From construct to concept: "Relational Flourishing" in Education

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Authors: Michelle Wooten and Josh Corlew

I. Flourishing as studied in Psychology

In the widely cited (2001) psychology article, "On Happiness and Human Potentials", Ryan & Deci argue that humans can possibly flourish, and that the study of flourishing has been deficit in psychology research. While psychological practice had generally focused on characterizing individual's problems, a focus on flourishing and well-being could influence human being's "practice of government, teaching, therapy, parenting, and preaching, as all such endeavors aim to change humans for the better (p. 142)" To this end, Ryan & Deci encourage researcher's careful attention to the definition of constructs pertaining to flourishing, like well-being, motivation, agreeableness, forgiveness, and positive affect.

Over the next ten years, in response to Ryan and Deci's (2001) call, the field of positive psychology exploded in research directions. Positive psychologists Fincham and Beach (2010), suggested that psychology's *method* toward the study of human's negative states is partly to blame for psychology's attention to human problems. Various degrees and caricatures of human problems had been advanced, per the accepted view that "the negative is inherently more interesting and more deserving of attention than the positive (p. 5)." Fincham and Beach (2010) defend this inattention to similar development of positive and relational constructs by suggesting that "positive behaviors are more common than negative ones" and so nuanced understanding of them requires longer time frames of study. However, they also suggest that without this nuanced understanding, psychologist's efforts are "limited' and the descriptions of positive relationship processes are "incomplete."

In this paper, we grapple with psychology's method toward flourishing as incomplete by design. We begin by analyzing the interplay between psychological definition of flourishing and Josh's sense of flourishing in an city-wide extracurricular program he directed. We then use Josh's experiences to render a philosophical problematic in the psychological definition of relational flourishing, requiring attention to the assumptions and practices of which psychology makes use. We finish by arguing that rendering relational flourishing as a philosophical concept, rather than a psychological construct, enables our continuous desired movements of thought regarding flourishing, which psychology practices claim to wish to do, but cannot per its assumptions and practices.

II. Josh's experience

Several years ago I was invited to be a nonprofit organization's program manager for a city-wide nutrition-awareness program for school-aged children. The program was centered on a belief that by increasing the nutritional literacy of young people through improving dietary choices, their quality of life would also increase. Our funding sources wanted to see evidence of this nutritional literacy, which would be measured in terms of the number of fruits and vegetables students could identify or what percentage of students could accurately determine the calorie content of a 2-liter soda bottle. I was comfortable with these metrics, because they were simple to measure, amidst the otherwise complex aspects of the program's organization.

For the program to function, it came to my attention that something like relational flourishing between the high school interns leading the program's younger students was crucial, even though measurement of their flourishing wasn't considered by funding sources. When interns

were connected, the number of students causing disruptions to the activities dropped. Further, many of the interns seemed to have garnered a significant amount of respect from their younger counterparts through engaging them in conversations that had nothing to do with the curriculum. On the surface this seemed counter-intuitive. How could the number of students meeting our learning objectives increase while the limited time we had with them was being intruded on by these personal interactions that were entirely off-topic? I learned a valuable lesson in education that summer by recognizing that the relationship between teacher/student is an important part of the education process. I sensed flourishing among the interns, and it was something I tried to measure. But I was having difficulty defining what it was that I was so excited to see in their experiences, partly because it did not manifest in an individual, but in the whole. If I couldn't define it, could it possibly be measured?

In this vein, psychologists Fowers et al (2016) critique the tools available for measuring relational flourishing. They find existing measurement devices incapable of generating a meaningful measurement of well-being because of its relational component. While existing flourishing instruments were primarily hedonic, measuring an individual's immediate experience of pleasure or pain, the authors suggest a new scale based on a eudaimonic perspective, "indicated by meaning, purpose, personal growth, and deep relationships" (Fowers et al, 2016). Based on their reconceptualization, Fowers et al (2016) generate a relational flourishing survey based the measurement of six eudaimonic realms: meaning, personal growth, goal sharing, relational giving, personal expressiveness, and engagement.

Despite Fowers et al (2016) reconceptualization of flourishing as relational, its seeking to define a relational flourishing state failed to capture what was interesting to me in the sense of my program participants' flourishing. In particular, the flourishing I observed manifested through unpredictable interactions. For example, one team of interns was having trouble balancing conversational power dynamics during our weekly meetings as one intern insisted on controlling the activities. This generated antagonistic feelings from others. The intervention techniques that my colleagues and I used to help these interns resolve their conflicts came out in their own teaching strategies later. I could not have planned interns' antagonism, resolution, or even their practice of learned skills in their leadership of younger students. And so even if we had access to an accurate tool to measure relational flourishing among colleagues, the unpredictable nature of how/when/where/why events that produced my sense of relational flourishing would have been missed. Further, the very act of my trying to measure flourishing might have shift my sensing of our flourishing towards a specific definition.

III. Conceptualizing Flourishing as Relational via Philosophy

Josh's experience prompted our thinking about what a philosophical conceptualization of relational flourishing enabled us in contrast to a psychological constructing of relational flourishing as a measurable state. We thought that this analysis would be helped by considering what psychology's methods can and cannot do. In order to consider relational flourishing as measurable, for example, positive psychology makes use of the "standard social science model" which assumes that there is a human nature, and that the state of flourishing is possible, hence

Ryan and Deci's (2001) naming their article, "On Happiness and Human *Potential*." Not only is human flourishing possible, they argue, its form is malleable based on the time, context, and culture under study. We argue that if psychology claims that there is a human nature, no matter how malleable, psychology rests on an assumption that the state of human flourishing can be "found." Further, as we quoted Fincham and Beach (2010), the articulation that human understanding is "limited" by attention to some constructs and not others suggests that psychology's methods consider the scope of human nature discernable, were researchers able to attune their measuring devices in all possible directions and resolutions.

With these assumptions, psychology's methods look for findings indicating flourishing states. However, in Josh's experience, the numerous measurements made in his program could not possibly articulate the sense of flourishing he met, nor the moments he shared with his program's participants that came as a surprise to him, that were instrumental to his notion of flourishing. Further, for Josh to name the relationships in his program as in a state of flourishing (or not) would require the privileging of his voice in the relation, which may not be mirrored by program participants. Thus, we argue that measuring states of flourishing is an enactment of a power dynamic, where the need for definition can be deconstructed as belonging to agendas beyond those in the immediate moment of relating. To Fincham and Beach (2010), for example, the need to define relational flourishing was to yield a "complete" picture of the positive relationship process. Critiquing this effort, Ecclestone (2012) provides substantive document analysis of government relations to psychology in the UK in order to demonstrate that completing this picture is bent on forming mass interest in character education; the end goal being behavior modification and a docile citizenry.

Interested in a conceptualization of relational flourishing without the need for measurement, we questioned how philosophic inquiry might attend to the study of relational flourishing differently. To do this we surveyed philosophy literature for relationally-rendered concepts, previously rendered as belonging to an individual, humanist subject. In this research, we learned about concepts such as "relational autonomy" (Mackenzie, 2008) which construed one's autonomy as highly influenced by the quality of their relations. In this sense, one's sense of autonomy is on par with their sense of flourishing, and is a matter of social justice as it requires society to create conditions that make person's choices multiple in form, based on enabling their citizen's good relations. Despite this conceptualization's relational focus, we continued to feel warned by Ecclestone's (2012) work that interests in establishing the masses "good" relations might have negative effects in terms of its production of docile bodies.

In education, philosophers and methodologists had rendered the concept of "relational pedagogy" as attentive to the power dynamics between teacher and student. The power assigned by students and the university to the teacher could enable their initiation of generative, philosophical discussions, where affective responses between and among students and teacher were interrogated in simultaneity with intellectual endeavors. Relational pedagogy was conceptualized as a learning community set-up by the teacher such that each person is "equal here to the extent that we are equally committed to creating a learning context. (bell Hooks p. 197 in Jones, 2014)" With equality, Jones argues, flourishing becomes possible through the potential of becoming other – "how to relate to otherness and difference." This requires a shift away from

conceptualizing learning as right and wrong, to accepting multiple directions of thought and practice. For example, in one elementary education context, teachers required students' participation in ad-lib dramas geared at resolving an assigned problem. Drama was used to allow students fluidity between genders, personalities, and responsibilities, and much to their teachers' and researcher's interest, this fluidity was seized upon.

Overall, we noticed that philosophy's approach to conceptualizations of the relational did not find interest in defining a context, a person, or a relation as flourishing based on measurements. Philosophy conceptualized relationality by thinking through humans' extension to the environments and relationships to which they are in immediate response. In particular a relational pedagogy is relational in that its focus is on relational development and possibility, not oriented to a particular state, other than one of equal investment; investment (of something) being encouraged by pedagogy's educational intention. Conceptualizing relations as flourishing in philosophy, rather than just relations, might then come in those modes when one is "becoming-other", where the other isn't necessarily a relation to a specific human, but a specific mode of thought encouraged by the relations with which one is engaged.

To end, Michelle surveys an uncomfortable moment in her teaching of statistics that she will never know produced a state of relational flourishing, but did produce a sense of becoming-other in her own responsiveness to her class.

IV. Michelle's Experience

This past year as an undergraduate statistics instructor, I was positioned by the university as one who could make possible students' statistical practice; also to mark their practices right and wrong on exams and tests. This imposed subjectivity of "one who makes marks" troubled my interest in building a sense of relational flourishing between and me and my students, especially in the direction that my readings in philosophy pushed me: toward multidirectional thought and affection. Was it possible to teach both streamlined practice of statistical methods while also enabling and welcoming multiple modes of thinking?

Like Josh, my sensing of relational flourishing did not come only through my purposeful initiation of them. Instead they came through modes of students' response to my markings. For example, in my first two-weeks of instruction, I had tried – *tried* - to create a "flipped" classroom. I asked students to take reading quizzes before coming to class so that we could come together 'as equals' in knowledge and build upon this knowledge in class. I was not prepared for students' response to my grading of the quiz items. While going over the correct response, some students readily contested my selections of correct multiple-choice responses. Feeling threatened – this being my first time teaching statistics, after all - I had to make a choice. Would I back down? Would I shut them down? If I couldn't do either of these, what would I do? Thankfully, I had a dissertation chair who always welcomed my contestations, putting them into the perspective of a wider problematic. Practicing his methods, I asked students to clarify their thinking to me. I diagramed their responses on the board in relationship to my own. Perhaps in this swirling around multiple logics toward answering questions, we were doing philosophy after all! This occurrence

– much to the detriment of my nerves – happened several times to which I exclaimed one day, "this is my favorite part of class! Where I get to hear multiple ways you students think about things." I felt that I was lying through my teeth, as my nerves were shot. But my philosophic contemplation on flourishing as relational pushed me toward course investments of flows of thought, rather than striated senses of "right" and "wrong." To me, inviting students' contestations, rather than become defensive or turning them away, was a mode by which I could actively "become-other," enabling flows of contemplation and affection between us. Not only was my reconceptualization of flourishing not measurable, it was darn right uncomfortable.

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