

CONGRUOUS AUTONOMY: THE “PULL” OF PERSONAL COMMITMENT TO EXTRAORDINARY INVOLVEMENT IN A PURSUIT

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Abstract

Self-efficacy and perseverance of mid- to late-life adults committed to extraordinary involvement in challenging new pursuits was the subject of dissertation research conducted as a constructivist grounded theory. Eight participants over age 50 were purposefully selected for homogenous criteria. Findings disconfirmed perseverance as a contributor to commitment. The study advances a theoretical position of congruous autonomy as an enduring, self-efficacious belief in personal capability and compelling rightness and identity, inspiring commitment to extraordinary involvement in a pursuit (rich in lifetime patterns and trends), despite sacrifice and risk, to develop one’s highest potential.

Introduction

No American woman has ever completed a solo sail around the globe in the open ocean and south of the five great capes. I feel bold, ambitious, and anxious, all at the same time, for saying I want to be the first....To be out where there are no guarantees – that’s part of the attraction. It’s not going to be easy. But that’s the whole point (“Karen,” dissertation study participant).

“Karen,” a strong, quiet 56-year-old woman, described her feelings just before embarking on a two-year voyage which distinguished her as the first American woman to circumnavigate the globe solo via all five

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major capes in the Southern Ocean. After age 50, Karen left a lucrative career to learn to sail on open water. Though many tried to dissuade her, Karen demonstrated the attribute I term *congruous autonomy*. Her autonomy, the hallmark of a self-directed learner (Cranton, 1996), in a pursuit congruous with her nature forged steadfast commitment. How does congruous autonomy occur? Is it simply self-efficacy, or is it more?

Many adults over age 50 lack the resilient self-efficacy beliefs and strategies to persevere with new challenging life pursuits of far less magnitude than sailing around the world. High self-efficacy, a resilient belief in one's capabilities, is unusual at any age (Bandura, 1997). Many people perceive that as age increases, ability decreases. Robert, a 68-year-old inventor, suggests that most older people hold the perception that, "When I get to such and such an age, then I can't do this any more." For an older population, tending to center on reappraisals and misappraisals of their capabilities (Bandura, 1986), the common perception that, as we age our capabilities decline, may be an additional obstacle to sustaining high self-efficacy beliefs (Stevens-Long & Commons, 1992). In order to address that problem, I conducted a grounded theory dissertation study of high self-efficacy and perseverance in adults committed to new challenging life pursuits after age 50 (Scott, 2002). The excerpts in this article are quoted from the study's participants.

As adult educators, this dismal perception of aging might cause us to consider whether lifelong learning is truly available. In the U.S. increasing numbers of people are retiring. Life expectancy is lengthening. More people are retaining good health into late life. Demographic estimates forecast one in four Americans will be 65 years old or older in the year 2030. Will age-related beliefs block or boost our opportunities to explore our potentials in late life?

Some adults over age 50, such as the participants of this study, sail around the world, become mystery writers, jazz composers, and scholars with a resilient sense of personal self-efficacy that allows them to survive life's impediments and optimistically continue their ventures. What beliefs and strategies might they employ? Bandura (1997) sug-

gests that the scope of inquiry must be broadened to provide a deeper, richer understanding of how an older population maintains a sense of personal agency in pursuing challenges and exercises in ways that give meaning and purpose to their lives.

The dual purpose of this qualitative study was first, to understand the lived experiences of highly self-efficacious adults persevering in new challenging life pursuits; and second, to discover the central theory for the processes, beliefs, and strategies of high self-efficacy and perseverance in self-selected pursuits at a time when their cohorts are viewing their age as an obstacle to capabilities. The study addressed a corresponding dual grand tour question. First, what is the deep, rich, lived experience of persevering in new life pursuits for adults over age 50. Second, what is the central theory that explains how high self-efficacy and perseverance are experienced by adults committed to new challenging life pursuits after age 50?

Constructivist Grounded Theory Procedure

A qualitative paradigm was chosen to gain the deep, rich understanding that Bandura recommended. The Constructivist grounded theory tradition stressed the importance of understanding the realities (ecology) of the participants (McCaslin & Scott, 2003) and the meanings they give those realities (Charmaz, 2000). “A Constructivist grounded theory assumes that people create and maintain meaningful worlds through dialectical processes of conferring meaning on their realities and acting within them” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 521). The adapted process led to a theory that moved beyond self-efficacy, to focus on the autonomy of the participants and the congruence of their interactions within their ecologies. The study imposed the traditional grounded theory rigor (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) beginning with purposefully selecting participants.

Data Analysis

Delimitations and Limitations

Eight participants over age 50 were purposefully selected as a theoretical sampling for the study because they each had a pursuit that met the following criteria. Their pursuit was a personally compelling, self-selected endeavor that changed the participant's life direction. The pursuit had been ongoing for a minimum of two years prior to the participant entering the study. The participant had demonstrated commitment to the pursuit despite adversity. The study was restricted to participants residing in the Western United States, possibly limiting generalizability.

At the time of the study, four of the eight participants had completed their challenging pursuits. Karen, age 59, had left her job, sold her house and investments, purchased a 36-foot boat, and sailed around the globe. Nancy, age 58, had galvanized inner strength to move from a deficit income to a self-built business (recently sold to an international firm) assisting employees affected in a corporate downsizing. Richard, age 68, began track bicycle racing at age 60, and won two world championships. Patricia, age 70, retired at age 65 to pursue Masters research analyzing the revival of the ancient Cornish language, which she learned to speak during her study. The other four participants were engaged in their journeys. Robert, age 68, a tenth grade dropout with no engineering training, invested his life savings in patenting and testing his revolutionary construction framing invention. Lou, age 65, retired at age 62, out of shape and needing nine knee surgeries, is now a gold medalist in state competitions, pursuing national cross-country events. Floyd, age 56, purchased a piano and course of instruction at age 50, and then left his job to dedicate full attention to learning to play, compose, and record improvisational jazz. RT, age 58, left his career as a federal drug-enforcement agent at age 56 to write and now has short stories published in the most prestigious mystery magazines and is seeking publication of his first novel.

Data Collection Procedures

Each study candidate completed a screening survey. Candidates who satisfied all delimiting criteria received a study description, involvement expectations, and the human subjects consent form. Confidentiality was rigorously maintained.

I developed the interview protocol from the grand tour question with two participants and piloted it with one. I conducted audio-taped interviews (90-minutes average) with each participant in participants' homes to foster candor and to observe each participant in his or her ecology. Each participant contributed a form of daily journal (e.g., journal, email, manuscript chapters). I also kept a journal, particularly during the data analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

During open coding, interview data were unraveled and sorted into 1908 common themes, then via a database they were integrally reduced to 54 elemental codes. I explored the threads of the 54 codes through the participants' multiple voices and ecologies. During reflective (synthesis) and selective (interpretation) coding and the process phase (determining conditions) of the study, I developed three tools to verify the data and maintain the human ecology focus. Asking and answering investigative questions identifies the relationships each category has with the other categories and the human ecology. This technique also includes a dynamic fourth dimension of time that Strauss and Corbin (1998) call *process*. My conditional relationship guide helped develop the core category relating *structure* with *process* by answering "What, When, Where, Why, How, and with What Consequence" for each elemental code. For example: What is *commitment* to a pursuit? (participants' definition); When do the participants experience *commitment* to a pursuit?; Where?, Why?, and What consequences does *commitment* have for participants involved in challenging pursuits? (Scott, 2002).

From the guide, I built a three-dimensional physical model of the relationships, and then a Reflective Coding Matrix, Figure 1. The reflective coding matrix is created from the “consequences” identified in the conditional relationship guide. I constructed the matrix as a hierarchy of relationships intended to develop the “core category” in terms of properties, processes, dimensions, context or ecology, and the modes with which its consequences are understood. The categories most frequently identified as a consequence on the guide suggested the core category, in this study: *commitment to extraordinary involvement*. Remaining categories on the guide become features on the reflective coding matrix describing the core category as properties, processes, dimensions, contexts, and modes for understanding the consequences. The matrix links interactions among categories identified with the guide and serves as a bridge between analysis and interpretation. A spiraling conditional matrix springs from the reflective coding matrix and can be “read” (moving left to right) as a story line.

The theory emerged as the data were iteratively conceptualized, categorized, interrelated, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data and their ecology. The researcher is very much a part of the process. Recognizing the interaction and striving to convey the participant’s reality is incumbent upon a responsible researcher and is an important part of theoretical discovery in this study.

Methods of Verification

To establish an audit trail sufficient for comparable regeneration of the findings, I transcribed interviews verbatim and validated them against original tapes. I coded interview passages in an iterative and a constant-comparative process, categorizing and relating the concepts derived across participants, and capturing them in a database that ties each passage to the original transcript. As a theory began to emerge, participants were included in validation via a crystallization approach that dynamically allows for multiple truths (Richardson, 2000). All participants validated the story line for relevance and fit. When their adjustments were made, I validated the story line across technical and

Congruous autonomy reflective coding matrix constructed from conditional relationship guide (Scott, 2002, p. 225)

Reflective Coding Matrix					
Commitment to Extraordinary Involvement					
Category	Process	Position	Perception	Product	Purpose
Properties	Choice	Conviction	Belief	Achievement	Development
Dimensions	Follow Direction That Inspires Ability to Adapt Focus on What's Important Doing Things Can Control Must be a Way Obstacles Part of Process Business as Usual, Nothing Personal Choice Toward is Also Away From Open to Possibility	Pursue What's Right for Me Sense of Autonomy Risk Epiphany Others Affect Pursuit Negativity Trends & Patterns in Life Difference Between US & Other Countries	Age Factor Sense of Urgency Mature Perspective Allows Greater Freedom Adversity Perseverance Can't is Suicide Faith Who I am I Don't Know What I Can't Do Knowledge Authority	Sense of Accomplishing Success Achievement Requires Plan Keep Moving Forward Pursuit Evolved Strategies Competing Steps of Pursuit Learning the Craft Can Achieve Any Goal if Work Hard Learning from Any Source	Personal Expression Pursuit Exceeded Expectations Sense of Self-Worth Communicating Perspective Compelling Passion Creative Energy
Context	Challenge	Personal Criteria	Identity	Personal Goal	Personal Meaning in Goal
Modes for Understanding Consequences	Momentum in a Direction	Sacrificing Ordinary for Extraordinary	Self-Efficacy	Progressive Realization of Worthwhile Goals	Maximizing Potential Creates Positive Force

non-technical literature. Finally, I validated the emergent theory across participants for credibility, transferability, dependability, trustworthiness, and rich, thick completeness.

Expectations, Epiphanies, and Discoveries

Due to the literature and personal bias, I entered the field assuming the participants used perseverance strategies. Disconfirming those assumptions, the findings suggest that the participants negatively perceive perseverance as an external “push” unnecessary “if I’m committed to something” (Floyd speaking of learning to compose jazz). For the participants the “pull” of commitment emanates from compelling “rightness” grounded in their personal criteria, “trends going through my life that seem to have been consistent and strong,” (Nancy describing the areas of her life that together led her to build a business). Participants describe their criteria not as capability, but as identity, “The things you do portray who you are,” said Masters student Patricia, followed by, “I’m a scholar.” Even when risks and sacrifices for pursuits are great (loss of life savings, severe injury, time), Karen tells us, “The greater risk is not being able to try.” The fit is right, *congruous* with identity.

The participants’ stories play out in a spiral beginning with personal criteria. Each made a *Choice* to undertake a challenging pursuit. Business-builder Nancy explains, “In other words, once you know what you want, you don’t have to do anything else. You just need to be aware of your internal responses. ‘Am I on the right track?’” Inner feelings guide the participants in the direction that individually inspires them. Obstacles are part of the process, business as usual. Regarding his invention, Robert concluded, “There was a way of doing that [framing] without all the screws, there must be.” The participants focus on what’s important, stay open to possibility, and progress.

Conviction and commitment come from listening to one’s inner voice and personal criteria, following the inspiration “right for me” with autonomy, catalyzed by an epiphany that “not being me” is an unbearable risk and sacrifice. Participant Karen, weighing her property against the opportunity to sail around the world, recalled, “The biggest fear I had was not being able to try.”

Belief (an area of variability) is the foundation of identity, fostering openness to possibility. Speaking of his bicycle racing, Richard describes an optimistic view of capability expressed by all participants, “I don’t know what I can’t do.” Maturity provides freedom stimulated by urgency. Jazz pianist Floyd articulates, “I’m going to make the commitment to focus the energy and time on that, and I’m going to let some other things go, because I have to.”

Achievement, (a second area of variability) occurs as a natural by-product of self-*Development*, maximizing personal potential. Participant Robert explains, “I think success . . . is the progressive realization of worthwhile goals.” On one level the participants acknowledge realization of worthwhile goals with regard to achieving the stated goal of their extraordinary involvement. On a higher level, in the context of personal meaning in the goal, the participants report a purpose beyond mere achievement, a purpose of personal development that is valued and understood as maximizing personal potential with the belief that, in jazz pianist Floyd’s words, “Good things will come of it.”

Emergence of a Theoretical Position

This study advances a theoretical position, which I call congruous autonomy. *Congruous* speaks to the experience of compelling personal “rightness,” “identity.” *Autonomy* moves beyond high self-efficacy to the independent autodidactic process adult educators claim to admire in truly self-directed learners. That experience is integral with the personal meaning of inspired commitment to a pursuit, intrinsically “pulling” the participants to develop their highest potential true to their own natures. Congruous autonomy is an enduring, self-efficacious belief in personal capability and compelling rightness and identity, inspiring commitment to extraordinary involvement in a pursuit (rich in lifetime patterns and trends), despite sacrifice and risk, to develop one’s highest potential.

Congruous Autonomy in the Literature

Locating congruous autonomy in the literature begins with Bandura’s (1997) self-efficacy theory that beliefs influence the goals people set for themselves, the effort they expend, how long they perse-

vere in adversity, and their resilience to failure. While self-efficacy is a strong thread of congruous autonomy, Humanists Maslow (1971), Rogers (1961), and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) contribute equally strong threads of self-actualization, full functioning person, and flow. All three emphasize the importance of identity, personal development, and maximizing personal potential through following a sense of rightness. Jung (1965) and Norton (1976) support the Humanists with the concept of being one's true self. Buscaglia (1978) and McLeish (1976) describe self-actualization in maturity. Congruous autonomy provides evidence of self-efficacy, self-actualization, full functioning through mid-life and after, thus beginning to fill a sizeable gap in the literature on opportunities for older adults to develop their potentials through commitment to challenging pursuits.

Conclusions and Recommendations

While the data of this study provide additional evidence that high self-efficacy is a strong contributor to commitment to extraordinary involvement, there is evidence to suggest that congruous autonomy moves beyond self-efficacy. The congruous fit of personal criteria in a pursuit catalyzes a compelling "pull" for the participant that, when linked with a sense of autonomy, forges commitment to the pursuit. Further, perseverance was disconfirmed as a contributor to that commitment. The "push" of perseverance was recognized by the participants as unnecessary in the presence of a compelling "pull" of commitment due to congruous personal "rightness." The study advances a theoretical position of congruous autonomy, experienced by each individual participant as compelling personal "rightness" and "identity" and belief in "capability." That uniquely congruous and autonomous experience is integral with the personal meaning of inspired commitment to a pursuit, grounded in beliefs and values and lifetime patterns, "pulling" each participant ever toward his or her highest potential and oneness with self. The participants' meanings cannot be separated and discussed apart from the ecology in which the findings suggest they are richly located.

The findings of this study suggest that keys to commitment and self-directed learning are congruous personal rightness, identity and belief in autonomous capability. Adult learners may or may not now choose academic pursuits that fit their identity, beliefs, and values. Adult educators can catalyze congruous autonomy in students, whether in selecting a curriculum or a thesis topic, by encouraging them to ask, "What is right for me?" Findings suggest that individuals give time and priority to pursuits that are congruous with their life trends and interests. Autonomous commitment to a challenging life pursuit is about choosing to follow personal inspiration and congruently honoring our choices.

This study provides theoretical evidence that positive perceptions of adults over age 50 continue to make even difficult learning challenges available. What might current participants tell us over time? How might the pattern change with less committed or autonomous adults, or with adults under age 50? Toward a theory of congruous autonomy, I recommend a longitudinal study with a broader range of participant ages and commitment levels. Congruous autonomy may open wide the door of discovery and lifelong learning in any pursuit for those willing to follow the path of their own inspiration. As mystery writer RT suggests of any new path of discovery in life, "Beginnings have all the possibilities in the world."

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