

Profound Moments: An Empirical Study

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Abstract: The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the construct of a profound moment. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interpretive phenomenological approach. Interviews were transcribed, coded, analyzed, and considered in the analysis. Four themes were identified from the analysis: accepting what is, change of life axis, human connecting, and a crystallizing process. Participants expressed a singular moment that changed their lives and became a referential point for life choices and actions as they developed profound learner practices.

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

Our lives are a series of experiences that shape the lens of our world perspective. Sometimes, major events create major disequilibrium that results in growth, ultimately contributing to our vertical development (VD) as adults (Henning, 2011). Researchers found that exceptionally meaningful events are often described as intense, with high emotions, and require deep reflection (Murphy & Bastian, 2020). We believe highly emotional, intense moments that result in continual reflection over time and inform life decisions shape us profoundly.

Literature Review

We grounded our conception of a profound moment (PM) with theoretical concepts of profundity and profound learning (PL) (Kroth & Carr-Chellman, 2018, 2020; Carr-Chellman & Kroth, 2018). Our conceptual framework postulates that a PM involves developing PL skills to accept the reality of a lived experience and a change of life trajectory through a process that deepens connection to humanity (Maib et al., 2021). Our framework draws from existing literature on PL (Carr-Chellman & Kroth, 2018; Kroth, 2016; Kroth & Carr-Chellman, 2020) and concepts of adult VD (Cook-Grueter, 2004; Kegan, 1982; Loevinger, 1976). A profound learner is “someone who pursues deeper knowledge regularly over time” (Kroth, 2016, p. 29). Practices and characteristics aligned with PL include regular reflection on life, social perspective taking, and actively pursuing deep knowledge that may challenge their current world perspectives (Carr-Chellman & Kroth, 2018).

Adult VD is a psychological framework that delves into how adults continue to mature cognitively and emotionally throughout their lives (Cook-Grueter, 2004) to expand capacity of self-reflection and interpersonal understanding (Loevinger, 1976), develop self-awareness, moral reasoning, and increase ability to handle paradox (Cook-Grueter, 2004). Girgis et al. (2018) contended that adults who reach higher stages of development become objectively aware of their emotions and beliefs. Vertical Development Theory (VDT) (Jones et al., 2020) implies that adults at higher stages of development retain their confidence to act responsibly while questioning their assumptions and accepting paradoxes.

Methodology

The goal of this paper was to disseminate findings from our continued qualitative exploration of components that make up PMs by interviewing additional research participants. The research team consisted of a professor and several doctoral students studying lifelong learning. The team received IRB approval to conduct this study prior to recruiting participants.

Participants were selected using purposeful convenience “typical case” sampling (Patton, 2015, p. 268); participants were perceived to be information-rich based on knowledge of their experiences to date. Members of the research team contacted potential participants to inquire about their interest in participating in the study. Eight participants, ages 34 to 70, were interviewed for data collection. All participants were cis-gendered, four identified as male, and four identified as female. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interpretive phenomenological approach (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007), recorded and transcribed. Each 60-minute interview was conducted by a minimum of two researchers and utilized a three-step phenomenological interview approach (Bevan, 2014) to learn about the participants’ PM, identify core elements, and derive meaning (King & Hicks, 2021).

Data Analysis

Focus coding was first conducted independently (Charmaz, 2014) and second in teams (Locke et al., 2022). The categories and representative quotes were transferred to an online collaborative whiteboard to identify patterns, resulting in four preliminary themes: accepting what is, change in life axis, human connection, and a crystallization process. Each theme had four subcategories (see Figure 1). Participants’ PM Summaries:

1. Brendan: chose to break from tradition and move across the country away from family after high school seeking intrapersonal growth.
2. Jesse: their young daughter was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer that needed their full attention through rapid developments and complex medical decision making.
3. Todd: opened to a solo meditative experience that led to a new way of thinking.
4. Tary: Life-changing study abroad experience as a teenager.
5. Pat: An off-hand remark by a fiancé suggested that they were an intellectual “lightweight,” which led to Pat adopting a life mission to demonstrate their cerebral strength.
6. Taylor: was denied promotion and tenure despite clearing every institutional checkpoint.
7. Jan: Lost their sister in a tragic accident that led Jan to evaluate how they live life.

Findings

Our analysis determined four common elements of a PM: accepting what it is, change of life axis, human connecting, and a crystallizing process (Figure 1). Accepting was signified as an attitude of open recognition of an experience without judgment or trying to change the experience. Over time, participants learned to trust themselves and “embrace the struggle” (Brendan). The PM experience prompted a change in life trajectory; participants divulged that a new life pathway resulted from reflecting on their PM. Human connection involves choosing community and seeking meaningfulness through intentional communication. Through continued practice of deformation and reformation, life behaviors became crystallized; a slow, ongoing process often accompanied by resistance, yet facilitated by self-awareness, openness, and humility.

Figure 1

Elements of a Profound Moment



Accepting what is – Deep Awareness

Participants accepted the reality of their situation without blame or denial. To do that, each participant conveyed vulnerability by expressing intense feelings and sharing emotions. Jesse’s PM involved a medical emergency. Giving self-grace and choosing the healing process led Jesse to seek help from a therapist to process the experience and reach acceptance. Like other participants, Jesse learned to let go of control while staying present and engaged. Jesse stated, “I grew in my acceptance of, you can’t control everything, life just comes at you. You have to be present and deal with it,” Participants noticed behaviors, their own and others, with new clarity and without self-judgment, building self-trust by believing in their ability to manage their lives. Brendan shared the importance of growth and accepted that some “relationships aren’t going to grow.” He expressed the importance of accepting relationships “for what they are, then experience a little bit of discomfort around it.”

Change of Life Axis – Life Trajectory Pivots

A PM fueled significant change in life direction for participants. Taylor questioned their professional vocation when a lifelong dream career path abruptly and unexpectedly ended. Taylor mentioned learning “to slow down and then understand the importance of the people who were there to support and help along the way.” Participants pivoted their life trajectories through critical reflection and value clarification by questioning personal values and intentionally learning from the experience. Jan’s sister courageously modeled finding joy after surviving a tragic accident that resulted in quadriplegia, which led Jan to evaluate individual life choices, clarify values, and search for inner joy. Jan stated the importance “To not have to wait for quadriplegia, before I experienced, whatever my version of sobriety is, whatever it means to actively participate in my own life, and actively seek my own joy.”

Human Connecting – Contributing to...

Participants recognized others who were also on a journey either through their shared struggle or through the support they provided, and they connected with others to create meaning from their PM experience. Meaning making became a life focus for Jesse. “I don’t do anything that I don’t feel has meaning or isn’t helping someone. I’m very motivated to make a positive difference.”

Participants were propelled by a strong desire to pay it forward either by creating positive experiences for others to participate in or protecting others from suffering a specific negative life experience. Through a solo meditative experience, Todd awakened to a new way of thinking; their life work as a wilderness guide now focuses on creating for and journeying with others. Todd said, “I’m moving into developing it entirely for others. ... where I’m trying to let it work so that I can help those moments emerge in other people's waking lives.”

A Crystallizing Process: It Takes Time to Sink in

It took time for the PM experienced by all our participants to crystallize, in some cases decades after the experience. An announcement heard overhead at high school started our study participant, Tary, on a path to actualizing a foreign exchange experience in Mexico that led to a career teaching English as a second language and a lifetime of advocacy work. Fifty-three years later, Tary recalled vivid memories of the PM during the interview process. Brendan’s words demonstrate embodiment, “I think it’s [PM] the integral definition of who I am.” Pat reflected on their crystallization process as cultivation for continued intellectual growth, “I think that path of trying to get information, trying to find research, trying to use evidence, I’ve used it. I’ve used it a lot in my interpersonal relationships.”

Discussion

The four themes in relation to the construct of a PM include accepting what is, change of life axis, human connection, and a crystallizing process aligned with the adult learning and VD literature (Henning, 2011; Jones et al., 2020; Kegan, 1982) and transformational learning theory (TL) (Mezirow, 1991). Our findings indicate that PMs are distinct concepts from the existing body of literature (Mezirow, 1991; Carr-Chellman et al., 2019). Participants use PMs as a continual reference point for making decisions as a foundation to inform life practices as the individual develops into a PL. Yet not all those who practice PL will experience a PM.

Accepting what is – as a deep awareness of the reality of the situation without blame. The situation involves vulnerability, such as expressing feelings, sharing emotions, seeking professional help if appropriate, recognizing humanity, and normalizing mistakes. Vulnerability prompts noticing behaviors and related meaning with clarity and without self-judgment. Participants intentionally engage with the PM in a process indicative of movement through VD stages (Cook-Grueter, 2004).

The second element, change of life axis – life trajectory pivots, found that life change for our participants starts with value clarification and intentional learning from the experience to inform their future. Highly emotional events can lead to critical reflection on life values resulting in profound changes as people seek meaning and growth (King & Hicks, 2021). Jayawickreme and Blackie (2014) reported that intense events provide an opportunity to restructure a person’s perceptions of the world. Our results indicate that a PM characteristic is a life trajectory pivot that goes beyond incorporating new knowledge into their worldview.

The third element, human connecting, reveals that even though a moment may end relationships, participants move on to develop healthier relationships. Rather than being alone, participants chose to be with others (Henning, 2011) with a desire to *engage in social generativity* (Erikson, 1982). A strong desire to pay it forward by creating positive experiences or protecting others from suffering propels participants to action and supports ego development theory (Cook-Greuter, 2004) and VDT (Jones et al., 2020).

The final element of a PM, a crystallizing process – it takes time to sink in, aligns with adult VD. Over time practices and values from the PM become an integral part of each participant, alluding to higher stages of adult VD (Jones et al., 2020). For some study participants, it took years after the experience for the moment to sink in. According to Bunting (2023), “With vertical growth we explore downward in ourselves to resolve our deep-seated assumptions, fears and patterns in order to grow upward into our best selves” (p. 1). Although a PM embeds deep in the individual, shaping who they are becoming, vivid

memories of the moment live just under the surface.

Participants' identities change as they embody new perceptions of self and reality (Miller, 2004) through a deformation and reformation process of deeper learning (Kroth, 2016). As participants overcome obstacles and move to higher stages of development, they accept the realities of their PM. The process of revisiting PMs signifies how a moment becomes embedded into an individual's self-concept through a process that was painful, problematic, puzzling, accepted, and finally mastered (Stiles et al., 1990).

Conclusion

This study contributes to the scholarly literature on adult learning with strong indications that PMs lead to a healthier perspective on life and embrace four common elements: accepting what is, change of life axis, human connection, and a crystallizing process. A story that lacks one of these elements may indicate the moment has not been assimilated into a person's worldview or that the moment has not fully permeated. PMs appear to be a unique touchstone of meaning-making intentionally integrated into life choices over time. We believe that not all PLs experience a PM, yet PMs function as a catalyst for becoming a PL. Despite sharing some aspects with other phenomena in the literature, the continual nature of revisiting a moment differentiates PMs. A transformational moment (Mezirow, 1991) may catalyze PL practices but does not continue to inform the meaning making process over a lifetime; a key feature of a PM.

A practice for adult educators is to teach journal writing and self-reflection to guide students on a journey of learning from intense emotional experiences. This Andragogical approach fosters personal growth and self-awareness as adult learners are invited to write their thoughts, feelings, and reactions to a highly emotional experience. The writing process provides an outlet for the often-overwhelming surge of emotions associated with intense experiences and helps to unravel complex emotions that have the potential to change personal perspectives on life events. Reflection is a component of developing PL practices (Kroth & Carr-Chellman, 2018). An educator can guide adult learners through a journey of introspection, encouraging them to revisit their experiences with a critical eye. Using this practical application to help students develop a holistic understanding of their experience through self-reflection empowers them to navigate future situations with greater resilience and emotional intelligence.

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