

Exploring the Roots of Profound Moments: An Empirical Study

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Abstract: This phenomenological study explored the concept of profound moments. We previously defined a profound moment as an experience that intentionally or unintentionally continues to surface in our consciousness, has transformed our fundamental perspectives, and has been integrated into how we live. Selected participants had experienced highly memorable moments and demonstrated an introspective personality. The interviews used a semi-structured, interpretive phenomenological approach. Interviews were coded, analyzed, and interpreted for preliminary results. Results from preliminary analysis indicate profound moments consist of four elements: acceptance, permeation, humanity, and change.

Keywords: adult learning, profundity, meaningfulness, humanity, profound learning

Our lives are a series of experiences that shape the lens of our world perspective. Sometimes, major events create significant disequilibrium that nudges us to grow, ultimately contributing to our vertical development as adults (Henning, 2011). Researchers found exceptionally meaningful events are described as intense, with high emotions, and require deep reflection (Murphy & Bastian, 2020). We postulate that highly emotional, intense moments that result in continual reflection over time shape us profoundly. We grounded our conception of profound moments (PM) with the profundity literature from Kroth and Carr-Chellman (2018, 2020). They found profundity encompasses being deeply insightful, provocative, and substantive, with meaningfulness as a key contributor to profound living (2018, 2020) and profound learning (2018).

The purpose of this study was to deepen our exploration of profound moments by conducting a qualitative empirical study using phenomenological interview practices. Our conceptual framework postulates profound moments consist of a fully accepted experience facilitating a readiness to learn from the experience in a process that deepens an individual's connection to the self and humanity (Maib et al., 2021). A profound moment becomes a catalyst for perpetual change, serendipitously integrated into a person's life.

Methodology

We used a qualitative phenomenological study to explore the construct of profound moments. A flexible emergent design allowed us to adjust as we grappled with the complexity of the phenomena during our inquiry (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008). The research team's experience with profound moments continued to inform the concept, question development, and research interpretation. We used purposeful convenience "typical case" (Patton, 2015, p. 268) sampling to select participants who had experienced a highly memorable moment and demonstrated an introspective personality. The university's ethics committee approved the study.

Four participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interpretive phenomenological approach (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Interviews were recorded on Zoom and transcribed verbatim. Our analysis began with a 3-stage technique starting with the transcribed interviews. The first two stages were independently completed by individuals from the research team to deductively and then categorically code the data to add rigor to the analysis process (Patton, 2015). Codes and categories were combined onto a shared spreadsheet then analyzed by groups of two or three from the research team. Reoccurring themes and categories were captured on a team whiteboard to visualize valence. During coding and analysis, we excluded one interview due to the participant's lack of iterative reflection on the moment. The third stage involved member-checking and categorizing codes, followed by intense team conversations about patterns detected in the data and pulling out representative quotes (Patton, 2015).

Findings

Our preliminary analysis indicates four primary elements of a profound moment: acceptance, permeation, humanity, and change (Figure 1). Acceptance involves vulnerability, that life can feel out of control at times, but there is often good associated with the bad. Over time, participants learned to trust themselves and “embrace the struggle.” Permeation refers to the process of the profound moment sinking in and gaining a deeper understanding of the experience. This process was not easy and often accompanied by overcoming challenges. Permeation was an ongoing process facilitated by self-awareness, openness, and humility. Humanity represents the recognition of participants that they were not alone. Participants *felt* the support of others and took opportunities to pay it forward and connect to meaningfulness of their experience. Through their experience, participants expressed deep personal changes. Some changes were voluntary; some were involuntary. All participants moved in unique and unanticipated directions after their profound moments.

Figure 1.

Elements of profound moments: acceptance, humanity, permeation, and change



Profound Moments of Participants

- Todd: While meditating on a rafting trip as a teenager, Todd awakened to a new way of thinking.
- Brendan: After high school, Brendan chose to break from tradition and move across the country from his family, never to return.
- Jesse: 4-year-old daughter was diagnosed with a rare, complex, and aggressive cancer.

Discussion

Acceptance

Participants communicated acceptance of their profound moment. The acceptance process unfolded over time and involved participants' revisiting and reflecting on different elements that transpired during profound moments. Participants conveyed feelings of vulnerability but also trusted in themselves. For Todd, managing vulnerability meant, "Let[ting] the things that I know transfer through me." As Brendan worked to make a life for himself after he left home, his confidence grew, and he trusted he could do what his family believed he could not. Growth and acceptance are entwined, and both are required for vertical development (Cook-Grueter, 2000; Taylor, 2006).

We found acceptance often was accompanied by vulnerability and accepting the good and the bad. Brendan stated it as "embracing struggles." After Jesse's young daughter was diagnosed with cancer, she regularly repeated, "Life is hard. Life is unfair. Life is good." Participants recognized that ups and downs, good and bad, were part of the experience. As each participant wrestled with the physical and emotional experiences, they felt off balance with the vulnerability that comes when one feels uncertain or unsteady, as if they might topple over (Kegan, 1982) Henning (2011) states, "To be a growing, developing person means, again and again, to return to the experience of feeling nothing is holding you." Our study echoes findings by Palus and Drath (1995) that sense-making often occurs long after an initial event. Thus far, our analysis indicates that participants experienced vulnerability, equilibrium, and acceptance. Our findings do not clarify whether feelings of equilibrium came before or after acceptance.

Permeation

Participants discussed how their profound moments permeated their beings over time, becoming embedded deeply into whom they became. Each participant overcame different obstacles, such as strong emotions, guilt, and lack of supportive networks. Time needed to elapse before they felt prepared to overcome those obstacles in an ongoing and iterative process. Although the timeframes varied widely, participants spoke of a time when they felt prepared to learn from their events.

Participants' acceptance of a profound moment was ongoing and often stopped short of complete closure. Todd continued to draw from his experience through prayer, work, and meditation. "The thing that I experienced in the moment, I am reliving daily...it informs a development of my whole life." The resulting permeation fundamentally changed participants' identities as they formed new perceptions of self and reality (Miller, 2004).

We found preparation for learning was cultivated intentionally and unintentionally. Throughout the permeation process, participants demonstrated elements of profound learners such as being reflective, open-minded, questioning their viewpoints, perspective taking, seeking knowledge and growth, and curiosity (Carr-Chellman & Kroth, 2018). Profound moments create tension as a person attempts to come to terms with what happened (Henning, 2011), stimulating continued engagement with learning from the experience.

Our findings show acts of integrating learning into the sense of self (Boud et al., 1985), including highly stressful events that resulted in greater life satisfaction and post-traumatic growth

(Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014). A profound moment is often revisited and becomes embedded into an individual's identity. Assimilating "problematic experiences" tends to progress from painful, problematic, puzzling, understood, to mastered (Stiles et al., 1990).

Humanity

Participants described a desire to share knowledge gained from their experiences and recognized they are not alone in this world, that others will stand steadfastly beside them. Creating opportunities for others played a key role for participants. Jesse said, *"I felt like it would help me if I could focus on helping somebody else."* Participants recognized creating opportunities connected them to humanity on a common journey. Brendan described the importance of intentionally spending time with others who supported his values. Recognition of the impact we have on the lives of others replaces feelings of being alone (Henning, 2011). Our participants held this recognition as a point of reference in their daily decisions and reflection of future impacts on others.

Participants all connected their experiences to the meaningful endeavor of giving to future generations. Brendan described the meaningfulness of his moment as a gateway to "have the emotions develop to connect to humanity.... if you have that connection, you know you have love in your heart for your fellow humans." The desire to help and promote future generations dovetails with concepts such as social generativity (Morselli & Passini, 2015) and ego development theory (Cook-Greuter, 2000; Loevinger, 1976), moving us into the fourth-person perspective where we see ourselves aligned with the larger story of perpetual humanity and Vertical Development Theory (Jones et al., 2020).

Our research supports elements of meaningfulness (Heine et al., 2006; King & Hicks, 2021), the duality of positive and negative emotions (Naor & Mayselless, 2017), and profound living (Carr-Chellman & Kroth, 2018). Yet, profound moments appear to be a unique touchstone of meaning-making intentionally perpetuated over time.

Change

Each participant considered profound moments pivotal points; each moment took a different direction than was expected and sometimes desired. Rate and direction of change were variable across participant experiences. Change experienced by participants was a mixture of voluntary and involuntary actions and reactions that resulted in diverse ways of being.

Brendan voluntarily chose to leave his family, which led to other involuntary events, such as financial hardship. Jesse's moment was involuntary, but many of her actions in response to that moment were voluntary, such as setting a goal to run a marathon. Literature supports the voluntary and involuntary nature of moments that shape us. During research on "aha" moments, Irvine (2015) identified these moments often arrive "during the intervals of rest between problem-solving sessions" (p. 11). The arrival of profound or "aha" moments between problem-solving efforts speaks to the idea there is intention in seeking to find the answer to a problem; however, the moment of revelation comes in the space between thinking. In this sense, the moment could be described as both voluntary and involuntary.

Involuntary profound moments may originate from traumatic events, such as in the case of Jesse. These moments can lead to profound changes in people’s lives as they seek to find meaning and growth from the moments. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) coined the term *post-traumatic growth*, defined as “positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances” (p. 1). Jayawickreme and Blackie (2014) reported traumatic (involuntary) events provide an opportunity to restructure a person’s perceptions of the world.

Whether voluntary or involuntary, profound moments moved participants in unanticipated directions. They perceived the new direction as positive, negative, or both. The new direction could be directly related to the moment or indirectly related. In Jesse’s case, her daughter’s illness immediately impacted how she spent her time, increased her self-confidence, and indirectly impacted the trajectory of her marriage. “I got out of a marriage with obviously a not supportive partner, that worked out well, for me. In the long term, it might have taken a lot longer.”

Next Steps

Our research group will continue to conduct interviews until we reach saturation of themes. We will continue to explore the concept of profound moments to determine if feelings of equilibrium are sequentially related to acceptance of people’s experiences.

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