

# Fostering Young Adult Growth Toward Self-Authorship

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Analysis of a Weekend Retreat Experience

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ESRAD Symposium

The Hague, Netherlands

27 May, 2016



# Post-Formal Operations

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- Epistemological development
  - Dualism → Relativism → Commitment

(Perry, 1970)

- Self-Authorship
  - External sources → Crossroads → Self-authorship

(Kegan, 1994; Baxter Magolda, Abes, & Torres, 2009)



# The Importance of Self-Authorship

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- College-educated adults uncomfortable with uncertainty, look to authorities for “right” answers

(King & Kitchener, 2002)

- One-half to two-thirds of adults have not reached Self-Authorship
- Over 50% of college educated professionals have not reached Self-Authorship

(Kegan, 1994)



# Self-Authorship: Not merely cognition

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- Demands on students' courage

(Perry, 1970)

- Both cognitive and affective dimensions

(King & Baxter Magolda, 1996)

- Three dimensions of Self-Authorship

- Epistemological (Knowledge)

- Intrapersonal (Identity)

- Interpersonal (Relationships)

(Baxter Magolda, Abes, & Torres, 2009)



# The Challenge of Self-Authorship

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“[A]n intensely threatening  
emotional experience”

(Mezirow, 2000, p. 6)



# Guidance Toward Self-Authorship

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- Building an “evolutionary bridge”

(Perry, 1970; Kegan 1994)

- Learning Partnerships

(Baxter Magolda & King, 2004)

- Transformative experiences

- Disorienting dilemma
- Self-examination
- Fear, anger, guilt

(Mezirow, 2000)



# Retreat Structure

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- Six participants
  - Recruited from leader's classes, mentorship group
- Intake session
  - Rules/expectations/logistics
  - Asked about ways in which they wanted to grow
  - Provided very little specific information about retreat



# Retreat Structure

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- Three day experience
  - Friday evening through Sunday night
- Stepping out of everyday life
  - Shared house far from campus
  - Sharing bedrooms, preparing meals together
  - Not sure what to expect



# Retreat Structure

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- Individual exercises
  - Experience of Zen
  - Opportunity for introspection, reflection
- Small group processes
  - Developing positive norms
  - Giving/receiving feedback
  - Witnessing others' work

(Hare, 1976; Johnson & Johnson, 2013)



# Impact of retreat experience

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- Expressed stronger intention to be genuine
  - Greater confidence, more assertive with others
- Mutually negotiating relationships with others



# Research Question

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What key features of the retreat do participants identify as important in guiding them toward Self-Authorship?



# Data Collection

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- Post-Interview
  - 2 weeks after retreat, 60 minutes, semi-structured
  - Narratives from retreat experience
  - Life story interview (McAdams, 2008)
  - Reflective conversations (Baxter Magolda & King, 2008)



# Data Analysis

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- Open coding
  - Does segment identify an impactful retreat experience?
  - Two coders. Disagreements adjudicated by third coder.
  - Coders proposed code labels for each segment
- Refining codes
  - Proposed codes consolidated into 12 themes
  - Single coder recoded all identified segments into 12 themes
  - Second coder reviewed codes, recommended changes.
  - Iterative process-reduced to four major themes
  - Four major themes reviewed by third coder



# Findings



## Theme 1: Discomfort

Being put into **uncomfortable situations** described as awkward, yet necessary—a push to see themselves in a new way.



## Discomfort: Initial Anxieties (3)

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“I got myself so worked up. Like I was out there furious like, ‘I wish I had driven my own car so I could just drive back now... I don't know if I've ever felt that uncomfortable and that frustrated in my life; and if I did, I left...I felt trapped.’”

-Dana



## Discomfort: Internal Conflicts (4)

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“One voice saying, ‘Share; get over it. Like you need this. Like this is good for you.’ Another voice saying, ‘I’m not ready to talk yet; I need more time. I’m still whatever.’ ...So you just sit there beating yourself up over it... you’re just sitting in the middle of an argument in your own head.”

-David



## Discomfort: Being Vulnerable (2)

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“Sharing with each person, it felt like a lot had come out and then I was done almost, in a way, and there was also another feeling, like a nervous feeling like, ‘What is Daryl going to say? What is Daryl going to say to me? What is he going to make me do?’ Not make me do, but just have me try to push forward.”

-Brian



## Theme 2: Emotions

**Experiencing their own and others' emotions in a new way** led to new understandings of intrapersonal and interpersonal processes.



## Emotions: My Own Emotions (5)

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“I felt them more. Like when I was happy, I was really happy. When I was sad, I was really sad. When I was really anything – I was feeling more within a day...And they're always there. I just couldn't feel them. Or I wasn't letting them really happen.”

-Matt



## Emotions: Others Sharing (6)

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“When we would share in some of the group times, going deeper into the work that we were doing while we were on the retreat and just seeing all the emotion coming from everybody else, sadness and anger and everything.”

-Maureen



## Emotions: Others Sharing (6)

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“He was so upset, just so angry and sad and confused. I just hurt for him. And I just wanted him to know that he wasn't alone in where he was at that moment...I just can be here for you and that's it. Just seeing...how you guys did that over and over and over again was really... amazing, seeing that's what caring looks like.”

-Kristin



## Theme 3: Relationships

As participants shared emotions, they built trust with one another. This created a unique sense of community as they **built meaningful relationships** with one another.



## Relationships: Building Trust (4)

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“I think that the women's group was like the biggest turning point for me trusting her because it was like I felt that warmness, and I was like, ‘Well, shoot, I thought she was ice,’ you know. And so feeling that warmness like at first like it threw me off. But then it was like, ‘Oh,’ it was like welcoming.”

-Dana



## Relationships: Identifying with others (4)

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“He's very socially awkward. And I see my caring side in him and my weirdness in him. And it's just great. It's like everybody in the retreat's my favorite, and I can't pick one.”

-Matt



## Relationships: Shared experiences (5)

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“It was Sunday morning, and there was just this energy in the kitchen when we were cooking breakfast. It felt so lively and energized... We were just getting food done, like sharing stories and laughing, and just being goofy and having fun. I mean we were all deadbeat tired, but it felt so lively and I was just like, ‘I really love these guys.’”

-Brian



## Relationships: Affection and Caring (4)

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“I don't know how to describe it. But it was like you could feel the love and acceptance from the other person. It was nice to actually let that happen and accept a hug from somebody else.”

-Maureen



## Theme 4: Challenging their story

Having their way of seeing themselves directly assisted participants in “stepping out” of their **life story** and taking it as an object for examination.



## Challenging the story: Retreat leaders (4)

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“I was saying my story was that I was the good girl... Saying what I thought was my story and then you saying, ‘Is that really what it is?’ ...At first, I was just really frustrated. I was like, ‘How dare he call me out?’ ...I told myself, ‘No. He's doing this because he cares. Sit here and think about it.’ ...And I did. And I realized that you were [right]...Here I was, having this story that I'm still a child – a good girl or whatever. When in fact I'm way past that stage. I've fought the hard fight, still am to an extent. I'm living on my own, paying my own bills, and yet I was still putting myself in this child's mindset.”

-Kristin



## Challenging the story: Co-retreaters (3)

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“I was shocked. We had to go around and everyone was [telling me my story]...along the lines of I'm living with my parents and the perfect child in the house or something like that. And even as I was hearing them say it I was like, ‘No. That's wrong,’ but here I was saying the same thing about myself. Just seeing also when I told them what actually happened, they were all so confused. They were like, ‘Really?’”

-Kristin



# What can we learn from these students' experiences?

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- The value of discomfort (disequilibrium)
- Emotion/cognition connection
- Relationships as a here-and-now experience
- The need for teachers' personal involvement in students' personal growth

