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Walking through a Successful Life: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study assessed the stages of life experienced by a famous and successful individual to gather information as to perception of success and its contribution to development. It used the qualitative case study on an individual above the age of 60 who was recognized due to her achievements in her field. Details of the life story were gathered through one-on-one interview and used holistic analysis of the whole case towards a theory-building report. The themes identified were: Success as a way of life, Contributing to others' success, and, A Walk into a Life of Success, with subthemes: A Playful but Noiseless; Childhood Teenage Confusion as Prelude to Real Life; Preliminary Structures of Adult Life; Immersion into the Life of Success; Death as Accidental Motivator; and Late Life Family Triumphs. Walking back into the life of a successful individual provided a chance to review not only the definitions of success but also the process of achieving success. It is recommended to conduct a study on multiple cases.

Keywords: Success in old age, Individualized Perception, Highlights of the Ages

Introduction

Success is perceived individually and is equated with development as stated in the assumptions of the Late Life Success Theory (Garcia, 2016). The American Heritage Dictionary defines success as “the achievement of something desired, planned, or attempted.” That something can be anything — such as economic rewards, the balance of family and work responsibilities, or the search to achieve a personal passion (AllBusiness Editors, 2015). Success is a relatively complex and multidimensional phenomenon. On the one hand, it deals with the performance and ability of people. On the other hand, it deals with adaptation power and coping with stress and organizational crises and many other variables (Asgari, 2015).

It is in trend to be successful in the 21st century. An essential aspect of people's lives is an ambition to obtain material belongings, have a “happy” family or social prestige. Present-day success does not only carry financial benefits and allow one to move up in the power hierarchy, but also motivates entrepreneurship, makes it possible to overcome hindrances, triggers happiness and satisfaction, increases the level of self-acceptance and has a satisfactory effect on mental health. The positive regulatory purpose of success, which primarily consists of stimulating activity, makes one feel better and makes it likely to stay sane. Conversely, success is associated with mental well-being, happiness and quality of life. Success therefore has an enormous impact for our entire life, including its professional part (Paruzel-Czachura, 2011).

Correspondingly, human development is an enduring process of physical, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional growth and change. In the initial stages of life—from babyhood to childhood, childhood to adolescence, and adolescence to adulthood—immense changes take place. During the process, every person develops attitudes and values that guide choices, relationships, and understanding (Advocates for Youth, 2008). At each stage people tend to reevaluate and re-balance life's values and priorities. Knowledge of these stages allows people who pass through them to gain mindfulness of what's happening and recognize that it's normal. The movement



from one stage to another is a progression. As people pass from one stage to the succeeding, often with some challenging periods of transition, they learn and mature in the process. Acknowledging and working through the concerns of each consecutive stage, people develop into better humans and spiritual beings (Weiler & Schoonover, 2001). At the core of discussions about successful aging is whether it can be measured by objective standards or is a value judgment, weighed by individual subjective evaluations. It is probable that the experiences preceding midlife, including level of education, marital status (particularly not getting married), incarceration and childlessness, impact the extent to which a person ages successfully (Pruchno, Wilson–Genderson, Rose, & Cartwright, 2010).

The Late Life Success Theory proposed that achieving successes in different periods of life make it a milestone. The constant exposure together with the biological and physical development creates the definition of that certain stage, which might be common to all but the experience that creates it, is highly individualized. In order for a person to move through the different stages, the person has to be allowed to be in that situation and find his way out successfully. Each stage is unique and is comparable to the others; therefore, a person has to be successful in each stage in order to have a satisfying late life (Garcia, 2016). Thus, this study intended to validate the assumption of the Late Life Success Theory which states that success is perceived individually and is equated with development. The validation discovered the personal experiences of famous individuals and its contribution to their progression. It likewise uncovered the achievements of the person at specific stages of life.

Materials and Methods

This study used the qualitative case study research method. It is an empirical inquiry that explores a contemporary phenomenon within its real–life setting; when the confines between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple bases of evidence are used. Specifically, it used instrumental case study. It is used to achieve something other than understanding a specific situation. It offers insight into an issue or aids to refine a theory. The case is of secondary concern; it plays a supportive role, enabling understanding of something else. The case is often viewed at in depth; its contexts scrutinized, its usual activities detailed, and because it aids the researcher to pursue the external interest. The case may or may not be understood as typical of other cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008). A certain individual above the age of 60 who resided in the Philippines, and who was recognized by the society due to her achievements in her field, was the case under study. She was chosen because she had attained numerous achievements and was acclaimed for those achievements. The richness of her experiences in the aspects of studies, career and family life made her a good subject for the study. Details of the life story of the person were gathered through one–on–one interview and document review after an informed consent has been signed (Yin, 2003). All data gathered were kept confidential and were destroyed after analysis. The identity of the case was kept anonymous throughout the study.

The style of analysis of these data was a holistic analysis of the case. The researcher provided a detail of aspects such as the history of the case, the sequence of events, or a day–by–day representation of the activities of the case so that the detailed account of the case will emerge (Stake, 1995). The researcher also focused on a few significant issues (or analysis of themes), not for generalizing beyond the case, but for understanding the complexity of the case. One analytic strategy was pinpointing issues within the case and then tried to find themes



that transcend the case. After the detailed description of the case and themes within the case, known as a within-case analysis, it was followed by assertions or an interpretation of the meaning of the case (Creswell, 2013).

In the final interpretive phase, the researcher reported the meaning of the case, whether that meaning originated from learning about the issue of the case (an instrumental case) or learning about an uncommon situation (an intrinsic case). As Lincoln & Guba (1985) mentioned, this segment established the “lessons learned” from the case. It used theory-building report wherein the case study is presented in the context of a particular theory (Boateng, 2009).

Results

The Successful Life of the Queen of the Tree Herders

This chapter narrates to us the life of a woman who has ended up as a protector of the natural ecosystems and the herder of the trees. She is a person who has reached the highest peak of her career. She is a 68-year-old woman from a province in Visayas, Philippines. She graduated secondary education from a Catholic School in 1963 as a salutatorian. She earned her degree on the study of the animal kingdom from a famous university in Cebu and graduated as Cum Laude in 1967. She was granted scholarships in the 1980–1983 and in 1984 – 1985 respectively. Thereafter she earned her Doctor of Philosophy in 1985 in the United States of America.

Analyzing her case allowed the researcher to understand her perception of success and how she arrived at that stage of her life.

Success as a way of life

At her age, she has her own definition of success. She looks at it as something that happens because of doing something you love to do and work hard for it. It is not the attainment of a goal, but the feeling of satisfaction for being able to finish a task. She said in the interview:

“I’m almost... I’m a half century old plus 20. At this point in time, I don’t think I would say I am successful, but I am happy with what I am doing and I am happy that I have the time to do what I want to do, not necessarily because I have to do it.”

There are several definitions of success. Success is when you attain certain gains, certain wealth and certain status. But to me, success is something that you can even say that every day is a success if you feel that day you have accomplished something. It could be a day when you finished something that you want to finish. So for me, I am still weaving my life in such a way that I can finally say that I am successful in everything.”

She viewed herself as successful because she was able to do the things, she felt would make her happy.

“I am successful in such a way that, okay I have attained the... I finished my degree. I finished my PhD. I have written some books. And I presented papers. I am acclaimed by people to be, they always call me the

“Queen of the Tree Herders”. But for me, maybe, it is success already. I was able to train people; I was able to promote my technology about reforestation. I was able to influence people; the people tasked to protect the environment for example. Rain forestation is part of the international greening program. I don’t know if you consider that a success. But for me, as long as I was able to do it, maybe, that is success already.”

She was a prolific writer in the discipline. She was able to author and co-author books. She co-authored the chapters of books on the protection of biodiversity protection, natural heritage site protection and sustainable



rural development and biodiversity rehabilitation. She also contributed to books on the taxonomy of echinoderms in the country. There is also a book on economic and cultural aspects of environmental farming. She also wrote chapters on arthropod communities in the locality. There is also a work on orchids.

She contributed also to the pages of the book on studies of inland waters. Additional work on ecology is written in books on Dipterocarp Forests in their province. Her expertise in rodents led her to write books on how to prevent them from destroying coconut farms.

In addition to these book chapters, she published articles in journals and was able to produce manuals and modules. She presented her works in various conferences around the world. Because of her works on forest restoration, she is considered the "Queen" of tree protection.

Contributing to others' success

To her, she didn't plan for all of those things to happen. She even viewed her success based on the achievements of the people she has helped. She said:

"But for my life, I never say I want to be successful as such. It never occurred to me. It just happened. I work for something and finished it. It became like a way of life. You do things you want. You accomplish things because you want to do it and with a passion. Then you become happy. It never started with me aiming at something. That is why some people ask me, "What is your real objective?" I answer, I don't have an objective, and as long as I can do something that I feel I need to do, I am happy to do it. But one important thing that I find I could say that I am successful are the people, the young people I train. I train people. Maybe, I am successful with some people. I can say, for example in the school, some of the key personalities there, were my students. The executives for example were my students, the directors, and the head of certain offices. To me, I am already successful with that."

She had all the opportunities to contribute to the lives of others for she has dedicated her life in service. She started her academic career as an instructor until she reached the highest rank a faculty can attain. She also taught abroad. Throughout these years of teaching, she was able to mold lives. She was even granted the rank of a lifetime teacher. She also occupied key positions in the school, from middle manager to being the chief executive, which allowed her to help students and employees to reach their goals. Her passion for saving the ecosystem allowed her to hold positions in different agencies and offices. She became head of an Oversight Committee in the Senate of the Philippines. She was an officer of a foundation for environmental protection and eventually became the President. She is also the Chairperson of a foundation for forest conservation. These positions allowed her to contribute to saving the environment and the people. She said:

I was able to recommend people to the graduate school. They finished their PhD; I think there are ten of them. I work hard so that they will be employed. Others got a permanent employment status in the university; some got their pension because I really worked on it. To me, these are small points that if we sum up using the point system of the faculty ranking, I would have attained the highest rank. So that is my definition of success. I never set a goal that when attained I would consider myself successful.

A Walk into a Life of Success

Looking back into her life, we would see why she has made her own definition of success. Dividing her story into stages would allow us to truly understand how these contributed to her growth as a person. This also provided a means to uncover the specific achievements she has in her life leading to her perception of success.



A Playful but Noiseless Childhood

Contemporary theorists have acknowledged the importance of middle childhood for the development of cognitive skills, personality, motivation, and interpersonal relationships. Throughout middle childhood, children learn the values of their societies. Middle childhood is also a period when children develop proficiency in interpersonal and social relationships. Children have a growing peer orientation, yet they are intensely influenced by their family. The social skills learned from peer and family relationships, and children's increasing capability to partake in meaningful interpersonal communication, provide an essential foundation for the challenges of adolescence. Best friends are vital at this age, and the skills acquired in these relationships may provide the building blocks for healthy adult relationships (Net Industries, 2016).

In the case under study, she has been active physically but she is socially detached.

"I am the typical playful child, very active. I always climb trees. If you look at my legs, there are so many scars because I go to mangroves. I play with crabs. But I am a shy person in some ways, I'm not open, even now, I am not open. I'm open only when I talk about something I like; I talk about trees. I am not as sociable like others. I am not extrovert. I am always behind the scene."

She added,

"Sometimes I am clumsy. I fell into a barrel of water at the house of my grandmother".

However, this did not stop her from developing into a cognitively advantaged person. Being behind the scene allowed her to finish the things she do without disturbance and then catching the attention of the people around.

"But if I am given a task, I do it and I'll do it perfectly. That is when I get noticed. But to present myself, no I am not the one. And when I was young, aside from climbing trees, I liked to experiment in cooking."

But, like any other child she is influenced by the people around her.

"When I was young, I thought I will be a nun. In school, I have a favorite priest who would always push me towards that. Imagine I was a member of the Children of Mary, Legion of Mary, Catholic Women's League, Junior Daughters of Isabela."

"Our bishop said he would pay the dowry. He was even supported by our parish priest. I would just smile. I never said it is what I wanted to be."

Her childhood experiences are similar to that of other children but its significant contribution on how she has grown up is undeniable. The things she loved when she was a child are the things, she never thought she'd love to do when she grows up. Even in the way she approached tasks, she was able to carry it on to adulthood. This is with resemblance to the **Overcoming a Misfortune Beginning Life Stage** of the Late Life Success Theory (Garcia, 2018). It may not be the way it is presented in the theory but she was able to overcome the challenges of beginning life through her innate characteristics.

Teenage Confusion as Prelude to Real Life

Adolescence is the phase of developmental transition from childhood and adulthood. It includes changes in personality, as well as in physical, intellectual and social development. Throughout this time of change, teens are confronted with many issues and decisions (The Cleveland Clinic Foundation, 2015).

"I started my career in a very chaotic way. I studied pre-medicine, and then I enrolled in education. I didn't finish both. I started again as first year. Until finally I thought I don't know what I want in life. My father wanted us to be accountants. My sister is a Certified Public Accountant. My brother took banking and finance."



I am the only odd notch. I am the odd one. Sort of. Ah, I wanted to work in disease control center. But I don't know why mother didn't allow me, she was afraid I might get sick."

As an effect of the transitional period of development and by her very young age, she has also experienced difficulties in making decisions. But she was able to finish her studies earlier than students of her age. Like any other adolescent, she makes choices without thinking about the consequences first. However, this has done well to her, for this paved the way for her future achievements.

"So one summer, my uncle was the parish priest of our parish, I always hang around there. The director came over. He is the Director of the college. He said, "What are you doing?" I answered, "Nothing". He asked, "Are you done schooling?" I said, "Finished".

I finished school at the age of 19. So, I was not really, I don't know. I finished BS Zoology. He asked, "What are you doing? If you are not doing anything, see me in my office". So, on Monday I went to his office, wearing jeans and step in shoes. He said, "Here is your teaching load for today. Go, see your class." I said "What?" He answered. "I hired you as an instructor". Salary then was just Php 380.00. That was in 1967.

She was prematurely exposed to the real world without her expecting it and without being given the chance to think it over. Despite that, she is like any other teenage girls who engage into relationships, an important requisite to successfully transition into adulthood.

"I had only one boyfriend. That was in high school. It was a long-term relationship but long distance. He was in Manila, I was studying in Cebu."

"There were several suitors in Cebu while I was studying. I was not into parties. I don't like to dress up. I was even told before that I am tomboyish. I think I never attracted men in particular. Men became attracted to me, and there are several men who said that they got attracted with the way I think, because of my brains."

Her adolescence is the typical adolescent life, only that certain circumstances made it contributory to how she lived her life today. Her adolescence served as a prelude to a successful life she is experiencing today. This is similar to **Teenage as the Constructive Passage to Adult Life Stage** of the Late Life Success Theory (Garcia, 2018). Her adolescence provided her easy passage to adulthood.

Preliminary Structures of Adult Life

The life stage known as early adulthood describes individuals between the ages of 20 and 35, who are typically vibrant, active and healthy, and are engrossed on friendships, romance, child bearing and careers (QuinStreet Inc, 2016).

"He was delayed for two years because it takes five years to finish engineering. Then on the 6th year, he has to enroll in review classes. And it was on the 7th year where he got a job. I was waiting for him for two years. We got married after he got employed. We immediately had one son. After four years we had a daughter. We only had two children. It is not a milestone because everybody expected that we will be together."

Since, everybody was expecting for them to get married, so they did early. She was able to establish her family at an early age with the assurance that they would be able to support it since they both had a job.

This period of her life was a period of vibrancies in terms of intimacy. Though she had her husband as her only boyfriend, she experienced how it is to be admired and this ignited her inner potentials which were very much useful in her career.



“There were several foreigners who expressed admiration. There was one American, who expressed his regrets, “If you were not married, I would have married you.” I said, “I’m sorry. And you are much younger than me”. He was a co-teacher in Ohio. There was a German also. It was only an admiration. I like it. In some way it encouraged me. You get inspired with the way people tell you. I work, they admire me. When Germans visited the school, they liked me because I converse with them. They told me that people in school go home immediately after eating in the party. I don’t do that; I engage them with discussions. That is what makes me happy.”

Her transition into the married life didn’t stop her from exploring her potentials. As the **Becoming Part of the Adult World Stage** of the Late Life Success Theory suggest, that period of her life allowed her to explore more and experience its spectacles (Garcia, 2018). Her interactions with people were very much helpful in the actualization of her future tasks.

Immersion into the Life of Success

The ubiquitous term “midlife crisis” that is taken for granted by many in society, doesn’t exist, according to various developmental psychology researchers, and in fact, most individuals during middle adulthood are contented and pleased with their lives. Developmentalists categorize this life stage as people between ages 35 to 64, and they retain those healthy and unhealthy lifestyles and, attitudes are the chief concerns for those in this age group (QuinStreet Inc., 2016).

While people of her age are complaining of this stage, she was achieving a lot.

“There. In short, I enjoyed teaching. Imagine I stayed for 5 years in the school, until the college here was changed into a state college. I transferred because they were looking for a biologist, not an agriculturist. Most teachers working there were agriculturists. So, I ended up applying since my sister was working there. So, she recommended me to the president. To make it short, I stayed there from 1975, then 1980, I was sent to the US for studies, full time scholar. Then I came back, I became the department head, I held various positions and then with the change in administration, I was derailed. I became just a program leader of a German project for 10 years. After 10 years, there was a change in administration. I was selected as chief executive. For me that was a milestone. From working in a catholic school, I was transferred here, so maybe it is a milestone.”

Her responsibilities in her job didn’t stop her from pursuing what she loved most. It instead provided her more opportunities and led to more memorable moments in her life.

“The most important thing that I’m very happy with is I was able to travel because of my work. I travelled all over Europe, all Asian countries, name it. Before, I travel twice a year. Every year I go to Germany because of my project. I went to Rome six times. In United States, my landlady would admire me for I was able to visit almost all its states. This is the aspect of my life where I can say I am successful. My travels are what I consider as the number one success in my life. I don’t know if there are Filipinas who have travelled the way I did.”

She was able to reflect that these opportunities opened because she was given a chance to improve herself. Earning her degree opened all other doors for her success.

“I was never ambitious. If I am, I would have left for America a long time ago. I would have joined my best friend in college after graduation. All my travels started after my PhD. Before my PhD, it was just in Bangkok, Manila, Davao. After my PhD, it all started. It can do a lot. When you graduate, people will seize you.”



She continues to enjoy the fruits of her labor till date. Even after serving as the chief executive, she was given another opportunity to serve and continue to do what she is most passionate about: which is what **Expanding Influence and Commitment Stage** of the Late Life Success Theory suggests (Garcia, 2018).

“Another highlight of my life was my secondment to the senate. I was requested by a Senator, to be the Director of a committee on modernization of agriculture and fisheries. So, I was assigned there for a year.”

In her life, success seemed to happen continuously. Every single achievement was a product of a previous effort and accomplishment. It is clearly shown in her life that success is never planned, it is but a product of continuously doing perfectly what makes you happy.

Death as Accidental Motivator

The effect of death on the family system forms a structural void that necessitates homeostatic adjustments (Bowlby-West, 1983). When a loved one passes away, those left to grieve, or survivors, often find themselves entangled in an intricate web of emotions and reactions. The death of a loved one can be an overwhelming, terrifying and agonizing experience. How individuals mourn depends on various factors: their support system; the circumstances of the death; the reactions by family members, friends and the criminal justice system; the nature of the relationship with the deceased; religious or cultural views and customs; and the individual's coping skills (National Center for Victims of Crime, 2012).

The saddest part of her life was the death of her son, which happened a year after she was appointed as president. The death was too painful for her but instead of pulling her down; it served as a stimulus for her to attain more.

“And after a year my son died of cancer. And I think that year, I was grieving. For two years I was grieving. I was grieving and I poured all my concentration on my work to forget my grief. And I think that was one of the reasons I also excelled in something. Because I was grieving, I don't want to think about it. I was able to write books; I was able to promote rain forestation. I went around preaching it, to lecture, to train people, so it was the busiest and saddest part of my life.”

With the panorama of several decades and whole chapters of life ahead, these adult orphans can and frequently re-chart the course of their lives, reevaluate their priorities and occasionally reject the expectations (whether achievement or disappointment) that powerfully shaped the opening and middle chapters of their lives (Healy, 2008).

While she was grieving, she went into reassessment of her long-held values.

“I did not become so much religious when I grow old. I think there was one time when I questioned God why he took my son away. Imagine for two years I'm away. I was not angry to God. I just have regrets with the Lord for when I was young, I devoted my life to the church. I clean the church, I remove the dusts, I campaign for people to attend mass, to the prisoners, to the elderly. I encouraged the marriage of unwed couples. I was so active in church while I grew up. Every year, I joined Flores de Mayo. Until I graduated from college, I was active in church, physically. And then, I joined religious organizations. But, when my child died, I stopped. But there was only a little difference. I still gave contributions to projects, concerts, I always give. I gave every year. I gave to the church. The bishop, he knew that I never was away. It was just that I am not anymore, a fanatic. I don't know what happened to me.”



“I could say I have a happy childhood. But I was sad with the death of my son and my best friend. There are deaths that are easy to accept, but there are deaths that are sudden. To me, it made me stronger. It made me become unmaterialistic.”

The pains of her son’s loss reshaped some aspects of her life and made her question some of her long-held values. This made her partially abandon what she once was fond of doing when she was younger. But she knew the pain of the death made her prioritize what would make her forget the pain. Those things made her even more successful.

Late Life Family Triumphs

Despite the complications associated with longevity, studies of people in their 70s have revealed that growing old is not automatically synonymous with considerable mental or physical deterioration. Many older people are pleased and involved in a variety of activities (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

Even at her age right now, she continues to see things as satisfying. These became highlights of her late life.

“Then after being chief executive, 8 years, my daughter finished her PhD in Germany, got married, and I now have a grandson. It’s another milestone that I have a grandchild. He is a very lovable child. Those are the highlights of my days there.”

Late life seems to be a time for family and evaluation of her relationships with them. These brought her happiness and a feeling of success.

“We celebrated our 40th wedding anniversary. That is a milestone, 40 years, we are still alive.”

She also continues to be useful to people through the sharing of her knowledge on things she is so passionate about. She is able to leave a legacy for even at her age right now, she continues to do what she loves as what **Leaving a Legacy Stage** of the Late Life Success Theory assumes (Garcia, 2018).

“Then, they gave me an emeritus rank. It keeps me busy. Last week I attended an Environmental Summit and presented a paper. Next week, on Monday, I will be in Subic. I am invited to speak among foresters, in the ASEAN Forestry Week. I have to introduce to them the new paradigm in forest restoration using native trees. That is my advocacy now. Rain-forestation.”

For her, success is not a goal. It is not placed at the end of the finish line. It should not be taken that way to allow you to experience satisfaction for the things that you accomplished.

“When you set goals, you cannot achieve it 100%, only 75 to 80% maybe. There is a 20% left unachieved that would make you frustrated. You tend to blame somebody, and that will pull you down. It is nice that every day you do something.”

She was so passionate when she said that *“There is no fixed menu for success. It is a continuous process of doing what you want to do and being good with it.”* A life of success need not necessarily be a well-planned life. A successful life is not a straight line. It is a mixture of ups and downs. And more importantly, indicators to success are the ways a person manages to go up after being pulled down. Continuously doing what you want to do with a positive attitude will ensure positive results.



Discussion

Growing up as a typical child, who enjoys every moment and who explores the world through misadventures, allows a person to experience the real world. This enjoyment and exploration bring with it a feeling of confusion for the child has seen a lot of things about the world which the young mind cannot decide on. This also precipitates entry into the real world. Previous experiences allow the person to be trusted upon on real world problems thereby allowing for continuous achievements. Hardships and trials, likewise, serve as driving force to achieve more. People who experience these life experiences are successful late in life and even contribute to the success of others. And, they enjoy the effects of being able to explore life.

Conclusion and Suggestion

Walking back into the life of a successful individual provided a chance to review not only the definitions of success but also the process of achieving success. Both are highly individualized. The milestones at specific stages of life of a successful individual contribute to each other. The preceding milestones ensure the succeeding stage will produce another milestone. These previous experiences guarantee that an individual will progress into greater heights.

In order to provide more understanding of the lives of successful individuals, it is recommended to conduct a study on multiple cases. Subjects should be representative of both sexes and of different fields of life.

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