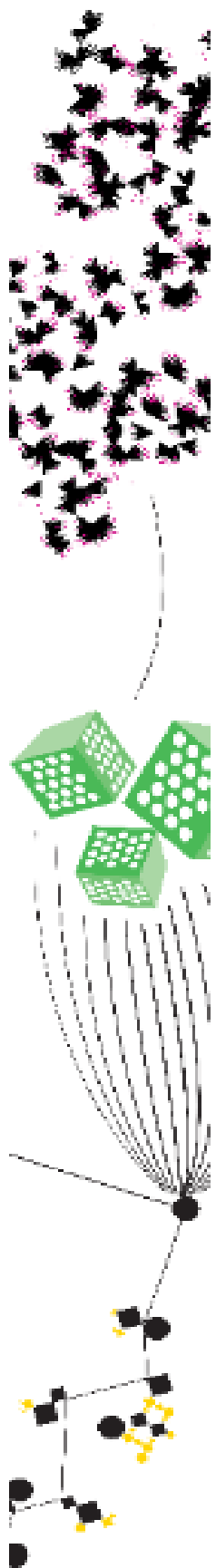


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Flourishing throughout the Lifespan: A Qualitative
Interview Study

Bachelor Thesis Psychology

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Abstract

Background. With Positive Psychology influencing most of today's psychological research, theories, and interventions, Corey Keyes' concept of flourishing has become particularly relevant. Flourishing is defined as positive mental health, which involves humans striving to achieve self-actualisation and fulfilment. Thereby, it can benefit society, as its members are more productive, happier, and live longer when they are flourishing. However, it is yet unknown in what ways people differ regarding their needs of flourishing over time and age.

Objective. This study aimed to explore younger and older participants' descriptions of present-day, retrospective, and future flourishing.

Method. A qualitative interview study was conducted with six German participants who were all from a middle or high social class. For the interviews, the participants were grouped into *Younger* (22-40 years) and *Older* (51-75 years). The data were content analysed.

Results. The findings yield insights into the concept of flourishing throughout the lifespan of *younger* and *older participants*. All participants in this study described flourishing in 13 different ways, depending on their past, present, and future. No important differences were found in the answers between the two groups. However, present-day flourishing and future flourishing were connected to more personal matters such as being autonomous and having the freedom of doing what one loves, whereas retrospective flourishing was described in more materialistic and achievement goals.

Conclusion. Flourishing was found to be a continuing process, which seemed to develop over time. The differences in flourishing could be explained by socio-cultural factors, such as personal growth and development. Future research should further evaluate and determine changes in the way people can flourish throughout their lifetimes.

Keywords. positive psychology, flourishing, qualitative research, lifespan development

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Flourishing throughout the Lifespan: A Qualitative Interview Study

Have you ever wondered if the things that make your life worth living right now are the same that made it worth living in the past or will do so in the future?

Erik Erikson once said that as life develops, a humans' identity also develops (Erikson, 1950). He was convinced that, over a lifespan, human beings strive towards generativity and ego instead of worrying about identity and intimacy (Sheldon & Kasser, 2001). Furthermore, Carl Rogers (1961) suggested that people direct their goals in life towards experiencing personal growth and change by adapting through the process of time and ageing. Finally, it was William James who, characterised humans' consciousness as something that is 'sensibly continuous' and, therefore, changes through time (James, 1961, p. 19). This gives reason to believe that also peoples' perspectives regarding the meaning of life are eventually changing just like their identities, personal goals or consciousness do. The present study aims to explore the variation within humans' perspectives of a meaningful life by critically reflecting on younger and older people's past, present, and future descriptions of flourishing as defined by Corey Keyes.

Keyes proposed the concept of flourishing shortly after Martin Seligman introduced Positive Psychology in 1998, which refers to the study of how humans beings can thrive in the face of traumatic events or illness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Froh, 2004). Hence, Keyes encourages people to engage in activities that can produce the actualisation of their full potential to live their best life possible, and not only generate themselves to be mentally healthy (Keyes, 2002). Therefore, Keyes refers to the term 'flourishing', which describes a state in which a person abides if they experience self-actualisation and fulfilment, defined as the presence of positive mental health (Keyes, 2007). Thereby, in order to be able to flourish, a person should be functioning in a positive matter and experience high levels of hedonic well-being, referring to subjective and emotional well-being and eudaimonic well-

being, referring to psychological and social well-being (Keyes, 2010; Schotanus-Dijkstra, 2016). Precisely, a flourishing person could be described as someone who is ‘regularly cheerful, holds positive attitudes towards herself, finds own life has a direction, can form warm, trusting personal relationships and has a sense of belonging to a community’ (Keyes, 2007, p.98).

Further research supported the assumption that individuals who are experiencing anything less than completely positive mental health score higher in impairment and disability and have an increased probability of all-cause mortality (Keyes, 2012; Schontanus-Dijkstra, 2016). Additionally, adults who are flourishing strive from having an increased motivation to work, miss fewer workdays, and have the lowest incidence of chronic physical disease and conditions (Keyes, 2007). Another study also found that people who experience meaning and happiness in their lives are healthier, more productive, and above all, live longer (Headey & Yong, 2019). Economically, and psychologically speaking, a society enriches when it focuses on improving people’s well-being and happiness to increase their ability to flourish.

These prior studies indicate that research should pay attention to the matters that give human beings dignity and purpose throughout life (Gable & Haidt, 2005). That is what Keyes has done by introducing his research on flourishing. However, due to the author’s knowledge, it is still largely unknown to what extent flourishing tends to develop over time. Keyes only reported in a representative population study that people of different ages vary in their likelihood to flourish: Older people (aged 45 up to 74) were more often flourishing compared to younger people (aged 25 up to 54) (Keyes, 2002). Contrary, another study conducted in the Netherlands found the highest percentage of flourishers in the age category of 18-25 years, suggesting that higher education and female gender are significantly related to flourishing (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2016). Therefore, there seems to exist an age difference regarding the probability of flourishing. Perhaps, this also means that flourishing is experienced

differently over life.

Notably, most of the recent quantitative studies have not investigated lifespan development in the context of the human capacity of flourishing, but instead focused on happiness. However, happiness is an important aspect of flourishing, which is why their results are of great value to the present study. Quantitative data indeed support the idea that happiness evolves over time. For instance, Sheldon & Kasser (2001) found a positive correlation between age and happiness. This was explained by the fact that older individuals are more psychologically mature than younger people and, therefore, can more easily experience joy in their lives (Sheldon & Kasser, 2001). This is contrasted by the finding of a U-shaped relationship between happiness and age, in which middle-aged people were found to have the lowest levels of happiness (Lelkes, 2008; Frijters & Beaton, 2012).

There have also been several qualitative studies on lifespan psychology, but again they do not investigate it in the context of flourishing but, for example, of happiness or meaning. For instance, an interview study of undergraduate students (aged 19 up to 21 years) found that younger people reported changes in their thoughts about happiness (Hill et al., 2013). According to these students, their sources of happiness were relationships, altruism, career, personal growth, the pursuit of happiness, and religion (Hill et al., 2013). Furthermore, participants expected their sources to be influenced by, for example, their parents, life-changing situations, or changes in their opinions (Hill et al., 2013). Hill et al. (2013) drawn from this that ‘specific changes involved shifting from superficial to more meaningful pursuits and thinking more for themselves’ (p.1). Quantitative as qualitative data showed that the view on happiness of people is influenced over time. Perhaps, flourishing could develop over time like the feeling of happiness as well.

A qualitative study conducted in 2010 indicated a change in older people’s perspectives of their lives. During the study, participants (born between 1930 and 1940) were

analysed according to their self-narratives regarding how they identified themselves with the past and present situations of possible cultural change (Westerhof, 2010). In this context, participants reported that material opportunities had increased from the past to the present, that their partnerships had become more open and equal, and that currently they felt more autonomous in making their own choices (Westerhof, 2010). These results support the assumption that older people are not likely to be consistent in their descriptions of their lives over time or, referring to the title of the present study: “During my life so much has changed that it looks like a new world to me” (p.1; Westerhof, 2010).

Other empirical studies can additionally support a shift of people’s perspectives regarding a meaningful life. They have shown that, as people grow older, their horizons seem to shift, and younger and older adults picture themselves in clearly different situations over time (Timmer, Bode & Dittmann-Kohli, 2003; Dittmann-Kohli & Westerhof, 2000). For example, participants within the age range of 47-53 years were found to direct their attention towards hedonistic goals like personal development and shifting away from ‘societal roles’ and other responsibilities (Timmer et al., 2003). Therefore, it can be concluded that future and past perspectives for situational outcomes can vary across the lifespan (Dittmann-Kohli & Westerhof, 2000).

Accordingly, qualitative studies underline the idea that both older and younger people tend to think differently over time, which could also be true for flourishing.

Mapping someone’s future may be as powerful as evaluating their past or present, which is why not only retrospective or present-oriented thinking about a good life but also the importance of people who are imagining the future must be considered. Regarding this, a qualitative web-based study aimed to explore humans’ capacity to picture their futures (Sools, Tromp, & Mooren, 2015). Therefore, researchers analysed the narrative processes of participants who were imagining their futures in the form of letters (Sools et al., 2015). The

results suggested that looking forward can be equally as helpful as reflecting on the elements that make someone's life worth living (Sools et al., 2015). It was found that a dialogical relation between participants' future and present selves was a powerful instrument to make people aware of their own values and to what extent they live according to them (Sools et al., 2015).

All these findings support the idea that age and time can, to some extent, influence the way people think and feel about a happy and flourishing life. However, a major limitation of the above collected qualitative studies about lifespan development is the disregard of Keyes' concept of flourishing. This concept is essential to gain a deeper understanding of what it means for people to live a fulfilling life from a psychological point of view. Therefore, instead of investigating feelings only related to happiness, or experiences of meaning, the present study focuses on 'flourishing' to cover all factors belonging to a psychologically satisfying life.

In sum, the current study examines the development of the state of flourishing over time, by considering the participants' age and their present, past, and future descriptions of flourishing. It is hypothesised that participants from different age groups report differences in their descriptions among present, past and future flourishing. The results may encourage future research to develop techniques that help people to comprehend what they need at different ages in order to flourish and thereby embrace their full potential (Sools et al., 2015). Thus, the aim of the current interview-survey is to explore how younger and older people describe flourishing throughout their lifespans. Interviews and results are focused on present-day, past and future flourishing.

Methods

Study Design and Ethical Considerations

The current study consisted of a qualitative interview study conducted in the 2020 academic year at the University of Twente. The study has been approved by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management, and Social sciences at the University of Twente (Request number: 200337). Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, the interviews could not be held face to face and were instead conducted via Skype. The interviews were additionally recorded on a phone for the purpose of later analyses. Before the interviews were conducted, the participants received an invitation letter and an informed consent form, in which they were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that none of their details would be used that could identify them as an individual. Also, it was made clear that only the interviewer would listen to the interview recordings. To confirm that all these ethical considerations had been understood, the informed consent statement was signed digitally by every participant.

Participants

To receive a wide variation of opinions on flourishing, six participants with an age range of 22–75 years were interviewed via Skype. Participants were recruited from the author's social network. However, they were not informed about the author's expectations of the study to avoid biased answers. All participants were personally invited by the author, either via telephone or WhatsApp, to take part in the study. After they had received the invitation letter and agreed to the committed terms, individual Skype meetings were set up for the interviews. Besides, it was ensured that all participants were comparable in terms of nationality (German), social class (middle to high), and whether they were married or in a relationship. To preserve confidentiality, all names were removed, and each participant was

labelled with an initial. For more details about each participant, see Table 1. For interview purposes, the target group was divided into *Younger* (participants within the age range of 22–39 years), and *Older* (participants within the age range of 53–75 years).

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of the target group.

Name	Gender	Age	Job	Marital status
Mr. B	Male	22	Trainee	In a relationship
Mrs. K	Female	30	Student	Married
Mrs. M	Female	39	Teacher	Married
Mrs. L	Female	53	Teacher	Married
Mr. T	Male	60	Engineer	Married
Mrs. O	Female	75	Pensioner	Married

Data Collection

Six semi-structured interviews with open questions were held during the period of April 7th until April 16th, 2020. A diary was used to write pre/during/post notes of the interviews to ensure that all details were recorded. The open questions were mainly used to minimise confirmation biases, and the interviews were held in German to reduce the risk of misunderstandings. However, a few closed questions were asked to clarify certain matters. As an inspiration for some of the interview questions, the interview layout of Levasseur, Tribble and Desrosiers' study conducted in 2009 was used. Levasseur et al. (2009) asked their participants for the meaning of 'quality of life' and for examples of how a good/bad day could look like. Similar questions have been useful for the current study as well.

Before the interviews, all participants' questions regarding ethical considerations of

the study had been clarified. The term *flourishing* was briefly explained to each participant to ensure that they knew what the interview questions were about. In addition, for the purpose of the protocol, all participants were asked to shortly introduce themselves, by describing how old they were, what their marital status was, and what they did for a living.

At the start of the interviews, a photograph-exercise was conducted in which the participant was asked to show meaningful pictures on their phone to explain what gives their life meaning. If they did not use their phone much, they could also use printed photographs. As the interview was about a personal topic, this procedure was intended to help to release the tension and to make it easier for the participants to find a start and to talk freely. For now, no response questions were given to anything the participants said. The participants did not have a time limit to talk about their photographs, but for the subsequent interviews, a time limit was set for approximately 30 minutes.

Besides some exceptions, the first part of the interview referred mainly to the participant's present thoughts of flourishing. Therefore, the interview started with the question: 'How do you think you can live a life worth living, in which you can achieve a state of flourishing?'. This question was asked of every participant. Further questions were based on what the interviewee replied, which meant that each interview had its own individual path. An example of a subsequent question was: 'Could you please give some examples from your daily life, which improve the quality of your life?'.

Afterwards, questions were asked to explore participants' retrospective and future reasoning of flourishing. Therefore, the *younger participants* were first asked: 'Please think of the things that make your life worth living right now. Explain why you think that they will stay as important to you in the next 10, 20, and 30 years or why you think they will be replaced by other things?'. On the other hand, the *older participants* were first asked: 'Please compare the things that make your life worth living right now to the things that made it worth

living in the last 10, 20, and 30 years. Explain why you think the fundamental things stayed the same or why do you think they did not?'. To answer the research question of how people at different ages describe flourishing throughout their lifespan, the *younger participants* were later also asked about retrospective flourishing and the *older participants* about future flourishing. Further questions would again be based on what the interviewee said. Examples of subsequent questions were: 'How do you think you will think about the quality of life when you are old?'; 'How did you think about the quality of life when you were young?'.

Care was taken to base the interview questions on the needs of the participants. For example, one person expressed the wish to talk about their relationship; therefore, the flow of the interview went along with this. Furthermore, it was ensured that every interview would last approximately 30 minutes, but the interviewee's thoughts were not cut off. More precisely, if someone felt the need to talk for more or less than 30 minutes, the appropriate amount of time was given to them. Therefore, the actual duration of the interviews was between 25 and 40 minutes. Moreover, all participants expressed the need to discuss more deeply the first part, which is why the first part lasted longer than the second. Ultimately, it was simply ensured that everyone had answered the fixed questions stated above.

Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded with a mobile phone and were later transcribed verbatim into written form with the help of AmberScript. Additionally, the transcripts were adjusted by hand to ensure that they were complete, whereby no change to the meaning of the answers was done. Moreover, after conducting the interviews in German, they were translated into written English by the researcher. Here, it is important to mention that the translations were performed very carefully and were reread many times in order to translate them as accurately as possible. Furthermore, an independent person outside this project, who had good English skills, read through the interview transcripts to check for issues related to understanding.

In order to answer the research question, the interview answers of each participant were coded based on an inductive approach according to content analysis. Content analysis can be defined as a systematic and replicable technique, which is used for combining many words of text into fewer content categories based on rules of coding (Stemler, 2000). This enables the simplification of large volumes of data and, in this case, the identification of participants' emotions, thoughts, and personal perceptions about flourishing.

All six interviews were coded through the ATLAS.ti software.

The coding process started by analysing the first interview for the units of analysis, which referred to answers (words and sentences) of present-day, past, and future flourishing. Every relevant answer was called a fragment and was only coded once. An important note is that only if a fragment was found in the majority of the interviews (more than three different interviews), it was considered to be important and generalisable. Based on this, several sub-codes were created, which were then merged into collective codes. Subsequently, the codes created for the first interview were used to code all the other interviews for answers regarding present-day, past, and future flourishing. Every time an interview has been coded, the coding schemes for every time frame (referring to present-day, past, or future flourishing) were adjusted until they were considered to include all important fragments (answers) given by the participants. Finally, in the interests of establishing reliability, all codes were reviewed by a person not involved in this bachelor topic. In total, 13 codes and 32 sub-codes were identified, assigned to present-day (see Table 2), retrospective (see Table 3) and future flourishing (see Table 4).

Table 2

Coding Scheme (Present-day Flourishing).

Code and Sub-code	Definition	Example quote
Autonomy and Self care	This code was used when the participants talked about the need to be free in making their own choices and have a sense of self-focus.	<i>'... to have the freedom of deciding every day again, what is good for me and what I want to do' (Mr. B).</i>
Self-confidence		
Feeling free to make choices		
Being best possible and true self		
Spending time alone		
Taking care of oneself		
Job	This code was used when the participants talked about their job as being a fundamental element of flourishing.	<i>'I think you should always do what makes you happy. Therefore, if I am doing a job which makes me unhappy, I must do something for about 8 hours each day, that makes me unhappy. That is a lot of wasted time, don't you think?' (Mrs. K).</i>

<p>Family</p> <p>Having children/ grandchildren</p> <p>Having a good relationship with family members</p> <p>Having a loving and supportive relationship to partner</p>	<p>This code was used when the participants expressed the need to have a family.</p>	<p><i>‘Even if my children are grown up now, the family is still important and has always given me joy in life. My children and my husband are very important, and I would choose this kind of life for myself again’ (Mrs. L).</i></p>
<p>Purpose</p> <p>Feeling satisfied</p> <p>Knowing where to go in life</p>	<p>This code was used when the participants expressed the need to know which direction to take in life and to feel a life purpose.</p>	<p><i>‘For me, it is important that I can make the most out of myself. I am constantly working on finding out what I want in order to set me some goals, which I then try to reach. I think, to have a specific goal in life is very important’ (Mr. B).</i></p>
<p>Health</p> <p>Physical health</p>	<p>This code was used when the participant expressed the current need to be either</p>	<p><i>‘I need to be healthy... I am a migraine patient, If I have headaches, I am not</i></p>

Mental health	physically or mentally healthy to be able to flourish in life.	<i>able to be active and enjoy life. Therefore, being healthy is a basic requirement to feel good' (Mrs. M).</i>
Travel	In the context of future flourishing, this code was used when the participants expressed the wish to travel the world in the future to be happy.	<i>'Seeing different countries, meeting new people, and exploring a new culture, all these things are wonderful things to do to feel fulfilled' (Mrs. L).</i>
Money	This code was used when the participants expressed the wish of being financially stable or of having enough money to live a fulfilling life.	<i>'I think it is important to have a base, ... I do not need a lot of money, but I know what it feels like not knowing if I can pay my rent, or if I have enough money to buy food. Therefore, I think money is essential to generally be able to achieve a state of flourishing' (Mrs. M).</i>

Table 3

Coding Scheme (Retrospective Flourishing).

Code and Sub-code	Definition	Example quote
Family	In the context of retrospective flourishing,	<i>'Back then, I wanted to have a family and</i>
Getting married and having children	fragments assigned the code 'family' referred to any expression of the participants	<i>a loving husband. For me, that has always been the highest priority to have a</i>
Spending time with children and grandchildren	regarding the wish to marry, start a family, or be a parent and spend time with their	<i>fulfilling life' (Mrs. L).</i>
Parenting	children and grandchildren.	
Friends	This code was used when the participants	<i>'When I was young, to me, it was super</i>
Having an easy way of living	expressed the need to spend time with their	<i>important to be in contact with others. I</i>
Spending time with friends and partying	friends and to go out to parties, in the past.	<i>mean, to go out and to spend time with friends, to work as a waitress, to do sports</i>
Considering it to be important what others think		<i>with others, and all these kinds of things. So, that has changed a lot. Back then it</i>

was not important to have alone time, I was even a little scared of being alone’ (Mrs. M).

Job	In the context of retrospective flourishing,	<i>‘Work for a good job. Only then can you</i>
Having children/ grandchildren	fragments assigned the code ‘job’ referred to	<i>embrace your talents and earn enough</i>
Having a good relationship with family members	the past wish of the participants to have a fulfilling and suitable job.	<i>money for a good life’ (Mrs. O).</i>
Having a loving and supportive relationship to partner		

Table 4

Coding Scheme about Future Flourishing.

Code and Sub-code	Definition	Example quote
Freedom	This code was used when the participants expressed the wish to feel free and have fewer responsibilities in the future.	<i>When you are young, you have so many responsibilities, and you need to take care of your family and get money. When you are old, you can just take care of yourself</i> <i>(Mr. T).</i>
Feeling free		
Having few responsibilities		
Being self-focused		
Being financially stable		
Travel	In the context of future flourishing, this code was used when the participants expressed the wish to travel the world in the future to be happy.	<i>'...having a caravan and travelling the world. This is very important to me and my husband. We want to travel the world, and maybe even have a house on the beach'</i> <i>(Mrs. M).</i>

Family	In the context of future flourishing, this code	<i>'...the focus shifted a little bit, more to my</i>
Spending quality time with partner	was used in terms of having a loving family	<i>marriage, and how we can enjoy our last</i>
Spending much time with children	with future children or grandchildren and a	<i>years together' (Mrs. O).</i>
and grandchildren	partner.	

Results

General Remarks

The photograph exercise created an effective pre-start for the actual interviews. Each participant shared information about their individual feelings, loved ones, and dreams, which enriched the content of the subsequent conversations. Furthermore, the exercise helped the participants to prepare for the topic and created a personal foundation for the interview, on which the interviewer could base the later interview questions. During this exercise, each participant had the opportunity to delve into the subject of flourishing but was also able to set their personal limits and boundaries of what they were willing or unwilling to share. Overall, it was a valuable exercise to perform before starting the interviews, as these referred to personal content.

During the interviews, most of the participants were open-minded and talkative, which meant that a relaxed atmosphere had been created. In the event that a participant was quiet and not talkative, enough backup questions had been prepared; but the interviewer also gave each participant sufficient time to think. It was notable how easily some interviewees could delve into this personal topic, whereas others seemed to struggle. For example, one of the participants started to cry while talking about a sensitive topic. On the other hand, another participant did not seem to be in the right mood to share any personal feelings. Both situations needed the interviewer to create a safe and welcoming atmosphere and to remind the participants that they did not need to share anything that they did not want to. This was a challenging task due to the need to remain professional and be empathic at the same time, and because the interviews were held via Skype conferences.

Overlaps of Codes and Boundaries

Several codes were applied to the fragments of the interviews. This sometimes made it hard to separate codes from each other, so it was helpful to create sub-codes, which were grouped into broader categories later. Moreover, many codes were used several times with respect to the different time intervals (present-day, retrospective, and future flourishing). Therefore, it was necessary to investigate each time interval individually, while referring to overlapping codes. Furthermore, participants talked more about their present than about their future and past, which influenced the amount of data available to create codes for the respective time intervals.

Table 5

Frequencies of Codes and Sub-codes grouped by time flourishing.

Flourishing Time and Codes	Interviews (N = 6)	Fragments (<i>Younger</i> ; N = 3)	Fragments (<i>Older</i> ; N = 3)	Fragments Total
Present-day Flourishing				
Autonomy and Self-care	6	28	32	60
Job	6	22	36	58
Family	6	11	24	35
Purpose	6	7	14	21
Health	6	7	4	11
Travel	5	2	6	8
Money	6	3	4	7
Retrospective Flourishing				
Family	6	8	21	29
Friends	5	6	9	15

Job	6	3	5	8
<hr/>				
Future Flourishing				
Freedom	6	20	25	45
Family	5	10	5	15
Travel	6	5	2	7
<hr/>				

Present-day Flourishing

Besides different frequencies, no important differences were found between the answers of the *younger* and *older participants*. Overall, they described present-day flourishing as a state in which a person must be healthy (physically or mentally), is supported by a loving environment, has enough money and a fulfilling job, can explore the world, finds purpose and meaning in what they are doing, is independent in their decisions, and, finally, has enough self-care to fulfil personal needs. Interestingly, the *older participants* referred to all the codes more often than the *younger participants*, except for the code *health*. However, all participants considered being healthy as a basic requirement of flourishing in life (see Table 2 for an example quote). They referred to this code, due to answers which were about factors such as participating in sport, being active, or having a strong mind.

Fragments referring to someone who is autonomous in their decisions, and, has enough self-care to satisfy personal needs as has a fulfilling job, were found most frequently in the all the interview transcripts regarding present-day flourishing. In this context, participants often mentioned words like ‘self-awareness’, ‘independence’ and ‘self-care’. Furthermore, they talked much about a job which allows someone to embrace one’s talents in order to receive positive recognition for what participants are doing. For instance, it was often described that they want to get up in the morning and know that they can do something fulfilling (see Table 2 for an example quote).

A further important fragment referred to as finding a purpose in life. For example, some participants mentioned that they wanted to feel happy with their relationships and their family dynamics, or, simply, that they wanted to have a goal in life. The phrases ‘knowing what I want’ and ‘being satisfied’ were often used in this context. For example, one participant said: “I want to become my best possible self. I can only become that if I know what I want and where I want to be in my life” (Mrs. L).

Furthermore, when the participants were asked what makes them happy every day, all of them thought of their loved ones, referring to their children, girlfriends, husbands, and wives, and also to their grandparents and grandchildren. In particular, the feeling of belonging and support was frequently mentioned. For instance, one participant answered when he was asked to describe a good day: “The first thing that makes me happy refers to a “good morning message” from my girlfriend. I know it sounds cheesy, but this is the best way to start my day. It gives me energy for it” (Mr. B).

The least often mentioned codes referred to *money* and *travel*. In this context, none of the participants expressed the need for having a large amount of money to be happy. However, all the interviewees agreed that money was something essential to have, to be able to live a happy life and to fulfil their basic needs and wishes (like travelling). They supported their thoughts by stating that travel makes you feel free and alive. Most participants agreed that travel was something that they did not need every day and was a luxury activity.

Retrospective Flourishing

Again, the *younger* and *older participants* described retrospective flourishing very similar. They connected it to a state in which a person has a good concept of how to create a life worth living. Therefore, the person needs to have many friends, be involved in different activities, and to have worked towards the goals of having a family (for example, marrying or having children) and a successful career. Again, the *older participants* referred to all the

codes more often than *younger participants*.

Fragments referring to the code *family* were now found the most frequently one. Especially, the *older participants* described that, in the past, their children had been the main fulfilling factor of their lives. However, also the 22-year-old, who did not yet have children, talked much more about his parents when he was asked about his past. In general, the family played an important factor in retrospective flourishing, but more in terms of being fulfilled by the dream of starting a family that loves and supports each other. Furthermore, it was often mentioned that flourishing in the past involved being around people all the time, for example: "... when I was young...I just wanted to have many good friends..." (Mr. T).

Finally, both *younger* and *older participants* agreed that, to be able to flourish, having a good job that they liked was equally important in the past as it was in the present (see Table 5). Even the 22- and 30-year-old participants, who had not yet finished their degrees, agreed that, since they were teenagers, they had wanted a successful career.

Future Flourishing

Based on the interviews, the *younger* and *older participants* described future flourishing as a state in which a person seeks to fulfil his or her dreams, will relax and do what is good for them. Especially, the *younger participants* tended to think that in the future, they will have fewer responsibilities and more time to take care of themselves and their deep-down wishes. They described further that they would like to travel the world and how important family remains over the years, especially if they have children or grandchildren. In addition, spending quality time with their partner was important in future flourishing. Interestingly, the *younger participants* referred to all codes more often this time, except for the code of freedom, which has been mentioned a little more often by *older participants*.

Regarding the code of *freedom*, the *older participants* often mentioned that they plan on being/remain financially stable in the future and to spend time with their partners. The

younger participants mentioned that they plan to be more self-focused when they were old, as they would not have to work anymore. This would allow them time to do the things they enjoy. Moreover, they thought that they would be able to fully express themselves in the future because they would not feel society's pressure anymore (see Table 4 for an example quote). Notably, the *older participants* mentioned almost exactly the same aspects that they liked about being old compared with what the *Younger* participants said that they looked forward to when they retire.

The codes of *travel* and *family* were mentioned a little less than freedom. All participants dreamed of having enough time and money to experience the adventures they had not been able to have until now. Travelling was depicted as more important in the future compared with how it was described in the discussions of present-day flourishing (see Table 5). In the context of future flourishing, the family often referred to it in terms of spending quality time with their future children and grandchildren. In particular, the *younger participants* often talked about how their relationships with their partners would be considerably more important to them in the future. They stated, for example, that they wanted to spend more time with their partners because the children would have grown up or moved out by then:

“...I think...we will have more time for each other...Just him and I.

I mean, our whole life we had to be there for the kids, and when they have their own lives, then we will have more focus for each other again. I guess this is fundamental to living a happy life” (Mrs. K).

Flourishing throughout the Lifespan

Regarding the research question of this study, flourishing was described in a similar way by the *younger* and *older participants*. However, differences could be found for each time interval. People in this target group described retrospective flourishing more in terms of

achievements compared with present-day and future flourishing, which were associated with more personal and self-fulfilling needs. Therefore, it seems that the participants shifted their focus away from being successful in every part of their lives and towards a stage in which they could embrace themselves, do the things they love, and be surrounded by positivity, less stress, and their loved ones.

Although, it is important to note that the interviews demonstrated that family remains important throughout the participant's lifespans. This is assumed from the fact that fragments of the code *family* could be found in all three-time descriptions of flourishing. The participants explained that the feeling of belonging, being supportive by their loved ones, or simply the wish of having a family is something that could, according to them, make them flourish at every developmental stage of their lives. In addition, the tendency of the *older participants* to assume that nothing had been different regarding how they thought of flourishing when they were younger. However, by looking more closely into the details of their past, they found many things that had been important when they were young, which were not as important anymore.

Discussion

The present study collected the descriptions of *younger* and *older participants* regarding present-day, retrospective, and future flourishing to understand how they believed that they could flourish over time. No important differences were found in the answers between the groups but between the descriptions of present-day, retrospective and future flourishing. The study found that retrospective flourishing was described in terms of wanting to be liked by others, to be surrounded by many friends, and to achieve personal goals in life. In particular, having a job that fulfils the participants and provides financial stability was often mentioned in relation to retrospective flourishing. Contrary, for present-day and future

flourishing, the attention shifted to personal needs, such as feeling a purpose in life, travelling the world, and having a sense of self-care. However, being part of a family in which a person feels loved and supported was something that each participant reported as necessary in order to flourish, regardless of age and time period.

Main Findings

Overall, the findings of the current study are not fully in line with the results of past quantitative studies. However, it is important to mention that the present study has been qualitative with a small sample size, which differs from the majority of cross-section/longitudinal studies with larger samples. For example, the current findings do not support the findings of Sheldon & Kasser, (2001) regarding a positive relationship between age and happiness. Neither can the current study support the past finding that middle-aged people tend to have the lowest levels of happiness or that older people are more likely to flourish in life (Frijters & Beaton, 2012; Keyes, 2002). Regardless of their ages, all participants of the current study reported similarly high levels of happiness and ability to flourish. However, the participants did report different needs to be able to flourish in retrospective compared to present and future descriptions. The findings are thereby similar to the ones of Timmer et al. (2003), and Dittmann-Kohli and Westerhof (2000), regarding that older people, direct their attention towards personal needs and away from social pressure. Perhaps, older and younger people do not necessarily differ in their likelihood to flourish but in their needs to achieve such a state.

Past results of qualitative studies on humans' life development are in line with those of the current study. For example, a past study showed that older participants explained that material opportunities have increased throughout time and that, while they grew older, it became more important to be independent (Westerhof, 2010). These similarities may arise from the fact that the methods used in the past and the current study were almost the same,

using interview questions which were then examined by content analysis. Also, younger people reported in past qualitative studies that they experienced changes in their thoughts about a good life, for example regarding their relationship, altruism, career, and personal growth, which is in line with the findings of the current study (Hill et al., 2013).

The way in which participants described the things they needed in order to be able to flourish in their present life can be closely related to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). This makes sense, as Maslow believed that humans are motivated by three fundamental needs (basic needs, psychological needs, and self-fulfilling needs), which can help humans to steer their lives towards self-actualisation (Froh, 2004). Self-actualisation further is the desire of every human being to become their best possible self by always reinventing themselves (Maslow & Lewis, 1987). Therefore, the definition of Maslow's idea of self-actualisation is similar to Keyes' concept of flourishing. To make this more concrete, Maslow (1987) described being healthy as a basic need. Participants of the current study also mentioned that to be mentally or physically healthy is a basic requirement to function well in life. Next, Maslow presented psychological needs, including feelings like safety, security, love, and belonging (Maslow & Lewis, 1987). Participants of the present study also talked about their psychological needs, as they reported a drive towards the needs of having a family in which they felt loved and safe and having a good job in order to earn enough money to provide for a living and doing things such as travelling. Finally, the participants of the current study also talked about Maslow's third type of needs, namely self-fulfilling needs. Maslow (1987) related these needs to having any form of self-esteem, feeling of purpose in life, or meaning. Participants of the current study mentioned these needs by referring to, for example, feeling a purpose in life, being independent, being self-confident, and taking care of themselves. Therefore, participants of the current study described a similar chronological order of needs like Maslow, which can then lead to a state of flourishing.

Another finding of the current study was that retrospective flourishing was described in more materialistic and achievement terms. An attempt to explain the findings can be made by examining the participants' cultural and social backgrounds. They were all German and from a middle or high social class, which is probably why all participants were highly influenced by Western society standards. The findings show that the participants strongly associated retrospective flourishing with the needs of having a good education and career, marrying, and starting a family, and being liked by others. These are more materialistic or prosperity values, which seem to occur frequently in Western society (Nurmi, Poole & Kalakoski, 1994). Young people, in particular, tend to think of a satisfying life in terms of achievements and success (Nurmi et al., 1994). Furthermore, younger people are often less mature and less confident than older people (Nurmi et al., 1994), which seem to explain why the focus of the participants has been on others in the past, such as their friends and what they think of them. Interestingly, the *older participants* talked more about the need of being surrounded by many friends in the past than the younger participants did. This is probably because the *younger participants* were still in this phase of needing to spend much time with their friends. However, friends were not mentioned much during present-day descriptions of flourishing, which suggests that the need for being around friends all the time seems to be something that people first recognize in retrospective.

To explain the results of future flourishing on a deeper level, the theories of Rogers and Erikson are considered. Rogers assumed that, over their lifespans, humans grow through the process of trying to create their unified self (Rogers, 1961). Besides, Erikson assumed that when people grow older, they usually yearn for rest and personal integrity (Erikson, 1959, 1950). Perhaps, this explains why the participants were more self-evaluating in their answers about future flourishing than about present-day or retrospective flourishing.

Furthermore, the fact that participants' descriptions of future flourishing were all similar, may

be explained by Rogers' theory (1961) of the possible and ideal self of human beings. This theory proposes that people have a notion of their ideal self, which they try to come close to throughout life, and turn it into their actual self, which refers to who they are (Rogers, 1961). If that does not work, the discrepancy between the ideal and actual selves may become too large, resulting in depressed feelings and dissatisfaction (Rogers, 1961). To obtain a clear picture of the ideal self, humans create a picture in their heads of a possible self, a future self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Of course, these possible selves can look different for everyone, but they are also influenced by social comparison and cultural factors (Markus & Nurius, 1986). As the participants of the present study were from a similar socio-cultural background, they were more likely to thrive towards a comparable possible future self.

The findings of present-day, retrospective and future flourishing show that there is a clear pattern in the answers of the participants. In retrospect, they described flourishing in terms of achieving goals and having success in life. When asked about the present, they listed several factors such as family, money, job, and purpose to describe their current way of flourishing. Regarding their futures, they tended to shift their focus almost completely onto themselves. This development is explained by the fact that younger people are more likely to be goal-directed and ambitious because they are usually in more contact with others in school, university, or the workplace (Nurmi et al., 1994). Therefore, they may compare themselves with others and want to live up to social standards. When people grow older, they may start a family, build a career, or buy a house, but this does not mean that they only hold these wishes and needs. They try to reinvent themselves, by constantly improving their well-being and creating a new dream for the future (Maslow & Lewis, 1987). This process is part of Maslow's concept of self-actualisation and may be a reason why the participants described present-day flourishing with so many needs. On the other hand, when imagining the future, the participants strived towards peace and relaxation and referred to primarily self-fulfilling

needs. There seems to be a point in life at which people slow down the process of self-actualisation, sit back, and evaluate life (Erikson, 1959; Maslow & Lewis, 1987). The answers reported for the 75-year-old participant control for this.

Strengths and Limitations

One strength of the present study relates to the use of Keyes' concept of flourishing. The explanation of what flourishing means at the beginning of each interview, gave the participants many ideas of what to talk about. This is because flourishing not only encompasses happiness or well-being but also covers all factors regarding a meaningful life, such as social support, feelings of belonging, and many more, which is why the use of the concept has enriched the present study (Keyes, 2007). Another strength of the present study was the use of unstructured and open interview questions. As the topic of flourishing can become personal and complicated, it was helpful that participants could choose their own flow for the conversation. Each participant could select their main emphasis and decide for themselves how much they wanted to share. This kind of autonomy ultimately offered a large base of information. Furthermore, this study involved a wide age variation, including participants aged from 22 years up to 75 years. Thus, it was possible to receive many valid opinions on a happy life from the perspective of people with different life experiences. In addition, the expectations of younger people could be compared with those of older people to determine whether they are likely to be realised.

However, using a time limitation of 30 minutes, and interviewing only six participants were main limitations of the current study. Therefore, some topics were covered more than others. For example, some participants talked much more about retrospective flourishing than present-day flourishing and vice versa. Secondly, the current study focused on how people flourish throughout time, which saturation was not yet reached by six participants. A final limitation is that this interview was conducted and coded by the same researcher. Even if all

the tasks were carefully executed and two persons outside of the project helped with the translation and the coding, this should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. Hill's study (2013), for example, benefits from greater reliability as a whole team of trained researchers were included in the coding and evaluation process.

Future Recommendations

Future research should try to have longer interviews, in which each part can be covered equally. Additionally, a longitudinal study in which much more participants are observed over time and interviewed repeatedly on how they flourish in their young, middle and older ages, would be even more informative. This way subjects can be compared within rather than between. Furthermore, any decay of memory recall could be avoided. The memory of the past is vaguer than the memory of the present, which may be a reason why the participants could simply have forgotten about things that mattered to them when they were young. Perhaps their memories of the goals they had when they were young are more present in their heads than anything else, which does not necessarily mean that they all have been more materialistic or goal-directed when they were young. Here, the only proof the study can offer is the comparison between the descriptions of the 22-year-old participants regarding present-day flourishing and the answers of the older participants about their past, and, indeed, these were very similar.

Furthermore, it would add much to the study if the target group were extended to different cultural backgrounds. As some of the findings may be influenced by Western society, future research should investigate different culturally and socially influenced people to make the findings more universal. Since the University of Twente has many international students, they could be invited by the researchers through social networks to participate in the study or asked to invite their friends and families.

Finally, it would be of great value to advise future researchers to share the work with

other experienced researchers. In particular, the interpretation of the findings should be performed by more than one person to enrich reliability of the data.

Conclusion

The results of the current study support Erikson's idea that people do generate when they get older and start to concentrate on themselves. The findings of the present study provide valued insights into the concept of flourishing. They support the assumption that humans' perspectives on a meaningful life can change over the course of life, which could be explained by aspects, such as the need for self-actualisation, the situational context, the social and cultural influences (comparison with other people and with Western society), the wish for an ideal self, or striving towards personal growth and change. Furthermore, the study suggests that flourishing is a continuing process, which can change several times in life, depending on situational factors or ageing. Therefore, people may need to redefine from time to time what they need in order to be able to flourish.

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Appendix A

Ethical Approval



APPROVED BMS EC RESEARCH PROJECT REQUEST

Dear researcher,

This is a notification from the BMS Ethics Committee concerning the web application form for the ethical review of research projects.

Requestnr. : 200337
Title : How does a diverse population flourish? A qualitative interview study
Date of application : 2020-03-17
Researcher : Schotanus-Dijkstra, M.
Commission : Klooster, P.M. ten
Usage of SONA : N

Your research has been approved by the Ethics Committee.

The ethical committee has assessed the ethical aspects of your research project. On the basis of the information you provided, the committee does not have any ethical concerns regarding this research project.

It is your responsibility to ensure that the research is carried out in line with the information provided in the application you submitted for ethical review. If you make changes to the proposal that affect the approach to research on humans, you must resubmit the changed project or grant agreement to the ethical committee with these changes highlighted.

Moreover, novel ethical issues may emerge while carrying out your research. It is important that you re-consider and discuss the ethical aspects and implications of your research regularly, and that you proceed as a responsible scientist.

Finally, your research is subject to regulations such as the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Code of Conduct for the use of personal data in Scientific Research by VSNU (the Association of Universities in the Netherlands), further codes of conduct that are applicable in your field, and the obligation to report a security incident (data breach or otherwise) at the UT.

Klooster, P.M. ten (18-03-2020 11:34):

It is noted that you already anticipate potential alternative ways to collect data given de Corona outbreak.

Klooster, P.M. ten (18-03-2020 11:32):

NB: The approval given for your research project is **CONDITIONAL**. Your study intends to make use of methods requiring social and physical interaction. This poses risks for both participants and researchers, which have to be taken into account. You have to **COMPLY** with the current **RESTRICTIONS ON SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL INTERACTION** regarding the COVID19 outbreak. This may imply that you have to find alternative ways to collect data or to delay the start of your study until the restrictions have been adjusted or lifted. If adjustments lead to substantive changes in the design of your study (excluded: digital/online means to get in contact with your participants), send your changes to ethics committee-bms@utwente.nl stating your request number. Please consult the standing guidelines of the UT and national authorities on research and educational activities www.utwente.nl/corona

This is an automated e-mail from My University of Twente.

University of Twente, Drienerloaan 5, 7522NB Enschede, The Netherlands

Appendix B

Information Letter and Informed Consent

Informed consent form template for research with human participants

Authors: BMS Ethics Committee with input from Human Research Ethics TU Delft

Information for participants of the study on flourishing

Welcome to my study: “Flourishing across the lifespan”

I would like to thank you for your participation in my study on flourishing. Please read the following information carefully.

The following is adept to give you all the necessary information regarding my study and ethical considerations. Your participation in this interview study is voluntary and you can withdraw from this study at any time.

Purpose of the study

Do you often wonder what it is that would make you happy or how to be your best possible self? However, is your view on happiness constantly changing or have you always felt the same way about meaning in life? In this interview study we want to explore this together.

Corey Keyes’ thoughts on flourishing are fundamental for this. But what means flourishing? Human flourishing means that people feel happy and are able to live a purposeful life. They can embrace their full potential and are involved in lots of activities that benefit their well-being. Therefore, the final goal of positive psychology is to improve flourishing, which benefits society at large. People who flourish are mentally and physically healthier, more productive and have less risk of mental illness and mortality. This study aims to understand what it is that makes people flourishing and how these views might develop over time.

Let’s talk about what makes your life worth living and discover how your view on it might do or do not develop throughout your lifetime. I am looking forward to listening to your answers!

Consent Form for the study: “Flourishing across the Lifespan”
(YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM)

Please tick the appropriate boxes

Yes No

Taking part in the study

I have read and understood the study information dated [14/04/2020], or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.

I understand that taking part in the study involves talking about private things regarding what makes me happy, that my answers are audio-recorded, and notes are taken while I am talking.

Use of the information in the study

I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as [e.g. my name or where I live], will not be shared beyond the study team.

I agree that my information can be quoted in research outputs

Consent to be Audio/video Recorded

I agree to be audio/video recorded. Yes/no

Future use and reuse of the information by others

I agree that my information may be shared with other researchers for future research studies that may be similar to this study or may be completely different. The information shared with other researchers will not include any information that can directly identify me. Researchers will not contact me for additional permission to use this information.

I give the researchers permission to keep my contact information and to contact me for future research projects.

Signatures

Name of participant

Signature

Date

For participants unable to sign their name, mark the box instead of sign

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands what they are freely consenting.

Researcher name [printed]

Signature

Date

For participants unable to sign their name, mark the box instead of sign

Study contact details for further information:

[*Sara Christin Linkhof*, s.c.linkhof@student.utwente.nl]

[*Dr. Marijke Schotnus-Dijkstra*, m.schotanus@utwente.nl]

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Secretary of the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences at the University of Twente by ethicscommittee-bms@utwente.nl

Appendix C

Interview Layout

Photo exercise

1. Show me three photos on your phone please and explain to me why you picked them and why the things on it make your life worth living?

Part I (approximal around 15 minutes):

1. How do you think you can live a life worth living, in which you are able to achieve a state of flourishing?

Part II (approximal around 15 minutes):

1. Compare the things that make your life worth living right now to the things that made it worth living in the past. Explain why do you think the fundamental things stayed the same or why do you think they did not?

AND

2. Think of the things that make your life worth living right now. Explain why you think those things will change in the next few years, or why do you think the fundamental things will stay the same?

Possible additional questions to ask (Levasseur, Tribble & Desrosiers, 2009):

1. Have you ever heard the expression “quality of life”?
In your own words, tell me what it means to you
 - a. What has the most positive effect on your quality of life?
 - b. Give me some examples of personal situations that are improving your quality of life
2. What has the most negative effect on your quality of life?
 - a. Give me some examples of personal situations that are diminishing your quality of life
3. Describe an ordinary day.
 - a. How do your everyday activities influence your quality of life?

German Questions:

1. Wie denkst du, kannst du ein wertvolles Leben führen?
2. Was gehört für dich zu einem wertvollen Leben?
3. Beschreibe wie ein wertvolles Leben aussehen könnte?
4. Was macht dich glücklich?
5. Wie oft bist du in der Woche glücklich (in Zahlen)? Was trägt dazu bei, dass du glücklich bist?
6. Würdest du sagen, dass sich die Dinge, die dein Leben lebenswert machen ändern werden in den nächsten Jahren oder das sie höchstwahrscheinlich grundsätzlich die Gleichen bleiben? Begründe deine Entscheidung (andersherum für die andere Gruppe).
7. Wenn es sich ändern wird oder hat, was ist das Fundamentalste, was sich ändern wird/hat, beschreibe mir die Dinge detailliert.