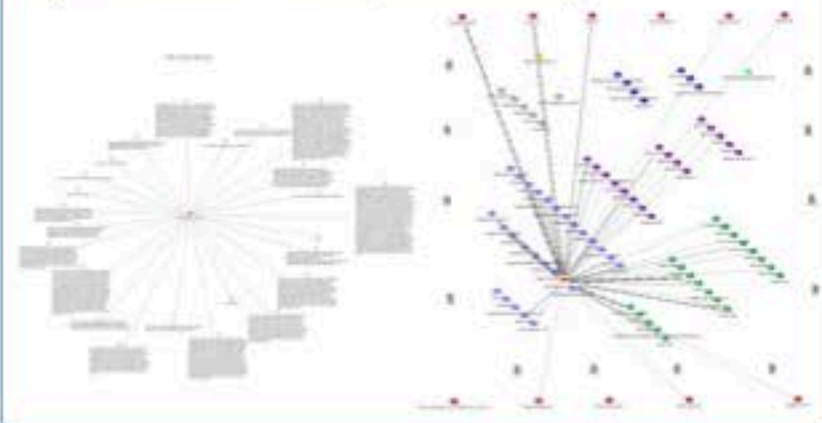
 Engrained in the field of Positive Psychology, this research project in the area of Transformational Leadership, focused on **exploring experiences that contribute to a life of empowerment and flourishing**. The research was ontological/phenomenological in nature and used narrative inquiry to gather stories from participants. This exploration was transformational in nature. It sought to discover experiences that allowed for transformation to occur, and in the process of listening from the future, standing on flourishing and empowerment created a space where whatever is, is perfect. Theoretic Foundation includes scholarly work on **Transformational leadership**, which is not concerned with fixing the past, but with the creation of a future that was not seen as possible before: "In order to rise to the occasion, leaders often have to learn how to operate from the highest possible future, rather than being stuck in the patterns of our past experiences" (Schammer, 2009, Introduction, Section 1, para. 15). Furthermore, this research is grounded in **Positive Psychology**, focusing on exploring experiences that are correlated with a life of empowerment and flourishing, with the aim of contributing to this field and literature, as Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) propose: "Psychology should be able to help document what kinds of families result in children who flourish. Transformational parenting and teaching, as used on this research, refers to the transformation of the adult (be that a parent, teacher, or any significant adult in the life of the child), so that the integrity of the essence of the child is honored and respected, and the flourishing adult might freely emerge in the future. Maria Montessori expressed the true meaning of transformational teaching in her structuring of her methodology: "We shall be confronted by a child not as he was considered before – a powerless being – an empty vessel that must be filled with our wisdom. His dignity will arise in its fullness in front of our eyes as he reveals himself as the constructor of our intelligence, as the being who, guided by the inner teacher, in joy and happiness works indefatigably, following a strict time-table, to the construction of that marvel of nature: MAN. [...] We, the human teachers, can only help the great work that is being done, as servants help the master." (Montessori, 1967, Chapter 1, Section 4, para. 1)

RESEARCH QUESTION

The research focused on exploring experiences during childhood that correlate to an adult life of empowerment and flourishing. Of particular interest was observing whether unconditional loving is present in those experiences as the common foundational element associated with empowerment and flourishing. Based on this narrowed interest, the research question was defined as: **What are some of the experiences during childhood that correlate to an adult life of empowerment and flourishing and is unconditional loving a common element in the majority of them?**

There were **sub-questions** that were explored in parallel with this main research question:

- If unconditional loving is not the common element in the majority of experiences that correlate to an adult life of empowerment and flourishing, what is?
- Is there a particular "significant adult" that played a key role during childhood, in the future capacity of living a life of empowerment and flourishing? (teacher, parent, caregiver, family member, mentor, etc.)
- What are the "ways of being" of that significant adult that were a manifestation of unconditional loving, or that were the basis for a life of empowerment and flourishing?



RESEARCH METHODS

Research Methods. This is a **mixed method quantitative research study**, combining phenomenology with **narrative inquiry**, and exploring the underlying **ontology** of the participants at all points of their experiences as well as the ontology of the people they had the experiences with. The main inquiry of this research is to **identify experiences that correlate with an adulthood of flourishing**; a deeper exploration looks into the **"being"** of those people involved on the experiences that are narrated, which is the ontology of the participants of the stories.

Population and Sample. A Sample of **twelve adult participants** were recruited to this study, with no restriction of gender, ethnicity, geographic location, religion, sexual orientation, marital status, parental status, family history, or life-style preference. The size of the sample derives from the typical phenomenological research design, which maintains a low sample and deepens the questions in the narrative and through interviewing. There was an open and broad invitation in several online and local outings and media, which generated a sample of twenty five individuals who consider themselves as living an adult life of empowerment, happiness, and flourishing. There was a process for being admitted to the study, which started by taking the **PERMA** test administered by **UPenn** (University of Pennsylvania) which measures flourishing in life through five different variables: Positive emotions, Engagement, positive Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments. Participants took a 23 question test each with questions to be ranked on a scale from 0 to 10 (10 being the highest score). Participants also received individual scores (on a 0-10 scale) for the five variables, plus four additional ones (Negative affect, Health, Loneliness, and Happiness). After receiving the PERMA test results, participants submitted their final test scores we calculated the average and mean of seven variables: the five PERMA variables plus health and happiness scores (excluding Negative affect and loneliness that are control measures for the test), and only those with an average score above 8.0 were selected to participate in the research.

Data Collection, Coding, and Analysis. The PERMA test is administered by **UPenn** and results were inputted into a format after receiving the screen shots of the candidate's final scores from **UPenn**, demographic data from participants was collected to cross-analyze the data in the study. **Individual two-hour conversations took place with each participant.** Using **narrative inquiry method** to collect their stories about experiences that are correlated with their adult empowerment and flourishing. All their responses are presented anonymously in the study. The conversations were transcribed literally and codified using qualitative research computer software **MaxQDA**. Data was entered into the software, finding units of meaning, and analyzing the emergent themes from the narratives.

FINDINGS

Interviews were coded by content and the emerging themes were: Current experience of life, Negative experiences that influenced, Significant Adult that influenced, Values that were experienced and learned, Ways of Being of the Significant Adult (Ontology) and, What was Provided to the Child.

- 1. Significant Adult that influenced.** Eleven sub-codes were identified, most significant adults were: Mom (39%), Dad (16%), Grandparents (14%), Aunt/Uncle (11%), Teacher (10%), Mom & Dad Together (7%), Others (3%)
- 2. Values that were experienced and learned.** Sixteen sub-codes, top five were: Hard Work (17%), Responsibility (15%), Care for Others (15%), Resilience (10%), Being of Service – Contribution (9%).
- 3. Ways of Being of the Significant Adult (Ontology).** Nineteen sub-codes, top five were: Loving (13%), Caring & Nurturing (12%), Present (8%), Expressed loved not by physical affection but in different ways (8%), Empowering (7%).
- 4. What was Provided to the Child.** Twenty-six sub-codes, top five were: Unconditional Loving (10%), Support (10%), Good Example (10%), Empowerment (8%), Nurturing and Care (6%), Conversations (6%), Inspiration (6%).



DISCUSSIONS

Finding experiences that are correlated to a life of flourishing can bring opportunities for transformation in the world, if some of these experiences can be shared with conscious parents and teachers or any significant adult in the life of a child, the chances for increasing flourishing in the planet multiply.

- Implications for Parenting & Teaching.**
- The nuclear core family is in most cases where the significant adult who can generate a lasting impact of empowerment can be found, however, **as important as the family is the influence that teachers have in generating empowered and flourishing adults.** Parents, grandparents, aunts, family members and teachers must never lose awareness of how significant their actions and "ways of being" are in the life of the child.
 - The **most impactful experience** that an adult can give to a child for their future empowerment is **unconditional loving and support**, an adult that the child is certain to have their loving and presence "no matter what". Equally impactful was **the behavior that the adult exemplified to the child, transformational leadership in action.**
 - The **most impactful "Way of Being"** of significant adults is being **loving, caring, nurturing and present.** Equally important are expressions of **love that are not necessarily physical** but that the child can truly get as being loving and nurturing. Particularly relevant is the distinction that empowering adults were identified as **"loving but firm"** in a majority of our findings.
 - **Empowering Values** found in significant adults were **hard work, responsibility and care for others.**

Implications for Montessori. Montessori Principles are aligned with Transformational Teaching in which the adult undergoes transformation to be of service to the child, for his or her nurturing and empowering. **It is recommended that Montessori schools educate parents into transformation, because the influence of the teacher is substantial, however the family is crucial.**

Limitations & Next Steps. It was challenging to find empowered adults and have a larger study sample. Next steps include **sharing findings** with a larger audience and **recruiting more participants** into the study to explore changes and enrichment of findings.

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RESEARCH PRESENTED IN 2017 AT



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