

# **Hope—Heartbeat of Adult education: A Phenomenological Inquiry**

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## **Abstract**

This phenomenological study of the phenomenon—hope, completed in 2005, identified two essential meaning structures (“change” and “human agency”) in the experiences communicated by the adult educators interviewed. It was also discovered that hope is an energy that interacts with Affective, **Relative (Re-lay-tive)**, and Cognitive energies in the lives of the research participants. Understanding how “change” and “human agency” can be aligned with these **A.R.C.** energies holds implications for further research and the practice of adult education.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of my research, while participating in the Adult and Continuing Education Doctoral Program at National-Louis University, was to develop a rich and thick description of how hope manifested itself in the lives of masters and doctoral students before, during, and after their formal degree programs in adult and continuing education. In addition, this study intended to identify meaning structures for the phenomenon—hope, in and of itself, as revealed by the adult students interviewed.

## **Methodology**

The methodology used in this study was phenomenology informed by hermeneutics. This offered the best approach to investigate and describe the phenomenon—hope. I drew from the writings of Husserl (1981, 1998), Spiegelberg (1975), Stanage (1987), and Van Manen (1990).

The questions that first emerged for me in this research related to hope were:

- **Is hope that underlying feeling that enables a person to reach out to the world around them?**
- **What, if any, is the connection between fear and hope in adult education?**
- **Is hope the connection between the cognitive and affective dimensions of transformative learning?**
- **Is hope identified as linked to individual and group activity in adult education?**
- **Does hope require critical thinking to be effective in adult education?**

Before I could seek responses to these questions with my research participants I first had to fully explore my own experience and understanding of the phenomenon—hope. This would enable me to “bracket” my cultural understanding as described by Husserl (1981, 1998). Secondly, I had to identify and claim my philosophical assumptions related to adult education. Reporting this would allow my readers to check for bias in my interpretation of data. Thirdly, I had to find out what research had been done related to the phenomenon—hope. This would create a foundation for analysis and provide a check on the use of my personal perspective when interpreting the data.

In examining my own experience of the phenomenon—hope, I described it as a force of human nature underlying all activity. I described it as an energy that sustained and opened up new possibilities. I suggested that it had dimensions that connected it to emotions and cognition. Further, I described it as the tissue that connected individual learning to group learning. Hope was for me the sustaining drive that enabled adults to complete goals. The imagination that created our dreams was also part of my initial understanding of hope. The “status quo” is always called into question by hope as it visualized the “not yet.” Hope has kept people from settling

for what is, because it called people to look for what might be. I thought it also focused on qualitative changes rather than quantitative changes in human life. Because of this description of hope, I found it a worthy topic of study.

Finally, I adopted the metaphor of the human heartbeat to summarize all that I had said about hope. Just as the heartbeat pumps life-giving blood throughout the body, hope pumps motivating energy that enables learning and action which is the realm of adult education. In my analysis, the same way that all activities of the body depend on the heartbeat, all that makes life human depends on hope.

The philosophical assumptions which guided my understanding of adult education and research were: (1) People have intrinsic worth. (2) People are meant to flourish. The definition of flourish is ultimately determined by the individual. (3) People are not meant to be exploited. People are to be seen as ends in and of themselves rather than means to other ends. These assumptions are very close to the philosophy of Humanism as described by Corliss Lamont (1957).

The philosophy of Humanism, when applied to adult education, best embodies my assumptions and fits with my definition of adult education. Humanism emphasizes both the cognitive and affective dimensions of the person. It combines an emphasis on scientific method with a deep appreciation of aesthetics. These unique combinations in Humanism are very harmonious with my definition of adult education: the intentional activity of a mature person to learn about subject matter and self through critical reflection in collaboration with others.

Hope has been studied more in the fields of psychology, philosophy, and theology than in the field of adult education. Paulo Freire (1989, 1996, 2002), Henry Giroux (1997), bell hooks (2003), and Sherman Stanage (1987) are adult educators who have written specifically about hope, yet none of them actually studied the phenomenon in and of itself. I adopted some of the language from each of them to interpret the data from the research participants.

Following the examination of my own experience and understanding of hope, my philosophical assumptions, and what research had been done, I was ready to conduct interviews, some by telephone and the rest face-to-face, with my research participants. I interviewed nine graduates of the masters and doctoral programs in Adult Education at National-Louis University. I made summaries of the interviews and sent copies of my summaries for review by each research participant (member checks). I used phenomenology and hermeneutics to analyze the data in the interview summaries as verified based on the feedback from the research participants. I reflected on what arose in my consciousness in response to the research participants during the interviews, while writing the summaries, and following their feedback. In addition, I used dialogues with my cohort group and advisors concerning this research project to develop insights and terminology to accurately express the meaning of the data.

### **Findings and Interpretations**

I discovered that my original questions guiding this research project were too binary and therefore unhelpful in interpreting the data from the interviews. I also realized that I was almost unconsciously using a quantitative approach to the data rather than the qualitative approach that I claimed to be using. I was initially analyzing parts of the phenomenon rather than looking at it as a whole. I was looking for cause/effect relationships rather than for descriptions of the experience and how it presented itself to the minds of the research participants.

I determined, that for this group of research participants, there were two essential meaning structures for the phenomenon—hope. Those meaning structures are: change and human agency.

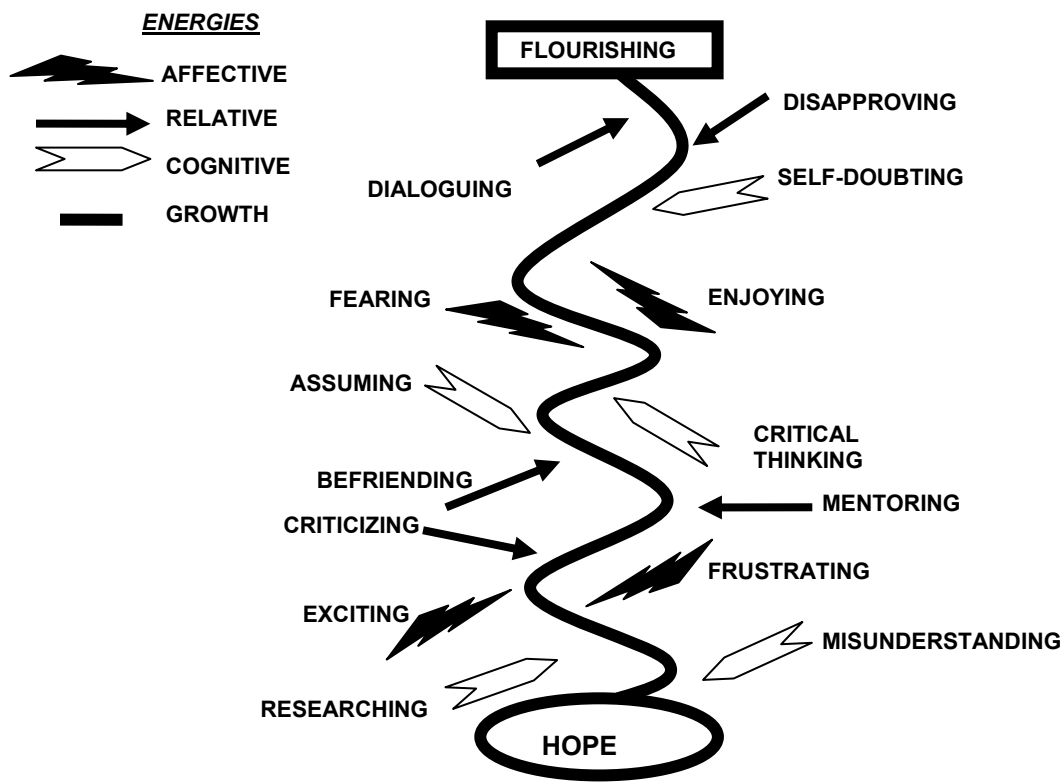
These concepts were revealed by looking at common language and meanings from the interviews.

First, hope could not be conceived of apart from desiring a change in a positive direction from the current status quo. This can be seen in the language used by the research participants. They used the following terms; growth, knowledge creation, goal, experiment, accomplishment, and pioneering. This language meant to me that each one had a vision of how life could be better than what was currently being experienced.

Second, these research participants made the inseparable connection between hope and human agency. They used the following terms; choice, decide, commitment, fearlessness, and self possession. This language meant to me that one was not dealing with hope unless viable human actions were identified and taken in order to make the desired change possible and more likely to occur.

Third, I learned that the data supported an interpretation of the phenomenon—hope as an energy that interacts with three other energies: **Affective**, **Relative** (re-lay-tive), and **Cognitive**. I called these the **A.R.C.** energies. Once again the words used by the research participants guided this interpretation. For **Affective** energy they associated the words joy, liberated, elation, confidence, optimism, destiny, fearlessness, vulnerable, peace, and feel good with their various experiences of hope. For **Relative** energy they associated the words collaborating, friends, support, dialogue, engaged, commitments, acceptance, and approval. For **Cognitive** energy they associated these words with their experiences of hope; choice, decide, realism, opportunities, self possession, and pioneering. From the stories they told it became clear that these interactions of energies can inhibit, support, or misdirect the energy of hope. (Please see below.)

### Hope and A.R.C Energies



Finally, I learned that it was possible that my Humanistic philosophy affected my interpretation of the data supplied by the research participants about spirituality and its connection to hope. I had intentionally avoided asking about spirituality in relation to hope because I thought that the language of spirituality would hinder investigating the phenomenon—hope in and of itself. In spite of this intention, all but one of the research participants volunteered information about their spirituality and its relationship to hope.

During the process of this research, I recognized that I had experienced a perspective transformation moving from a Christian theology to a Humanistic philosophy. Because of the significance of this perspective transformation, my analysis of the data from the research participants might have been affected and had to be reviewed critically to determine if I had distorted the data. I provided the research participants with a copy of the “Findings and Interpretations” chapter of my thesis and requested their clarifying and correcting feedback. Thus I attempted to mitigate being overly influenced by this perspective transformation when interpreting the data.

### **Implications**

More research on the phenomenon—hope is needed to determine if the essential meaning structures for this group of research participants (change and human agency) are present in any other groups. It is important to be clear that these implications are my speculation based on the research. My research is only definitive for the group of individuals who participated in it. Thus I am really suggesting areas for further research to determine if the understanding of hope developed here can be confirmed or disproved.

It seems to me that the impact of hope interacting with the **A.R.C.** energies is what could keep people progressing through their educational experiences. This might, in part, explain how people can return to school after having found it a difficult experience earlier in their lives. They now have **Affective**, **Relative**, and **Cognitive** energies that can create a new equilibrium with those past educational experiences and enable them to move forward with their learning. This could only be confirmed if further research were done.

People might drop out of formal adult education experiences because those settings reinforce previous inhibiting **Affective**, **Relative**, and **Cognitive** energies which reduce their hope. Obviously, much research would be needed to confirm or deny such a possibility. This could be done through action research in multiple settings. Learning to create supportive **A.R.C.** energies that enhance people’s hope may be necessary to enable more successful adult education. Awareness and appreciation for the unique learning styles, issues, and patterns would seem to be necessary to support hope in these individuals. Critical reflection is needed on how to provide sincere encouragement (relative energy), how to request information about their needs (affective energy), and how to engage the subject matter with them (cognitive energy).

I think some tools exist which can assist adult educators in looking at the interaction of the **A.R.C.** energies and hope. Brookfield’s Critical Incident Questionnaire (Brookfield, 1995, p. 115) and the cohort model for adult education may be some of those tools. By using Brookfield’s questionnaire one is more likely to identify the issues and activities that generate supportive **A.R.C.** energies or non-supportive **A.R.C.** energies. By responding to the feedback one can conduct a form of action research to see which adjustments generate more supportive energies for learning in that course. The use of a cohort creates the possibility of the students becoming connected on an affective level as well as a cognitive one. If this is accomplished, the **Relative** energy in the cohort can be quite positive and supportive. This conclusion reflects my

experience of participating in a cohort approach to adult education; however that is too small a sample to support such a conclusion.

This research about hope, if confirmed by further research, has something to contribute to the theory of transformative learning. The two meaning structures of hope that I identified (change and human agency) are also evident in the phases of perspective transformation described by Mezirow (2000, p. 22). Change is evident in many of the phases. It may even be a part of the identification of a “disorienting dilemma.”

Human agency is easily seen in several of the phases which require actions of selecting new behaviors, planning a course of action, practicing new behaviors, and reintegrating of these new behaviors into one’s lifeworld. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22)

Since both change and human agency are quite evident in transformation, it seems reasonable to conclude that where the meaning structures of change and human agency appear, hope is also present. Research to confirm this conclusion and integrate hope with transformative learning is still needed.

Why did the research participants so frequently tell me about their association of spirituality with hope? My reflection on this question leads me to the idea that hope has most often and most clearly been discussed in a religious or spiritual setting. It is my analysis that the association of spirituality and hope is a culturally conditioned overlay on the phenomenon—hope. Some of the research by Elizabeth Tisdell (1999) on the cultural development of images and symbols related to spirituality provides some support for my analysis. She states, “Spirituality is about constructing knowledge through image and symbol. But it is also about attempting to live or act in the world in accordance with one’s spiritual path, which for many has an orientation to community.” (Tisdell, 1999, p. 91) I think it is not reaching too far to identify in her statement the two essential meaning structures identified for the phenomenon—hope in my research; human agency and change. Living out a spiritual path which impacts a community would require wanting change and the human agency to take action toward that change, and thus hope is present. Tisdell also seems to imply the **A.R.C.** energies identified earlier in this paper. A symbol like the flag of the United States is certainly connected to **Affective** energy because of the feelings it generates in the people of this country. Symbols also require a community connection thus the **Relative** energy is implied. Finally the construction of image and symbol also require some **Cognitive** energy in terms of design and intended meaning. When images and symbols are constructed within a community they are, in my opinion, built on and interacting with the underlying phenomenon—hope.

Studs Terkel (2003) entitled one of his books “Hope Dies Last.” While I agree with him on this assessment, I don’t think he goes far enough. I have concluded that hope is that underlying feeling beneath all human activity that is aimed at flourishing. Because of this I assert that “Hope lives first.” As an adult educator, I want to build on the existing hope that every adult learner has and support its development and direction toward that goal of flourishing as defined by each individual. By doing that I will pass on what was given to me by my best teachers. Being part of that process which enables persons to use the **A.R.C.** energies in support of hope to reach their visions of flourishing does create meaning in this life I live.

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