

“BEING LESS IS NEVER LEAST” UNRAVELING CREATIVITY AMONG OLDER ADULTS WITH DISABILITY

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to validate the first proposition of the Theory of Creative Aging, which stated “Creativity does not decline with age, however with physical disabilities; it limits the level of creativity.” This study utilized a qualitative multiple case study approach. A multiple case study enables the researcher to analyze within each and across setting. Several cases are examined to understand the similarities and difference between cases in a multiple case study, after the analysis of data utilizing qualitative content analysis method (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Four themes emerged from the shared experiences of the participants being involved in this study: (1) Turning Point: At the onset of Disability; (2) There is more to Life; (3) Family as a major source of Support and Inspiration; and (4) Faith beyond the Mishaps. Being disabled and creative at the same time does not make one different. The creative capacity is not fully eradicated but there are some limitations, as long as one is capable of expressing and carrying out the task, then everything is possible. A creativity of an individual is relative to his health. For one to continue with his creative pursuit, it is important that he has the passion to create and a healthy disposition to fully express his creativity. However, experiencing any physical disability lessens a person's ability to create and time to adapt to changes is essential.

Key words: Case study, creativity, disability, faith, life, qualitative content analysis, transition

INTRODUCTION

In fertile grounds anywhere, creativity can be found (Gustafson, 2014). But it takes a personal resolution and dedication to openness to change as well as acceptance of risk, including risk of failure. Conservatism, criticism and pessimistic attitude is not helpful and hinders any creative process. To pursue one's love for a craft, it takes a lot of passion and a sense of dedication. As the cliché goes, “the more, the merrier”. However, there are circumstances that greatly affect the capacity of an individual to pursue a loved passion or task. Creativity exists in all ages, thus, any individual from all walks of life and from all ages is born creative and is capable of being creative. However, with physical disability, a degree in executing a task may somehow become limited. Many have thought that older adults creativity diminishes with age, his capacity to do creative things will declines. Gustafson (2014) in his article stated that there is a study that looked into the health status and life expectancy of creative people that found that creativity is indeed associated with delayed decline in cognitive and physical health at an advanced age. According to the researchers it was found that people who are creative find better ways of coping with their

diminishing abilities than their less resourceful counterparts, while it is unclear whether engaging in creative activities or the use of creative energies actually contribute to the slowing of the natural process of aging. On the other hand, there are creative persons who are highly functioning excellently in specific area of interest only and are not better-equipped for problem-solving beyond their expertise, for example when it comes to their health needs.

Stimulation and socialization for individuals with disabilities are very much necessary as they are isolated from peers. This group context is very much useful for receiving such experiences (Hume & Hiti, 1988). This is confirmed in more recent studies focusing on group activities and its benefits. In a study of Lynch and Chosa (1996) the relationship between group-oriented community-based participation expressive art programs for individuals with disabilities was examined and perceptions of psychosocial function change were investigated. Participation in community arts was found to promote an increase self-esteem, communication abilities and skills in socialization.

A study by Reynolds and Prior (2003) on a group of women living with disabling chronic illnesses discovered that art filled occupational voids, distracted

thoughts away from illness, encouraged the flow and spontaneity, facilitated the expression of emotions, maintained a positive personality with a broadened social networks. Therefore the requirement for creative arts services is increasing day by day. They have become an environment in which people assemble together to enjoy and freely express themselves and think about problems of common concern (Vasey, 1992). This disability culture would offer people a key to “the basic process of identifying as a disabled person” (Vasey, 1992), because culture and identity are closely linked concepts.

Creativity is a human characteristic that empowers people and communities to adapt and flourish in changing circumstances (Creek, 2008). A variety of activities that support health and well-being is what people spend the greater part of their lives. The expression of creativity is done through many of the activities of everyday life, including work, family life, social interaction and leisure. One seeks alternative ways of meeting the needs when someone is unable to access a healthy range of activities, due to illness, disability or other circumstances. For example, a man may choose to use his leisure time to express his creativity if he is unable to work because of illness. Creative leisure activities become an important part of an individual's schemes for coping with illness or disability; through adaptation promotion, creation of meaningful goals and providing distraction from pain and anxiety. Due to illness or disability, if a person finds it difficult to participate in creative leisure activities, it may be essential to provide practical support or to stimulate the individual's own creative development.

According to Alforque (2016), it is by nature of creative individuals to persist creating despite disability. The passion to create never ceases, however, the ability to produce is diminished but never totally gone. This study aims to validate the assumption of the Theory of Creative Aging that creativity does not decline with age, however, with physical disabilities, it limits the level of creativity. Being an older adult and being disabled at the same time is a concern as to how one is able to perform a creative task. However, there are more than just the incapacities; instead there is the capacity of the older adult to perform better despite being someone with disability.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a case study design. Polit and Beck (2004) defined case studies as in-depth investigations of a single or a small number of entities. The investigation can be done on an individual, family, group, institution, community, or other social unit. In a case study, researchers attain a wealth of descriptive information and may examine relationships among different phenomena, or may examine trends over time. Case study researchers attempt to analyze and understand issues of the entity under study that are important to the history, development, or its circumstances. A multiple case study allow the researcher to explore differences within and between cases. The goal is to reproduce findings across cases. Comparisons are drawn after carefully selecting the so that the researcher can predict similar results across cases, or predict contrasting results based on a theory (Yin, 2003).

Purposive selection was utilized in this study, specifically selection of similar cases which deliberately reduces variations and permits a more focused study. The participants of this study included 4 older adults who belongs to the following inclusion criteria: 1) Age (should be at least 60 years of age); 2) Male or female; 3) currently working or not; 4) A resident of Cebu; and 5) preferably with disability or has recovered from a physical or physiological condition, presently active or engaged in a creative endeavor (such as music, arts, skills-related, sports, etc.). A purposive sample is a sample selected in a purposeful and non-random fashion to realize a certain goal.

To analyze the gathered data, qualitative content analysis is utilized. A research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns is defined as qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). It is an approach of empirical, methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytic rules and step by step models, without rash quantification (Mayring, 2000). It also refers to qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and efforts to recognize core consistencies and meanings (Patton, 2002).

A process designed to condense raw data into categories or themes based on valid inference and

interpretation is involved in qualitative content analysis. Inductive reasoning is used in this process, by which themes and categories emerge from the data through the researcher's careful analysis and constant comparison. Deductive reasoning does not need to be excluded in qualitative content analysis (Patton, 2002). It is very useful for qualitative research, especially at the inception of data analysis to generate concepts or variables from theory or previous studies (Berg, 2001).

The researcher made use of a semi-structured interview guide which consists of three warm-up questions, eight main questions and four prompts that encourage the participants to share their insights.

To address ethical issues, since participants of this study are those older adults with a minimum age of 60 years old and up, an informed consent (both verbal and written) was asked from the participants after full disclosure and explanation of the study. The participants were notified on the nature, purposes, methodology, risks and benefits of the study. The participants were made to volunteer and were not coerced to participate.

Audio-recording transcribed verbatim, and other records will be kept with utmost confidentiality by keeping them in the locker and destroying them a year after submitting the final report. Field notes were done using pen and a jot down notebook, taking note of important information during the interview session.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Discussed below is the case profile of the four participants that were being involved in this study:

Case A. The Gentle Woodworker

Case A is a male participant aged 69 years old. He was a Roman Catholic married with two children and he is into carpentry and woodworking. Before he had his stroke, he was a freelance carpenter. He is good in woodworking, making furniture of all sorts. His love for woodworking has made his work satisfying and happy.

“When he was confined, he fervently prays that he will be able to recover from all of these. Now, he is doing well, can move well but sometimes with some assistance, but able to perform activities of daily living. He admits that he has some limitations now with his movements and activities, but it does not stop him from sharing his insights regarding wood working and

carpentry. He feels glad that he is able to help others and is able to continue his passion for woodworks.”

Case B. The Happy Dressmaker

Case B is a female participant aged 80 years old, married with five children, three of which are girls and two are boys. She started dressmaking at age 12. Her constant stay at their dress shop has awakened her interest in dressmaking. She started sewing with rags, then handkerchiefs until she was given the chance to do uniforms. When she was 50 years old, she had a heart attack due to hypertension. After a year of rehabilitation, she was able to move her left side of the body, and she was able to recover.

“Though not 100% fully recovered, she was able to move on her own and was able to do her activities of daily living without any assistance. She was able to go back to dressmaking but her world is not that extensive anymore, compared to what she was doing back then. She was very hopeful that she will recover and that she can do dressmaking again. She believed that if you really love doing something, no matter what condition you will be, you will always have the heart for doing it. She believes that if she has limitations in doing the sewing, then she might as well extend her knowledge about dressmaking so that the act of it continues. She is very happy doing this because she was able to help others and at the same time she was able to share her creativity.”

Case C. The Hobbyist Photographer

Case C is a male participant aged 68 years old. He is married with three children, all of whom are males. He started photography when he was 17 years old. He learned the basics of photography from his father and older brother. He is a freelance photographer. He was diagnosed to be diabetic at a younger age of 38, thus, causing the amputation of his leg.

“It took him almost four months to be used to only having one foot when taking his shots. He brings with him crutches when he has some photoshoots, but it's really different now because there are angles that he is not able to do easily because he can't go down that easily because of his amputated leg. But he said that it's just only his foot that was taken away. He was thankful that he still has his hands, so that he can still go on taking pictures and capturing more memories. He is very much busy now teaching some of his nephews who

are also enthusiast with photography. Even if he is presently with a disability but he is glad to have continued and passed the creative pursuit of photography within his family."

Case D. The Painter on a Wheelchair

Case D is a male participant aged 71 years old. He is married with five children, four of which are males, and one is female. His father is a painter and his older brother as well. He started his journey at the age of 10, where he started with simple drawings on a piece of paper. He was taught the basics of painting by his father and his older brother constantly draws with him which motivated him to draw more. While he was growing up, he became an expert in painting. Due to a poorly controlled Diabetes Mellitus (DM), he undergoes an amputation below the knee of both his legs. It was really a major turning point of his life.

"It was only my feet that are gone; my hands are still intact and my heart for the arts is still alive. Now, he still continues painting but he on a wheelchair. It was a new situation for him, but he got used to that setting. He conducts painting classes for younger children in their neighborhood. He somehow feels glad, that in this way he is able to continue the passion for painting and drawing."

THEMES GENERATED FROM THE CASES

All of the participants in this study during the period of data collection have shared their personal experiences on their creative pursuits based on their own fields. From the data gathered, each of the emergent themes were defined and discussed with excerpts from the transcripts of responses to support and highlight each theme.

Theme 1: Turning Point: at the onset of Disability

Losing something that is deemed important is like losing a part of yourself. Every individual has a prized possession, and some of it is not measurable by any remuneration. We value people, places, things, events, experiences, self-worth, and even our own talents, skills and abilities. We are all born unique, and in that uniqueness we are able to discover our capability. Everyone is born creative. It's up to us to discover what we are truly more capable of expressing. There comes a point in our lives wherein unforeseen circumstances occur, and some of it are things that we least expect to experience.

There are some creative individuals who value parts of their body, like the hands for the painter, the brains for the writer and the scientist, the feet for the dancer, and all those in other creative fields. Our ability to draw, to sing, to dance, to think about things, to solve problems all of these are considered as gifts and must be treasured. However, there comes a time when these prized possessions will not remain with us or will disappear because it was meant to happen that way. Sometimes we experienced a loss of senses after a heart attack or a limb amputation. When such incidents occur then it creates an impact to us. We can either adapt to such situations or feel depressed. But in such a situation creativity can help us, as long as the passion is there, then the will to go on with the creative pursuits continues.

The following responses are from the participants telling us how losing a limb changed their life, and how they remained to be positive.

"It was something that I never expected this soon. The moment I realized that I lost my leg, I thought that this is another chapter of my life. I knew that I have lost a limb, but I have never thought of losing my hope in pursuing photography."

"I believe that losing my foot would mean another adjustment in my life to pursue photography. But I know that it will not totally hinder me in capturing more photos. I just need to adjust; then I will be able to overcome this situation."

"I knew the moment I lose my leg, it will be another chapter of my life. I am already disabled; it is another chapter of my life."

Theme 2: There is more to Life

One may never know the extent of one's existence unless he has ventured every corner of his life. The obstacles they have faced in their life, have taught them many lessons. When an individual experience some forms of disability suddenly from a normal state, it is expected that one may question such a happening and they might feel that there is no hope left for him.

According to one participant:

"I really did question why this has occurred to me. I was enjoying my life in creating beautiful paintings, and why this has to happen to me?"

Furthermore, he added:

"I know that God has his plans for me. It is not only me who experienced to be like this. There are also some people who have been like this, but have continued with life. It is just only my feet that have been taken away, not my hands. I can still draw and paint, and my heart for the art is still alive."

We may think that once one has undergone any degree of disability, it will stop his ability to create or to produce. For a creative individual, his capacity to utilize his every extremity is an essential aspect for him to be able to carry out his creative pursuits. It can be assumed that when a dancer loses his foot, he will not dance again. If a singer loses his voice, he will never sing again. If a painter loses any of his hands, he will not paint anymore. If a writer has recovered from stroke, he will never write again. These are some of the assumptions that most of us will think. However, it is very remarkable to know that despite the limitations in one's capacity, there are many creative individuals who can still perform and create despite their disability, even in older age.

One of the participant said that his physical condition did not stop him from doing what he really loves to do. According to a participant:

"Having been amputated both legs, it was never easy. I never knew that my diabetes can reach this point in my life. I'm glad that it was just my legs, not my hands because I will find it hard to paint anymore. But it does not mean it is going to be easy with everything. I am finding it hard to sit on the wheelchair and paint in front of a blank canvass. It was uneasy at first, but eventually I got a hang of it."

Theme 3: Family as a major source of support and inspiration

The family is a best source of support and inspiration. As the cliché goes, "when everyone else has left and abandoned you, then you will always have your family with you." For these creative older adults, being disabled is a major transition in their lives. However, coping with disability without hindering creativity becomes much easier when an individual has a family to lean on that has made the adaptation more of a reality. The atmosphere created by a supportive family is a good motivation for a disabled creative older adult to help that person to continue with creative pursuit,

without having the feelings of pressure from them. According to Dacey (1989), a favorably important influence, and quite possibly the major force behind, the ethnology of creative behavior is the family. Wright and Wright (1986) developed a three-pronged model of the creative family environment. Respect for the individual, stimulation of independence, and an enriched learning environment are the three main components of a creative family environment.

According to one participant he is very glad that he has a loving and supportive spouse in his endeavor:

"I am glad to have a very supportive wife. I know there are times that my work is so stressful yet my wife is ever supportive. She knows that carpentry and woodworking is my craft, that's why she never failed to support me with this."

"I'm so thankful that I have my wife who helped me do my day-to-day activities. When I was recovering at home, it was really difficult that I can't even move my extremities. I felt so weak. But I am just so glad that my wife never gave up on me. I really do appreciate the support she has given me."

The purpose that is less often or at least less explicitly, stated is promoting the development of creativity. After infancy, young children continue to grow physically in a stable manner while they continue to grow cognitively in a faster manner. Using their sensory abilities, young children begin to explore and adapt themselves to the surrounding environment (Lew and Cho, 2013).

"I really love photography. It was really a passion for me. I'm glad that my father was so patient enough to teach me all the basics about photography. It was not easy then, because the camera is manual. You have to know the basics because you are the one who does the adjustments to the shutter speed, aperture, the lighting, the angles, and the composition of your object. I have learned those things by heart, and with very much gratitude to my father and brother."

According to Lambert (2016), one complex subject is creativity. Although they have learned a lot about it in recent years, science has not come up to any concrete explanations as how it works. Furthermore, he added that if parents were creative themselves – actors, writers, artistes, architects – then they probably brought you up in an environment that is creative. Creativity

may have been stifled if they were office drones and TV addicts. Dr. Laura Markham, a parenting expert, noted that “We can't give people talent, but we can train the eye and the ear and the mind, and we can help our children attain access to seeing in a creative way. We can also help them gain the concentration, competence, perseverance, and optimism necessary to succeed in creative pursuit.” There are certainly exceptions to the rule and as well as there's no “right” answer. However, the impact on your creativity as an adult depends on the extent to which your creativity was nurtured as a child.

Theme 4: Faith beyond the mishaps

As one ages, his level of spirituality also increases. The myriad of experiences that an older adult has gone through teaches him to be more appreciative and understanding about life and its events. That is reason there are other individuals who persist to be optimistic despite all the mishaps that happened in their life. Everyone has his or her own experience of mishaps in life. Depending on how a person copes up, he will continue or otherwise will be deceased. Faith is a very prominent word among older adults, because from the participants of this study, it was evident that they remain faithful to the almighty, they will recover and that they will continue to be more creative despite being disabled. According to the following participants, they relied on God to help them recover from this phase in their life:

“Even before I have become like this, I always pray to God. He is my savior and my inspiration, and despite being like this, it didn't hamper my strong faith in Him.”

“When I was still recovering, I never stopped praying to the Lord. I am weak but my faith in Him remains to be strong. I also pray that I may still continue capturing wonderful shots of people, places and events.”

“I never doubted the love of God. I know that I may be losing a part of me, but I know I will be gaining more of my love for my craft. I know that this is just a phase, but I will be painting more, and that my experience of being like this can be a good medium and inspiration for me to paint on a blank canvas.”

Having realized the struggles and life-changing experiences of these creative older adults with disabilities, it made the author appreciate more about life. If one has faith in himself and on god then they will be capable to do all the tasks and everything will

possible for him. To some extent, one may feel anxious or have doubts. The person might even feel down or may not feel like going through these sufferings, but he might realize that everything is a matter of a process that will come to an end eventually. We should always believe that despite old age and disabilities, if one is in good health with the power to continue, then the door for more opportunities will be always open for him to pursue his creativity.

CONCLUSION

Being disabled and creative at the same time does not make one different. The creative capacity is not fully eradicated but there are some limitations. As long as one is capable of expressing and carrying out the task, then everything is possible. A creativity of an individual is relative to the person's health. For one to continue with his creative pursuit, it is important that he has the passion to create and a healthy disposition to fully express his creativity. However, experiencing any physical disability reduces a person's ability to create. Moreover the person must adapt to changes faster to continue his creative endeavor.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study was able to provide understanding of the experiences of creativity among older adults with disability. Based on the outcomes of the study, the researcher recommends the following:

1. The study can be applied to other creative older adults with cognitive impairments or mental incapacities to get another perspective of creativity among the disabled creative older adult.
2. The families of these kinds of individuals should not just be more supportive of the physical and physiological recovery of the individual, but also consider the aspect of the individual to be more productive and must be able to contribute to the society.
3. There should be services that will attend to the needs of these creative older adults with disability so as to help them adjust faster and become more sociable and connected with the world.
4. Health care providers should understand the capacity of a disabled adult despite their condition. If these individuals be given the opportunity to be productive, this will help them in their rehabilitation.

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