

The Path to the Ph.D.: Intertwining My Experiences and Research Topic

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Our lives and the directions that we go during our lifetime is highly related to both the perspectives in which we see the world and the experiences we have had. This is no different when a scholar examines the reasons for their choices of research topics. This essay looks at the research topics of trauma, trauma-informed care, and resilience as related to my experiences and what has moved me towards this area of interest. These life experiences deal with the personal traumas, finding direction for my future career post high school graduation, and experiences within my practice and field of study.

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The ability for individuals, groups, organizations, and communities to develop strategies to deal with stress and obstacles is paramount in this day and age. Knowing that individuals are experiencing stress at so many levels, seems to be a community norm in these times. Finding effective methods to improve our ability to address these stressors in our community is at the basis of my decision to pursue my Ph.D. This essay looks at the experiences and interests that have led me to pursue a Ph.D. in Transformative Studies and how my interest in resilience as a research topic has been guided.

Research and Practice Interests

The ability of a practitioner to see the underlying or root issues in their work is a vital task. Problem finding as a key element of the creative inquiry. Three key characteristics of problem finding include an openness to change, pushing limits, and a preference for addressing core and fundamental aspects of the problem (Arlin, 1990, as cited in Montuori, 2006). To be able to tackle these, the fundamental and core aspects of a problem seems to make meaningful assessment

a serious focus. My background is in Social Work both in practice experience and education. This background and the perspective of an advanced generalist social work causes me to consider problems from a micro, mezzo, and macro perspective (Vecchiolla et al., 2001). These level of assessment and intervention would allow us to know what must be done with individuals, groups or organizations, and even the community.

Individual resilience is a complex phenomenon that looks at the capacity of individuals to modulate their stress response and adapt to difficult experiences. This ability of an individual may lead to the absence of psychopathology after traumatic events (Sippel, Pietrzak, Charney, Mayes, & Southwick, 2015). I'm a licensed independent clinical social worker. I spent several years of work with individuals implementing individual and group treatment for mental health disorders at a community counseling agency. I am interested in increasing my ability to understand the stressors that affect individuals and those individuals can increase their resiliency, especially as facilitated by groups, organizations and the broad community. An individual's resilience is highly connected to the systems in which they partake. For example, schools can serve as a protective factor for individuals (Henderson, 2012). When we start to look at the systems that person is in, we can also better understand how to build supports that help sustain the individuals as well as themselves. These two aspects of resilience, individual and organizational, appear intertwined and a part of a complex interplay.

One of the questions that I am most interested in, is how we develop resilience in these organizational systems, especially in school settings. I have been working in a K-12 school district for the last five years, as a program social worker working with students who have emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBD). The program is made up of students who have individualized educational plans (IEPs).

This article was written Jacob was working on Ph.D. in Transformative Studies program while at the California Institute of Integral Studies. It is being self-published at his website, <http://jacobrcampbell.com/resources> to help other practioniers and students in their practice and give them ideas. This paper was originally submitted for an informal peer-review process as a part of the coursework for TSD 8210: Self, Society, and Transformation on 10/13/19 to be reviewed by Dr. Constance Jones, Ph.D., Kayla Henry, Phil Weglarz, and Andrea Montgomery Di Marco. It was revised and submitted to California Institute of Integral Studies Writing Center for review on 11/01/19 with Laurel Tien. It was submitted as a final assignment on 11/04/19 to Dr. Constance Jones, Ph.D.

Some of them have academic concerns, but the primary reason for them being in my program is due to the disruptive behavior they display. Many of them have difficult experiences in their past that contribute to their behavior. But in general many students struggle with a number of different events, such as bullying (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017, sup1), mass tragic events (e.g., suicide death of a student, the death of a teacher, mass shootings, and the aftermath of terrorist attacks; Williams, 2006), adverse childhood experiences (Felitti et al., 1998), and many other concerns.

The concept of resilience is interdisciplinary. Zolli and Healy (2012) describe resilience from the perspectives of engineering, ecology, emergency response, psychology, and sociology. For their book, they define it as 'the capacity of a system, enterprise, or a person to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances' (Introduction: The Resilience Imperative section, para. 24). I find this definition inclusive and useful in framing my research interests as a part of the doctoral program in transformative studies at the California Institute of Integral Studies.

This ability to develop capacity, maintain its purpose and core when circumstances change is an important endeavor that has wide-reaching ramifications. Along with inquiry into how we develop these skills and systems, I also find the concept of those stressors that can be addressed by individuals and organizations intriguing. The idea of trauma and stress is a lens that is important for all to have some understanding of, and there are systems around the concept of trauma-informed care that are starting to be implemented in various settings. Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Department of Health & Human Services. The United States (2014) lays out four assumptions in a trauma-informed approach. (1) Realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; (2) Recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; (3) Responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and (4) Resists re-traumatization. I am particularly interested in the systems which we can put into place to develop and implement a trauma-informed approach.

I find it consequential to move from theoretical to specific practices. My practice and research interests I am outlining in this essay all revolve around how to do we understand, assess, and intervene to develop resilience. At the smallest unit, is the individual. While I am interested in groups and organizations, the individuals in those systems must be addressed. This means understanding the stressors and affecting events in their lives that form traumatic experiences. Giving a framework for how resilience can be bolstered both individually and at a systems level is where I would like to see my research go into. This desire is developed based on

some of my personal experiences.

The Intertwining of Research Interest and Experiences

There are a number of themes that have flowed through my life, along with events that have helped to shape some of those themes. In examining my interest in my research topic and in the pursuit of a Ph.D., I could pull at the threads of many of those themes and events. Specifically, in relationship to trauma, I have my own story of some difficult experiences and my path of implementing maladaptive coping strategies (Campbell, n.d.). Those experiences help me to have some personal connection and inspiration in understanding the importance of resilience. For the purpose of this essay, I'll be diving more into what drove me towards education and graduate school.

It took me five years to complete high school. I was homeless for a while, couchsurfing due to my own actions. I ended up going to an alternative setting for that last year. It was a Christian-based boarding school for at-risk youth. It was while I was at Jubilee that I decided to change the direction my life was going and my lifestyle. After I graduated, I ended up going to a leadership training and discipleship school (it was similar to a bible college for people interested in both lay and ordained ministry) called the Master's Commission. One of my primary reasons for making the decision to go to the Master's Commission was out of confusion and not really having any idea what I wanted to do with myself. I remember thinking about college and I disliked the idea of starting without knowing what I would do with the degree. It was through this, and some connection with graduates that I ended up going to the year-long program.

The Master's Commission was an intensive program, that looked at all parts of our lives. I had to keep a budget, track my time, exercise, volunteer, all along with focusing on how I and my cohort could become better through our relationship with God and connection to my Christian faith I had at the time. We had a charter bus that we made several trips across the country to do various activities, that was painted green with the words "are you ready for the extreme" on the side of it. It was an intense, but life-changing experience in so many ways. I spent two years in the program. The first year, I was a student where the second year I stayed on to help in the program as an intern. While I was there, we started visiting the juvenile detention center every week. We would talk to the kids there, share our stories, and build a relationship with them. I don't remember a moment that I decided that I wanted to pursue social work specifically, but it was while I was the Master's Commission that I made the decision that I wanted to spend my life helping people. I decided there, that I would go back home and first earn my AA and then transfer to Eastern Washington University to earn my bachelors and master's degree in social work.

Working part time as an adjunct faculty teaching under-

graduate social work students now, and from my interactions with my peers then I find that I was pretty unique to pinpoint exactly what I wanted to do and how I was going to go to do it. I knew I wanted to work with youth, especially those who could be considered at-risk or who are just a bit hard-headed. I think some of the desire to pursue this was because my heart would break hearing the stories from kids about their home lives or the things they have to deal with due to some of their life choices. I saw in them, in some way a reflection of me and the experiences that I had gone through. As it was a process for me to heal and grow past my experiences, I knew that I wanted to help them transform themselves as well. Anzaldúa (2012) talks about cultural collisions that happens in the space she describes as a borderland. That borderland is where the locus of transformation happens, through those collisions in our lives. A couple of years ago I submitted for a business license using just that name (Locus of Transformation). I was seeing their lives as mine was and my life as it had been changed to be. I want to be at that borderland helping others to make it through to the other side.

It wasn't until years later that I started to see an even bigger perspective of the change that we can implement for others. I remember talking to the directors of the Master's Commission, Deborah and Terry Dawes, about why they invest so much in the youth they work with. Deborah described her perspective around the investment she was making into my life and the lives of the other program participants. She told me it wasn't just about my or their lives, but that it was a much wider vision. She described that influence she has had on my life will reverberate beyond that initial impact and carry on to those that I affect. I found this way of thinking inspirational. In many ways, it is precisely this that encourages me in the work that I get to do teaching social work students. I hopefully I can positively impact them and their careers moving forward, and in turn the clients they work with. The desire to help understand and strength the resilience of individuals and groups and or organizations is also one that I am excited to be able to pursue and gather more in-depth knowledge about.

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