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Abstract

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The Moral Call to Learn: A Qualitative Investigation of Encounters with Unfamiliarity in Everyday Life

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This qualitative study explored the moral aspects of learners' "encounters with unfamiliarity" in their everyday experiences. The encounter with unfamiliarity, as a basic phenomenon within the conceptual framework of embodied familiarization, was investigated using a multiple case study approach (Stake, 2006). Findings from this study are presented first as brief case narratives and second as themes based on a cross-case analysis. Themes of the study point to the nature and significance of the encounter as a part of learning, often as an invitation with a kind of moral significance that called participants to learn, or not learn, in particular ways. Moreover, much of the learning described in participants' accounts was itself a kind of moral action, enacted in response to the significance of the moral call to learn initiated by the encounter. Keywords: Learning, Encounters with Unfamiliarity, Moral Action, Hermeneutics, Agency

So she was considering, in her own mind (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid), whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies, when suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her.

There was nothing so very remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!" (when she thought it over afterwards it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but, when the Rabbit actually took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.

In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again. (Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, pp. 2-3)

Like the fictional Alice of Lewis Carroll's beloved children's tale, *Alice in Wonderland*, all people are frequently met with unfamiliar or surprising situations in the course of everyday life—though, perhaps not those involving anxious and hurried talking rabbits consulting their pocket watches. Whether at school, in work settings, at home, at play, or wherever, encounters with the strange, the unfamiliar, and the unusual are, if not commonplace, then at least (ironically) not unusual. Working through and making some sense of that which is unfamiliar, and, thereby, achieving a degree of familiarity with it, is one useful way of describing the process of learning that people commonly experience (Yanchar, Spackman, & Faulconer, 2013). Indeed, it might be said, at least in this regard, that genuine learning is initiated by encounters with unfamiliarity, and, as such, provides the basis for a kind of becoming—that is,

becoming familiar (or re-familiar)—which allows for effective practical involvement in the world. The study we report here offers some insights into such learning encounters, with a particular emphasis on the moral activities of learners dealing with the unfamiliarity that emerges in the contexts of everyday life.

Literature Review

The general idea of an "encounter with unfamiliarity" (Yanchar, Spackman, & Faulconer, 2013) as an impetus for learning has been discussed in various ways in different theoretical traditions (see, e.g., Kagan, 2002; Louis, 1980; Todd, 2003; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). One obvious treatment of this concept can be found in Piaget's (1970) concept of disequilibrium, that is, an unpleasant state of cognitive conflict that motivates learners to pursue a state of cognitive satisfaction through a process of equilibration. Behaviorist notions such as a conditional stimulus or a change in stimulus conditions, and cognitive science notions such as data-driven processing, have also been theorized as the initiating conditions of learning. While behaviorist and cognitive versions of the learning "encounter" differ from one another in important respects, they are both rooted in a naturalistic conception of human nature that emphasizes mechanistic processes as reactions to environmental stimuli in some fashion (Leahey, 1992; Rychlak, 1991). In contrast, phenomenological inquiries into the nature and meaning of learning have emphasized the relevance of the encounter with that which is unfamiliar as an "opacity that blocks immediate achievement" and sets the stage for attempts to learn (Giorgi, 1989, p. 103).

This list of concepts regarding such encounters is obviously incomplete and cursory. Nonetheless, it serves to illustrate the point that theorists from a variety of perspectives have acknowledged the importance of some event that creates the occasion for anything that might be construed as a type of "learning." Such encounters with unfamiliarity, as we refer to them, are necessary for learning; there would be no prompt or invitation to learn without them. However, none of these predominant theoretical approaches to learning have theorized or studied the phenomenon of the encounter with unfamiliarity as a kind of moral call. Rather, traditional approaches (e.g., behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism) have viewed encounters with unfamiliarity as merely the instrumental basis for accumulating knowledge or new behavioral repertoires (e.g., Driscoll, 2005), and seldom if ever make reference to ethical import, values, or invitations to moral action.

The qualitative study of everyday learning we report here enabled us to look at this phenomenon differently. The original intent of our inquiry was to study encounters with unfamiliarity as initiating conditions of everyday adult learning. More specifically, we set out to better understand the nature of people's experiences with these encounters that invite learning of various kinds in informal, everyday situations. Thus our study was not specifically designed to investigate moral aspects of learning encounters per se. However, we found that such aspects appeared often in the data, given our view of "moral" activities as those that make a meaningful difference in another's lived experience and that are guided by values regarding how one best engages in a particular practice (Brinkmann, 2004; Williams & Gantt, 2002, 2012). Moral action, in this sense, is not necessarily associated with momentous decisions and challenging dilemmas; rather, it is associated principally with how people treat one another in the ordinary contexts of life (for more on ethics in ordinary life, see Brinkmann, 2004; Lambek, 2010; Taylor, 1989). In this regard, it was difficult for our participants to speak of their everyday learning experiences without recourse to moral issues that appeared to be at play (i.e., meaningful differences to others or efforts to make meaningful contributions through one's practice). While not all of the accounts offered by our participants were laden with moral themes and examples, many of them clearly were so – and in rather straightforward ways. Thus,

we have attempted to take the moral call of learning and the learning encounter seriously, at least as described by our participants, and offer a set of qualitative findings that yield some insight regarding this phenomenon.

The moral call of learning and encounters with unfamiliarity may have been particularly visible in our study due to the interpretive frame we employed to generate themes, which is grounded in the hermeneutic work of philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hubert Dreyfus, and Charles Taylor, as well as the related ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas. A major feature of the hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective, especially as found in the work of those thinkers most influenced by Heidegger's (1962) formative analysis in *Being and Time*, is the notion that human existence is most fundamentally a temporal "structure of care" (p. 375), or as elsewhere noted, a form of agency marked by "existential concern" (Yanchar, 2011). From this perspective, it is taken as fundamental that human existence is shaped always by meaningful experience of what matters or makes a difference; and existential concern is, in this sense, concern with one's possibilities, such as how life should be lived, what projects should be taken up, and what ends should be pursued in one's activities. Against this theoretical backdrop, learning can be seen as action that flows from, or instantiates, such existential concern, including our efforts to learn about the world in ways that make a difference to others.

For our purposes, then, existential concern provides a defining feature of human agency, understood as "meaningful engagement" (Yanchar, 2011, p. 279), or, perhaps more appropriately, "concernful involvement" in the world (Yanchar et al., 2013, p. 219). Human agency, in this sense, is "engaged participation marked fundamentally by a sense of what matters most, ends worth pursuing, how to treat others, and so on, always within concrete situations" (Yanchar, 2011, p. 281). This view of the nature of human action has been termed *participational agency* (Yanchar, 2011), a way of understanding any particular agent's action as intimately and inextricably involved with the actions of others with whom the meaningful events of one's life unfold and for whom activity often takes place. In such a perspective, one's agentic action inescapably makes a difference not only to oneself but also to others, in both direct and indirect ways. This connection between agency and ethics has been explored elsewhere in the hermeneutic–phenomenological literature by scholars such as Emmanuel Levinas (1969), Charles Taylor (1989a, 1992), and Jean-Luc Marion (2007), each of whom offer similar though varying accounts of the fundamentally social, intricately embodied, and inescapably moral situatedness of human beings in their everyday lives and relationships with others (see also, Williams & Gantt, 2002, 2012).

In the present study, we treated this view of agency as a basic ontological commitment underpinning a view of learning that has been referred to elsewhere as "embodied familiarization" (Yanchar et al., 2013). More particularly, as participational agents, humans are concernfully engaged participators for whom the circumstances of life matter and who make a difference in the lives of others. As learners, participational agents are concernfully engaged in the project of achieving greater familiarity with ways of relating to the world of their involvement – that is, achieving degrees of familiarity with fully-embodied ways of being involved in the world, including ways of relating to others, using equipment, performing tasks, and so forth.

A primary lived phenomenon of embodied familiarization, *antecedent familiarity*, refers to an agent's prior awareness and capability, often tacit, within a given situation. It is rooted in hermeneutic notions of "fore-structure" (Heidegger, 1962), "tacit knowing" (Taylor, 1985; see also, Polanyi, 1966), "embodied agency" (Taylor, 1989b), and "prior familiarity" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), all of which point to an agent's functional background awareness that makes coherent activity possible. As is often stated in the hermeneutic literature, human beings are *always already* engaged pre-reflectively in a given situation—that is, they can do or know

more than they can articulate and more than what can be specified in explicit propositions or rules (Dreyfus, 1992; Taylor, 1985). Antecedent familiarity thus functions as a tacit starting point for learning in that it makes possible not only meaningful engagement in general, but also efforts to become *more* familiar with a specific situation, a particular skill, and so forth. Directly related to this notion, however, is the main topic of this study—an agent's *encounter with unfamiliarity*—the event that disrupts the relatively smooth flow of practical involvement enabled by antecedent familiarity. In other words, such encounters—typically something fascinating, complicated, challenging, or even vexing—interrupt the unremarkable, tacit flow of everyday living and call for *exploration* of the situation in order to gain a new, expanded range of fully-embodied familiarity.

The *encounter with unfamiliarity* is a significant topic of inquiry due to its pivotal role in an agent learner's shift from tacit (though meaningful) engagement in everyday practical involvement to deliberate efforts to regain a sense of familiarity—that is, to learn what is needed or desired in a given situation. While familiarization may occur more or less tacitly, as in the case of a child's gradual socialization into particular forms of life, our inquiry focuses on encounters entailed within more straightforward and overt learning experiences—the kind that could be reflected on and articulated by adult participants when asked to talk explicitly about their learning experiences. The notion of an encounter with unfamiliarity in some form is not new in hermeneutic and phenomenological literature (see, e.g., Heidegger, 1962). However, while the encounter with unfamiliarity plays an important role in this body of theorizing, it has seldom been investigated in connection with everyday learning, especially everyday learning experiences with moral import. Thus, we endeavored to shed some light on this important philosophical concept and experiential phenomenon, viewing it as a significant aspect of learning that occurs in the everyday activity of one's life. More specifically, we sought to offer a clearer understanding and applicable insight regarding this phenomenon—particularly, its moral aspects—by studying how it was experienced by people as an *invitation* to learn as a form of moral action in the midst of everyday concernful involvement. Our initial research questions simply concerned the nature of the encounter from this perspective: How is this encounter with unfamiliarity experienced and what is its significance in everyday learning?

Context of Researchers

As qualitative researchers, we assume the reality of human agency and purposive action in the lives of the people we study. We view these phenomena from a hermeneutic perspective which holds, among other things, that human agents are situated within cultural forms of life made meaningful by values regarding how one goes about achieving excellence in cultural practices. We also assume a kind of holistic relationality in which an object or activity's meaning is made possible by virtue of how it fits in with, or is related to, other objects and activities in a given context of cultural practice. From our perspective, there is no hidden reality of causal forces more fundamental than these relational contexts of practice; and in this sense, we suggest that these contexts of practice are the fundamental reality of human existence. Our research strategy reflects these underlying assumptions by emphasizing everyday practical involvement and how humans navigate the meanings and values intrinsic to practices. Our research strategy also emphasizes agency by not seeking to map causal factors that would presumably explain human engagement in practices. Rather, based on our assumptions, we seek to describe the meaningful ways in which people live their lives and the stances they take regarding what matters to them. Learning, then, is not a variable in a mechanistic natural order, but a way of being involved in practice.

Method

Study Overview

We used Stake's (2006) multiple case study approach as a way of generating both individual case descriptions and a cross-case analysis regarding the phenomena of interest. It was our intention to produce evocative themes regarding encounters with unfamiliarity in everyday learning experiences, made possible by our way of querying and inviting reflection. Findings of this sort can be transferred to other situations and possibly applied in contextually-sensitive ways—a general methodological concept referred to as "transferability" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 124). Our interpretive frame throughout the study was based on the assumptions of participational agency and embodied familiarization. While we did not employ a formulaic approach using concepts drawn from this general position, our querying of participants and analyzing data was nonetheless informed by such precepts. For example, as we analyzed interviews, we were sensitive to the role of encounters with the unfamiliar and how such encounters mattered to participants, fit into (or disrupted) their everyday concernful involvement in the world, were related to various ways of pursuing familiarization, and so forth. It is important to note, however, that we did not consider our study to be a test of this perspective; rather, we assumed this perspective's plausibility as an interpretive frame and utilized its concepts as a way of producing themes regarding the learning encounter.

Participants

Based on purposive sampling methods (Patton, 2002), we recruited adult individuals who were aware of, and willing to talk at length about, recent learning experiences. Specifically, we attempted to generate a strategic sample of various types of encounters based on mixed purpose sampling, while taking advantage of available opportunities. Thus, we sought willing participants, each of whom would be able to convey unique accounts of learning based on their life circumstances, in order to offer a richer breadth of experiences and possibly insights regarding the phenomenon under investigation. Given Stake's (2006) recommendation that the number of participants (or cases) be kept relatively low (to make the study process manageable), we included six cases drawn from the experiences of three participants. The first participant (pseudonym: Sally) was a new, first-time mother. The second participant (pseudonym: Terrell) was a self-employed owner of a franchise. The third participant (pseudonym: Edna) was graduate student pursuing a master's degree in education. We piloted our interview protocol with three other individuals prior to commencing the main study in order to refine our data collection procedures.

Cases

The unit of analysis in this study (i.e., a case) was a specific learning experience. We based our six cases on interviews with participants who articulated their everyday learning experiences, and did so with particular emphasis on the encounters that provided the initiating context.

Interviews

The first author interviewed each participant once, for approximately an hour. He interviewed Sally and Terrell in their homes. He interviewed Edna in a conference room at her university. We audio recorded all interviews and then transcribed them according to a

predetermined protocol. Interviews were conducted following both informal conversation and semi-structured designs (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003; Turner, 2010). This interview approach allowed for coverage of topics of interest without specifically directing or determining the flow of the conversation. The non-directive but modestly guiding questions were intended to avoid bias in the responses and allow interviewees to explore a particular area until the interviewer was satisfied with the depth of the responses. The interviewer began with the question: "What have you learned recently?" He then proceeded by asking the participant to articulate those learning experiences. Follow-up questions concerned the specifics of articulated experiences. Each participant discussed several relatively recent learning experiences. Throughout the process, the interviewer attempted to be as non-specific as possible regarding the meaning of the term "learning," allowing participants to decide what counted as a learning experience. Moreover, the interviewer did not specifically ask participants to discuss encounters with unfamiliarity and made no mention of this concept. By asking participants to tell us about recent instances of learning in their lives, we assumed that they would also describe these initiating encounters as part of their overall experience; and this is exactly what our participants did, without any special prompting on the interviewer's part. Also, the interviewer did not encourage participants to discuss only significant learning episodes, but to discuss a variety of experiences. Thus, some learning experiences discussed by participants were relatively mundane in nature, while others were fairly momentous.

Data Analysis

Initially, we analyzed the transcripts of cases separately in order to produce a vicarious, narrative account of each encounter with unfamiliarity (i.e., each case). We wrote each individual case summary with the intent of offering a thick description (i.e., a detailed account including context, intentions, and meanings). In doing so, we described each case in terms of five narrative-oriented qualities (Parrish, 2009) such as main character, supporting characters, plot, setting, and action as well as characteristics that emerged from the cases like moral issues. The case summaries we offer in our findings section are shortened versions of these initial case summaries. We then conducted a cross-case analysis, which allowed us to formulate 19 general themes regarding the encounters found in the individual cases. We then rated each case by theme for utility (i.e., the case was high, middle, or low in usefulness for developing the theme) and for importance in answering the overall research questions of the study. We categorized themes with multiple high utility cases as the most relevant. We presented those themes related to moral issues in this paper (for procedures see Stake, 2006). Thus, research of this sort is intended to offer a description of the phenomenon of interest through the case summaries and applicable insight through the cross-case analysis. To treat the data as fairly as possible, we employed widely-accepted qualitative procedures of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morrow, 2005), including peer debriefing, member checking, negative case analysis, progressive subjectivity checks, and dependability/confirmability audits. Finally, we adhered to procedures as outlined by the Institutional Review Board at Brigham Young University (who approved this study) to protect participants' rights and ensure that ethical guidelines were followed.

Findings

We present our findings in two phases. First, we present six case summaries that describe the learning experiences related by our participants. Due to space constraints, however, these summaries will be presented briefly, offering only a sketch of the encounter and subsequent familiarization. Second, we present five cross-case themes that offer insight

regarding the nature and significance of our participants' reported encounters with unfamiliarity. Our case summaries are not intended to offer factual descriptions regarding the essence of learning or underlying causal processes, but rather narrative descriptions that briefly describe the lived experiences of our participants and provide a basis for transfer to other learning experiences (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985, for more on "transfer" and "generalization").

Case Summaries

Case 1: Sally learned to bathe her prematurely born son. Sally experienced the unfamiliarity of bathing her newborn, premature son still on oxygen. As a first time mother not skilled at bathing a premature infant, she feared hurting the child and felt "underqualified" to do this work. In the hospital, Sally was exposed to a blanket wrap bathing method demonstrated by the nurses. However, she doubted this method because she didn't remember her mother bathing a baby in this way. She also thought the method was "weird" and thus declined the offer by the nurse to help bathe the infant, feeling that she wasn't yet capable and could harm him. Nonetheless, she reported her intention to use this method at home, because she considered the nurses experts. The first day at home, however, her aunt introduced her to another bathing method. She trusted her aunt more than the nurses, but was unsure about her ability to copy what her aunt showed her. Once her aunt left, Sally was afraid to bathe her son using her aunt's method, so she decided to try a bathing chair technique her sister had recommended. Unfortunately, her son screamed the entire bath. She remembered, "I couldn't understand why…I was like goodness gracious, you loved baths before this. Why are you screaming? ...It was awful." After the bath, she realized that because the bathing chair didn't fit inside the sink, her son wasn't always in the warm water. She figured, "he was freezing." Sally nervously tried her aunt's method during the next bath, which worked better and increased her confidence.

Case 2: Sally learned to dress her premature newborn son. Sally struggled with dressing her son because of an experience she had six years previously as a teenager (i.e., a prior encounter with unfamiliarity). At the age of 13, Sally's aunt asked her to dress one of her newborn cousins, but she had never before dressed a baby. She remembered, "I got the onesie on her head. I didn't even get any arms through or anything. I was shaking so bad [my aunt] took her baby and was like, ok, how about in a couple of years." This encounter with unfamiliarity proved too much for her emotionally and resulted in her not learning how to dress babies, but rather being fearful of this kind of situation. Instead of her learning this skill, she developed a "deep down fear…like a phobia" of dressing infants or very young children. Thus, she wanted to defer dressing her own son as long as possible. She said, "If it had been summer, I would have been like, I will learn how to dress you when you can lift up your own head." As in the bathing case, Sally experienced a sense of tension leading up to her dressing him for the first time. She attributed her ability to overcome this fear and to dress her baby to a sense confidence she had gained earlier that same day as she successfully bathed him for the first time. Thus, her experience with one encounter set the stage, at least in part, for her ability to cope with an ensuing and related fearful encounter.

Case 3: Terrell learned about managing a unique employee. This case involved Terrell, the owner of a small business, and a new employee named Erin. Erin's profile was different than what Terrell was used to in a newly hired salesperson—no college degree, no sales experience, a single mother—but she scored very high on the company aptitude test. Soon after her hire, Erin showed little initiative, which was problematic for Terrell, partly because his last two employees had not stayed long with the company and partly because of his concern regarding Erin's future. He said:

> …her parents split when she was 16, she never went to college. Because of that, graduated a year early just to get away from that kind of toxic environment and moved in with a guy, got pregnant, and left the guy. Now, she is a single mom and I am thinking, what kind of future does she and this kid have? Statistically speaking, it is not a very good one, but in her case, she will have a very good income because of what she has been able to do here and her son will certainly go to college because there is no question. I mean, it's a high priority to her and frankly, it's a high priority to me, you know, I would love to see that cycle of, kind of, systematic failure or social pressure down on them be broken up.

As time went by, Erin proved slow to learn the job and Terrell had to take unusual steps to help her achieve the needed competence. At one point in the interview, he described how he adjusted his management style to accommodate her unusual characteristics. Some of the most important lessons learned by Terrell through this experience were new techniques for training Erin as an employee—for example, reading body language, asking questions, role-playing, and making helpful suggestions. These were not entirely new concepts to Terrell, but he arrived at new and deeper understandings of their importance and effective ways of applying them. He also came to realize the positive impact of being flexible and putting sufficient time and effort into developing talent as a business owner.

Case 4: Terrell learned to tie his shoes with a different knot. When asked to talk about any other learning experiences Terrell had had recently, he mentioned, "I tie my shoes in a different way now." While camping, Terrell's father showed the campers a new knot for tying shoes. Terrell was uninterested at first, but later decided to learn the new knot. Terrell's father checked periodically on his progress and some tension occurred as Terrell's knot tying abilities were compared to the "much younger" family members who learned to tie the new knot with ease. Before long, through some trial and error, he mastered the knot and subsequently planned to use it to tie his shoes when jogging.

Case 5: Edna learned to cope with tendinitis and accept charitable service. Edna encountered tendinitis at the beginning of a college semester, which was painful and debilitating. She remembered,

> I was really, really upset. It was kind of like a roller coaster. I would, like some days, I would feel ok and I was like, I am not going to let this be the most important thing in my life, but then the next, I would be like in tears because I was so frustrated that it wasn't getting better.

She quickly realized that creating a 300 pinned insect collection for an entomology class and typing papers would be impossibly painful. She became frustrated as time wore on; she was now disabled, yet still wanted to be independent, get good grades, and graduate on time. She remembered, "I couldn't pin the bugs because it hurt my hand so much." A fellow student and friend, who had taken the class the previous year, heard that she was having problems with pinning her bug collection. He offered to help her pin her bug collection and also told her his wife, an entomologist, would help as well. She remembered, "I was thinking about how much I was relieved that he offered to help." Through unexpected service from others, Edna learned to accept assistance from friends who spent considerable time helping her pin her insects and type her papers. Although she was somewhat familiar with "other types of love," as she put it, her first-hand experience as the recipient of such charitable service gave her a deeper understanding of the tension between her desires for independence and her unexpected vulnerability. She also learned to patiently cope with the constant pain of tendinitis, understand

accessibility policies at her university, use voice recognition software, and apply procedures associated with physical therapy.

Case 6: Edna learned to cope with partial blindness and to better understand the concept of perspective. A solar eclipse partially blinded Edna. After accidentally looking at the eclipse without protective glasses, she experienced gradually increasing headaches, neck aches, and tense muscles. Her condition deteriorated as she encountered the unfamiliarity of partial blindness and had difficulty concentrating on her school work. This experience taught her about the effect of gazing at solar eclipses without eye protection; but it also provided her an opportunity to learn to continue functioning as a student while suffering from partial blindness and related problems. In the midst of this encounter, Edna took time to reflect and wrote about it in her personal journal. She remembered,

> that was a huge challenge for a couple of months and it was frustrating. I wanted it to just go back to the way that I was, but it helped me realize that you can look at things in a different perspective.

By writing about this experience, she reflected on the topic of perspective. She wrote, "After a few days of this pain and altered perspective, I realized that there was a powerful connection between my physical sight and my spiritual perspective on life." As she pondered her struggles, she gained some insights on the topic of perspective. She compared her blurry vision to a limited and short-term perspective on the purpose and meaning of life. She concluded that only with divine assistance can she clearly see the true nature of her existence.

Theme 1: The Moral Nature of Everyday Encounters

Through our data analysis, we saw evidence of a moral component to many encounters, as participants were often sensitive not only to how the situation mattered to them personally, but also how their activity in the situation mattered to, or in some way affected, others involved in the case. There was, in this sense, a type of moral call in many of the encounters we examined that mattered to the participants and invited them to learn in ways that might have positive implications for others. For example, Terrell's concern with an employee's long-term success in life invited him to learn styles of management and training that would facilitate her development in the company. This new approach came at some expense to Terrell, as it required him to learn to manage personnel in ways he had not previously considered in the fast-paced, competitive world of business. He recalled,

> it was obvious that everything I was trying to convey to her wasn't sinking in…there is just too much, you know, product knowledge, sales skills, and jargon and all the other things you have to learn…she had to basically come in with a completely clean slate.

A similar phenomenon appeared in the cases of Sally and Edna. How these participants related to the moral call of these encounters had much to do with how the learning experiences unfolded. In both of Sally's cases, for instance, this new mother felt a sense of concern about her vulnerable son's welfare and the possible harm that could ensue if she made mistakes in the learning process. While Edna's case (suffering from tendinitis) differed from Sally's and Terrell's, in that she was not faced with a moral call regarding the implications of her actions for others, she was faced with the prospect of overcoming personal pride and perhaps a too-strong sense of independence in order to cope with the demands of her life at that time. She

reported that this experience drew her closer to others in ways that are not discussed in theories of learning focused on overt behavior or the processing and storage of information. She stated,

> I was thinking about how much I was relieved that he offered to help…there are other types of love [besides romantic love] that make you want to help people and like give of yourself when you can…I needed to accept that love from other people.

Ultimately, the learning initiated by Edna's encounters placed her in a position to develop deeper relationships with others.

On the other hand, not all encounters with unfamiliarity in our study entailed significant moral demands, as in the negative case of Terrell learning a new way to tie his shoes. In this case, the participant appeared to be learning in the absence of a clearly discernable moral commitment, and further, in the absence of a strong interest in the subject matter itself. It may be said, at most, that he wanted to be a "good sport" and play along with an activity that had some meaning to someone else. However, his interest began to increase as he felt a modest sense of tension associated with being compared to younger family members who appeared not to struggle as much with this task.

Theme 2: Encounters with Unfamiliarity Invited Evaluation and Often Moral Evaluation

Data from our cases suggested that our participants engaged in a type of evaluation regarding encounters and how to respond to them. For example, efforts by others to help Edna were initially seen by her as unwelcome intrusions in her life. Edna was not accustomed to needing help from others, at least in this direct fashion, and was not interested in being the recipient of such generosity. She remembered, "I didn't want to accept defeat…for the longest time I was like, I don't need that kind of help. I can do this on my own." As Edna considered her situation, however, she came to look at it and her friends' involvement differently, partly because she recognized her genuine need for help at that time and partly due to her realization that help from others is often necessary and not a sign of weakness or inferiority. She recalled, "I was frustrated with myself for being so stubborn for so long."

These evaluations performed by participants often concerned moral aspects of the situations they faced; that is, participants did or did not pursue an invitation to learn based on their appraisal of what was at stake. Sally, for instance, declined an opportunity to learn how to bathe her premature baby in the hospital due to her concern about his welfare. It was overwhelming for her to cope with the possibility of accidentally harming this infant in such a vulnerable state. As she remarked:

> They wanted me there, you know, to learn it and everything…I did a little bit of it, you know, like I wiped down his ear with a cotton ball and I was like, ok, I am good, you guys can bathe him the rest of the way because I was afraid I was going to hurt him.

Thus, her son's welfare, in conjunction with her sense of unfamiliarity, mattered to her in a way that disallowed her to learn this skill at this very early stage in his life. She experienced a related moral tension when faced with the need to clothe her vulnerable infant son, years after a traumatic episode that involved clothing a family member's baby.

Terrell likewise engaged in moral evaluations of his encounters with Erin who, in his view, presented an unusual situation and needed a special opportunity for upward mobility. As the Case 3 summary suggests, this employer was sensitive to her personal circumstances and

was willing to find new ways to facilitate her development in the company that would lead to success for her and her son. Thus, Terrell responded to the moral call of this encounter with a kind of learning that was itself unusual, at least from a business perspective, but appropriate given his evaluation of the situation and how Erin's personal success had started to matter to him. In general, it might be said that the encounters with unfamiliarity in these cases invited a kind of anticipation and moral evaluation of what would be involved if an invitation to learn were accepted. A learner qua agent thus may or may not pursue a learning opportunity depending on how she or he appraises the expected outcome for those involved in the situation, as in the cases of caring for a premature infant or mentoring a struggling employee. In this sense, it might be said that the learner can accept or decline an invitation to learn, and the decision one makes will be at least partly a matter of how he or she perceives the moral demands involved. This point may be obvious in some sense, but is not raised for consideration in research based on other theoretical approaches to learning; indeed, other approaches do not provide the conceptual frame of reference that would enable learning phenomena to be interpreted in this way.

Theme 3: The Significance of Everyday Moral Encounters

The ordinariness of the experiences reported here did not diminish their significance in the lives of our participants. In many cases, encounters with unfamiliarity were associated with drama and emotion that varied throughout the experience and subsequent efforts to learn. As Edna commented, "It was definitely a roller coaster with a lot of emotions involved." And Terrell said: "There was a lot of tension in the beginning…She would show a lot of trepidation and then that would frustrate me." Slowly, he learned how to help her become an effective employee. He described, "I really, kind of, had to build her from scratch and it is amazing what we were able to do." Through encounters with this employee, Terrell experienced annoyance, tension, frustration, and finally, amazement. In this sense, the moral encounters and subsequent learning efforts reported by our participants were significant, challenging, and emotionally-laden, despite being enmeshed in their everyday lives. Dealing with everyday moral encounters was, for our participants, anything but routine or boring.

Moreover, from the perspective we have taken here, it can be seen that the most significant encounters described by our participants were those with the greatest moral import, such that how he or she handled a situation mattered significantly in the lives of others, as in the case of a woman who must overcome fear of injuring her child in order to take care of him; or in the case of a college student who must overcome physical adversity such as partial blindness and tendinitis while simultaneously transforming her understanding of relationships and the role that others can play in her life. Much of the drama in these cases, it might be surmised, would not have existed if there were no moral call to these encounters. For example, Sally might not have feared learning how to bathe or clothe a premature infant if that training occurred in a low-risk situation, for example, in a simulation setting with a baby doll.

Theme 4: Moral Learning Encounters Were Complex and Interrelated

What participants related as single learning experiences were often filled with multiple, interrelated encounters with unfamiliarity. Some learning experiences were brief and fairly straightforward—for example, Terrell learning a new knot for tying shoes—but most extended over time and entailed moral complexities, as when Terrell attempted to cope with the peculiar dynamics of training Erin over several months. By and large, for our participants, these encounters were not simple linear chains of events, but jumbled, overlapping experiences made more complex still by the moral dynamics involved. Terrell's experience as Erin's supervisor,

for instance, would have been fairly straightforward and unremarkable if he simply hired her, witnessed her lack of initiative, and then dismissed her based on poor performance. In this sense, the moral tenor of these encounters made for complex learning situations—for example, learning a new management approach to meet someone else's needs.

Edna's experience with the pain of tendinitis also demonstrates the complexity of encounters, which in this case seemed to be ever-present and interweaving, creating unique opportunities to relate in new ways to situations. More specifically, Edna found that her condition created new challenges in many phases of her life, such that, as she stated: "I couldn't really take care of myself." However, her condition led to other kinds of encounters as well, such as when she received the unexpected offer of a friend to help her pin her large insect collection for a class project, which taught her about generosity and how to accept that kind of charitable service from another. As we reported earlier, the complex nature of this overall learning experience, with its many overlapping encounters, enabled her to learn virtues such as patience, humility, and gratitude.

Based on the experiences of our participants, then, learning might be considered a "messy" endeavor—a single learning experience can include multiple, related or overlapping encounters that call for different kinds of learning simultaneously or that interweave in complex ways over time. This seemed to be especially so for learning experiences with a moral tenor, as in Terrell's experience with Erin. Moreover, from this perspective, learning appeared to be unending, as encounters continued to present themselves in the midst of everyday living as well as in formal educational settings. As Terrell's experience with Erin suggests, deviations from normal work routines provided a continued need for managing and thus continued opportunities to develop more helpful ways of mentoring a struggling employee.

Theme 5: Learning Per Se as a Moral Activity

Learning as part of a moral endeavor was evident in our participants' experience. This can be seen, for instance, in both of Edna's cases which helped her gain a greater awareness of the value of patience, humility, perseverance, and developing a broader perspective on life. Terrell also learned to be more flexible and empathetic in his management approach, so that an employee could grow professionally and become successful in her work. In this sense, much of the learning described by these two participants amounted to a kind of informal, everyday moral education; but nonetheless, one with significant import for their lives and the lives of others.

Perhaps more important, however, was that the learning experiences described by participants were often a kind of moral undertaking. In the accounts they related, moral learning was characterized not by a study of propositions and contrived scenarios as part of a formalized teaching effort; rather, the learning was motivated by a kind of moral-mixed-with-practical concern for the welfare of others in everyday situations; that is, learning was pursued by our participants so they could do something helpful for someone else. This kind of learning, then, was motivated by its own value—a discernible, felt sensitivity to someone else's predicament and a desire to become the kind of person that can make a positive difference to someone else.

Interestingly, our participants who related these kinds of accounts (primarily Terrell and Sally) did not mention explicitly moral concerns as part of their experience. For them, learning in these everyday settings seemed to be viewed as something ordinary people do in order to properly fulfill their roles as good parents, good work supervisors, or whatever else. For example, the mother of a premature infant on oxygen just learns how to change the child's clothes and give him or her a bath; it's what one does under those circumstances. Similarly, a supervisor learns how to train an employee for success, which may—and in this case, was—motivated by a concern for the welfare and future prospects of that employee's family as well

as the success of the business. Both were cases of everyday people engaging in everyday (yet meaningful and moral) activities, without intentionally following an explicit moral code. Their learning was motivated by an informal concern for another (i.e., a moral call).

Finally, it appears that the moral and practical aspects of our participants' relationships with others in these learning experiences were tightly woven together—or perhaps better stated, were often part of a unitary phenomenon. The very practical matters that our participants mentioned in their accounts made a meaningful difference to others; or they mattered in some rather significant sense, even if the other (i.e., a premature infant) was not fully cognizant of the situation. Thus, practical learning often was a form of moral learning. Generally speaking, then, learning may often have a moral trajectory in that it will be pursued purposively (though tacitly moral) and that purpose can be viewed in light of the difference it makes to other people, now or in the future, even with regard to mundane matters. To be sure, the cases we present here don't prove this to be universally true; but when viewed from a hermeneutic perspective such as embodied familiarization, this assertion appears plausible and provides a basis for further inquiry.

Discussion

Central to this study was the moral call identified in the accounts of learning offered by our participants. We initially conducted this study in order to explore encounters with unfamiliarity and how they lead to learning experiences in general. However, it was difficult not to see more specific moral themes emerge as participants described their encounters and why they chose to pursue or decline those invitations to learn. Moral themes have occasionally been discussed in the vast, interdisciplinary literature on human learning (e.g., Scott, 2012; Zhao & Biesta, 2012), but they are not included in common behaviorist, cognitivist, or constructivist accounts (see, e.g., Driscoll, 2005). We suggest that these moral themes appeared in our participants' stories because our participants were specifically invited to describe learning experiences from their own perspective and they conceptualized them as agents for whom the events of life matter in a distinctly human sense. Much of our participants' experiences were entailed within implicitly-moral narratives of mattering; and how things mattered to supporting characters was a significant issue for our participants in this respect. As our second theme suggests, the act of evaluating and, for example, ignoring an encounter had much to do with how participants were involved, or willing to be involved, with another person in the situation. This finding suggests something important about the participants in our study, namely, that how they dealt with an encounter was, at least at times, a reflection of their sense of responsibility and did, at least in one circumstance, lead to the avoidance rather than the pursuit of learning. Stated differently, our cases offered at least some evidence that a powerful moral invitation inheres in some encounters and that moral issues, construed somewhat broadly (i.e., issues pertaining to how one's conduct matters in the life of someone else), would seem to be more present in everyday learning encounters than is commonly recognized in theory and research.

The five themes we identified regarding moral aspects of learning encounters fit into an overall picture of the human learner as agent. These agent learners, through their ways of navigating encounters with unfamiliarity, achieved more substantial levels of capability and familiarity in relevant aspect of their lives, and those achievements are what we refer to as learning. However, our findings also suggest that these agent learners made moral evaluations regarding the worthiness of these learning opportunities and their own potential for success in addressing them. That is, our participants responded to encounters, at least in part, by considering questions such as how much does the learning opportunity matter to someone else, what complications or problems will responding to that opportunity create, and can those

problems be overcome? This phenomenon is not explicated in traditional learning theories, despite its ordinariness and importance. Indeed, unique to this account is the inclusion of learning itself as a moral act, rather than learning as something like a mechanical, and thus amoral, process that involves the processing of information about moral scenarios, moral decisions, and so on. Moreover, the accounts of moral encounters and moral learning we have presented here are unique in that they are not situated within formal structures designed in some way to inculcate particular values, such as a formal character education curriculum, or with somewhat less structure, a service learning experience. Although we have no objection to these educational opportunities, what our participants discussed was drawn from their moral-practical action within ordinary and real, yet meaningful, situations.

An implication of this study is that learning may often be moral in nature and that the moral aspects of the act of learning itself should be studied more intensively. However, it may also be fruitful to inquire into this phenomenon, first and foremost, from the perspective of moral action, and thus seek to study learning that is entailed in moral action per se, for example, as agents seek to become familiar in ways that will allow them to make decisions in a complex moral domain. What we suggest here implies a kind of moral education—one that inheres in the banality of existence and calls people to learn in an everyday practical sense. Given that a good deal of one's social interactions will make a difference (or matter) to someone else, and will be moral in that sense, it is likely that a good deal of human action in general will be moral as well. And much of that moral action will involve learning in some moral-practical sense to adequately address the situation at hand. Thus, studies of moral action that omit such learning may very well omit a significant aspect of the nature of human morality per se.

One limitation of this study was the lack of data regarding the experiences of other people directly involved in the situations described. Although these others were clearly important, even essential, to the narratives offered by participants, our data collection focused on the experiences as related by our participants only. Future research that includes data from others involved would add important perspectives and allow for an enriched, more relational understanding of the learning experiences involved. Future research could also explore more deeply the learner's moral responsibility (or lack thereof) in the face of an encounter and may reveal much about why people pursue or decline learning opportunities and how their sense of responsibility, at least in some cases, shapes their desire to learn. Similarly, inquiry in this vein can explore the difficulties that emerge when people face complex, real-world encounters with multiple, conflicting moral demands and complex situational dynamics. How do learners manage such complexity in ways that allow them to address what matters most to them and to the others involved? Answers to such questions can offer insight into the underexplored moral phenomena entailed within the learning that is invited by such encounters with unfamiliarity.

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