A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Experiences of Flourishing Among University
Students Transitioning Directly from High School


by


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**Abstract**

This study explored the experiences of flourishing, among first year university students making the transition directly from high school, to develop a beginning understanding of *1) the factors that promote flourishing amidst this academic and developmental transition,* and *2) how first year students define and experience flourishing.* An interpretive phenomenological approach, underpinned by Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy, was used with semi-structured interviews, in a sample of nine full-time, first year university students, ages 18-20 years.

The experience of flourishing emerged as temporal thematic understandings unearthing factors associated with: *1) personal strengths and areas of personal challenges 2) positive and trying aspects of personal health challenges 3) family/parental support and challenges 4) positive and challenging aspects of the living, high school and university environments and 5) positive and challenging aspects of community involvement.* These perceptions offer new understandings of the concept of flourishing as well as implications for practice, policy, and research.

*Keywords: flourishing, university, transition, qualitative, hermeneutic*

## Acknowledgements

**Chapter 1:  Introduction**

Mental health is defined as "…a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (World Health Organization (WHO), 2005). Mental health is central to overall well-being, linked to better physical health (WHO, 2014), and for students attending post-secondary institutions, mental health is important for learning and academic success (Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) & Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), 2013). Individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 years are more likely to experience either a mental illness or substance use disorder or both than any other age group (Pearson, Janz & Ali, 2013), a time when many young people graduate from high school and go on to pursue post-secondary education. With a rise in the number of young people attending post-secondary institutions since the 1970's (Clark, 2007; MacKean, 2011) mental illness, undoubtedly, is one of the most significant challenges faced within this context today.

Graduating from high school is a time when individuals experience a developmental transition involving physical maturation and ongoing growth and development in the cognitive, social and emotional domains (Kloep, Hendry, Taylor & Stuart-Hamilton, 2015). Some youth also experience an academic transition from high school to university. This transition often involves several challenges including moving away from the parental home, financial strain, adjusting to higher academic expectations, navigating a new social environment, and establishing new social networks and supports (Clarke, 2007; Johnson, Gans, Kerr & LaValle, 2010). Some students experience

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additional challenges related to upbringings, poverty, violence, illness, disabilities, prejudice and marginalization in addition to the more common developmental and academic challenges. These challenges may be the driving force for many young adults to flourish in adulthood (Padilla-Walker & Nelson, 2017).

While this dual transitioning period may be exciting, it also can be characterized by sharp declines in psychological, cognitive-affective and social well-being (Bray & Kwan, 2006; Conley, Kirsch, Dickson, & Bryant, 2014; Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2013). A wealth of research has focused on young people who experience these psychosocial declines (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Storrie, Ahern, & Tuckett, 2010); however, little is known about young people who are adapting and coping well with the transition. As well, how these young people flourish, or the factors that assist with this dual transition, has been largely unexplored from the perspectives of students.

**Background**

Canada is at the top of an international trend with the highest rate of post-secondary educational attainment in the world (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2017). Historically, universities have sought to achieve a high level of peak performance with a focus on academic excellence and success (Oades, Robinson, Green, & Spence, 2011). With a rise in the psychological distress of students, there is growing awareness among administrators within the post-secondary context of the need for more sustainable and long-term strategies to promote mental health (MacKean, 2011; Mount Royal University, 2013; University of Calgary, 2016; University of Lethbridge, 2017; Ryerson University, 2017; University of Toronto, 2017). Despite recent mental health promotion (MHP) efforts, strategies to improve student mental

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health continue to be heavily weighted on the problems and challenges that students face with fewer policies and resources devoted to understanding the factors that keep students well (De Somma, Jaworska, Heck, & MacQueen, 2017).

The array of mental health issues experienced by students is well outlined in post-secondary reports (American College Health Association (ACHA), 2016b; MacKean, 2011), strategic plans (Mount Royal University, 2013; University of Calgary, 2016) and the popular media (Macleans, 2012; The Globe and Mail, 2016). Mental health issues have increased in chronicity and have involved a range of problems including substance abuse, violence, sexual assault, suicide, sleep disorders, depression, anxiety, academic stress, relationship issues and financial stress, all of which can negatively impact students' academic success (The Globe and Mail, 2016; Macleans, 2012; Mount Royal University, 2013; University of Calgary, 2016; MacKean, 2011, ACHA, 2016b). There is debate as to whether these mental ill-health concerns are in fact on the rise or may be a result of the increased understanding of mental health as a concept that, subsequently, has reduced the stigma associated with mental illness thus encouraging more students to come forward and seek help for mental health issues (MacKean, 2011).

This problem-focused state of affairs is highlighted in the 2016 National College Health Assessment (NCHA) involving a survey of Canadian post-secondary students that explored their health behaviors, attitudes, and experiences over the last 12 months. The survey involved 41 campuses across Canada and 43,780 students (ACHA, 2016b). Results concluded that almost 90% of students felt overwhelmed and exhausted and approximately 60% experienced loneliness, hopelessness and overwhelming anxiety. More than 40% felt so depressed that it was difficult to function; indeed,10% had

considered suicide, nearly 9% had self-harmed, and more than 2% had attempted suicide. Anxiety and depression topped the list of mental health conditions diagnosed, or treated, by a professional in the last 12 months. The top 3 traumatic, or very challenging, incidences to handle over the past 12 months included academics (58.1%), finances (40.4%), and sleep difficulties (37.1%). Relationship issues - related to intimate, family and social connections - were a close second to sleep difficulties (ACHA, 2016b). The NCHA survey highlights a portion of the student body struggling with mental illness, putting them at higher risk for academic failure (Keyes, Eisenberg, Perry, Dube, Kroenke & Dhingra, 2012). Concurrently, these statistics do not address the contextual factors that have contributed to these problems. Nor do they provide insight into how they might be prevented, or more importantly, how mental health could be promoted.

The NCHA also provided the prevalence of self-rated mental health among students, with 49.9% of students reporting that they were flourishing, 43.6% reporting moderate mental health, and 9.6% reporting that they were languishing (ACHA, 2016b). Although these statistics provide a snapshot of the percentage of students in Canada who claim to be doing very well (i.e., flourishing), they do not provide an understanding of the pathways used to maintain a level of positive mental health or the contextual factors that promote flourishing among this population.

Yet, do we know what the concept of flourishing really is? Consensus has yet to be reached among scholars on how flourishing is defined or its constituent indicators. To date, four conceptual frameworks with assessment scales exist for measuring flourishing: 1) Keyes' Dimensions of Flourishing (Keyes, 2007a); 2) Huppert and So's Flourishing Scale (Huppert & So, 2013); 3) Diener et al.'s Flourishing Scale (Diener, Wirtz, Tov,

Kim-Prieto, Choi, Oishi, & Biswas-Diener, 2010) and 4) The PERMA-Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016). While these frameworks and measures have helped to define and understand the concept from a quantitative perspective; the experience of flourishing has been explored from a qualitative perspective only minimally (Ashfield, McKenna, & Backhouse, 2012; Gokcen, Hefferon, & Attree, 2012). More specifically, studies exploring the experience of flourishing among students living through the transition to university, during this developmental period are even less (Knoesen & Naudé, 2017).

We also lack a wealth of understanding regarding the factors that promote flourishing. Some predictors of student mental health include socially supportive climates, ease with transitioning to college, sense of belonging, civic engagement, self-confidence (Fink, 2014; Nicotera, Brewer, & Veeh, 2015), student engagement and involvement (Bowman, Brandenberger, Lapsley, Hill, & Quaranto, 2010; Low, 2011) and high academic achievement (Antaramian, 2015; Howell, 2009). Little is known about how these indicators work together to promote student flourishing within the post-secondary context. Therefore, if universities are to build nurturing campus environments, it is critical to engage in research to explore the experiences of students who are doing well - what they believe helps them flourish. The value of a qualitative approach can be extended further to uncover nuances and similarities among this cohort, and within this context, allowing for in-depth accounts of how students define flourishing, experience it and factors that promote it.

**Mental Health Promotion on Campus**

The Keyes' Dual Continuum Model of Mental Health with an operational definition of flourishing (Keyes, 2007a), is one of the above mentioned empirically tested

frameworks used in a number of post-secondary settings across Canada to guide mental health promotion efforts to address the mental illness crisis among students (MacKean, 2011; Mount Royal University, 2013; University of Calgary, 2016; University of Toronto, 2017). Within this model, flourishing is defined as, "a state in which an individual feels positive emotion toward life and is functioning well psychologically and socially" (Keyes, 2003, p. 294). Thrive RU, a program offered to students new to Ryerson University is based on Seligman and colleague's operational definition of flourishing (Butler & Kern, 2016). The 13-week program is aimed at promoting a sense of support for students on campus while increasing awareness about the link between academic success and healthy lifestyle (Ryerson University, 2017). In the fall of 2017, seven Canadian universities (University of Lethbridge, Grant MacEwan University, Memorial University, Nova Scotia Community College, Dalhousie University, University of Calgary and Mount Royal University) partnered with the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) to pilot The Inquiring Mind. This program aims to empower students how to understand and manage their mental health, covering topics related to stigma and better ways of coping and managing stress (MHCC, 2017).

     While the literature on mental health prevention and promotion interventions in primary and secondary school settings strongly supports a universal approach (Sancassiani et al., 2015), much less is known about interventions that are effective in post-secondary contexts (Conley, Durlak, & Dickson, 2013). Encouragingly, models using a whole school approach, such as the Comprehensive School Health Framework (Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health, 2017) to guide MHP efforts at the elementary and secondary school level are now being introduced in post-secondary

settings. These efforts draw from a broad range of upstream approaches aimed at

promoting mental well-being of entire student populations and have been incorporated

into the following frameworks: The Campus Population Health Promotion Model

(Patterson and Kline, 2008) Ecological Model (ACHA, 2016b), Healthy Minds/Healthy

Campuses (CMHA, 2017) and the UK Healthy Universities Model (Healthy Universities,

2017). It can be concluded from a review of these models that they are in keeping with

strategies aimed at promoting mental health and target,

> "…the whole population and focuses on enabling and achieving positive mental
> health…aims to enhance well-being and quality of life for individuals,
> communities, and society in general. Mental health promotion conceptualizes
> mental health in positive rather than in negative terms and delivers effective
> programmes designed to reduce health inequities in an empowering collaborative
> and participatory manner… endorses a competence enhancement perspective and
> seeks to address the broader determinants of mental health..." (Jané‐Llopis,
> Barry, Hosman & Patel, 2005).

The Okanagan Charter, an international charter for promoting health at colleges

and universities is guiding action and providing a framework to, "1. Embed health into all

aspects of campus culture across the administration operations and academic mandates

and 2. Lead health promotion action and collaboration locally and globally",

(International Conference on Health Promoting Universities and Colleges, 2015, p.3).

Approaches of this nature take into account the broader social, cultural, political and

economic context in which individuals, communities and societies are immersed that

influence mental health at an individual level (Holt & Warne, 2007). Efforts that move

away from focusing on the mental health problems of students require a change in policy,

practice and research involving individuals, the campus environment, community and

society to facilitates a school culture shift within these domains (CACUSS & CMHA, 2013; De Somma et al., 2017; Oades et al., 2011; White, 2016).

## Statement of the Problem

Although we are beginning to understanding what constitutes flourishing, studies advancing our knowledge of the concept of flourishing have done so solely through quantitative methodologies, leaving students' lived experiences largely unaccounted for (Hefferon, Ashfield, Waters, & Synard, 2017). To date few qualitative studies have been conducted exploring the experiences of flourishing among post-secondary students (Ashfield, McKenna & Backhouse, 2012; Gokcen, Hefferon, & Attree, 2012) and to my knowledge only one study exploring the experiences of flourishing from university students during this dual transition within the South African context (Knoesen & Naudé, 2017). To this end, there has been a recent call for more qualitative studies to broaden our knowledge base of flourishing across populations (Agenor, Conner, & Aroian, 2017; Hefferon et al., 2017; Hone et al., 2014) to build a more in-depth understanding of the lived experience of flourishing. Such qualitative research may potentially unearth other dimensions of flourishing, as well as developmental, environmental and contextual factors that contribute to flourishing within this cohort of students.

Our understanding of mental health has evolved mainly from the study of mental illness. Flourishing literature is primarily overshadowed by literature related to mental illness and student struggles within this context. This is problematic in that mental health is not the direct opposite of mental illness nor does it equate the absence of mental illness (Keyes, 2007a), therefore flourishing should be studied in its own right. Non-flourishing students are more prone to psychological distress and dropping out of university (Dyrbye

et al., 2012), making it an opportune time to ensure that students flourish and are successful. Without a better understanding of the factors that promote student flourishing while transitioning from high school to university, we have failed to understand the whole picture of what constitutes flourishing, the factors that keep this particular cohort of students well, how students define and experience flourishing, the challenges they experience and how they are managed and overcome amidst this transition.

Nursing, in particular, has lagged behind other disciplines in implementing the concept of flourishing in practice (Agenor et al., 2017). The strong link between mental and physical wellbeing positions nurses across all specialties to implement mental health promotion in research, education, and practice, however, there has been a delay in the execution of these endeavors (Agenor et al., 2017; Wand, 2011). Furthermore, central to nursing is a strong foundation in health promotion; therefore, research on flourishing that is inclusive of the nursing discipline is needed to develop the concept to create nursing interventions to promote flourishing (Agenor et al., 2017).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand and explore how post-secondary students define and experience flourishing while making the transition directly from high school to university. Critical to this exploration was the emergence of key factors contributing to how students define and experience flourishing and the challenges they experience, manage and overcome. This study has contributed to illuminating the concept of flourishing from the perspectives of university students by exploring the following research questions:

1.  How do first-year university students define and experience flourishing while transitioning directly from high school?

2.  What factors promote student flourishing during this development and academic transition?

**Significance of the Study**

This study was essential for several reasons. Declines in student mental health affect academic performance (Howell, 2009), social and psychological well-being (Conley et al., 2014) and physical health (Bray & Born, 2004; Bray & Kwan, 2006) with the highest rates of mental illness occurring at a time when many young people are beginning their post-secondary journey (Pearson et al., 2013). Non-flourishing adolescents and adults report poorer physical health outcomes, have an increased level of health care utilization (Keyes, 2010; Keyes & Martin, 2017) and are more prone to dropping out of school and attempting suicide (Dyrbye et al., 2012). Mental health status improves as one's level of education increases affording young people opportunities for income and job security, and an increased sense of control over life circumstances (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010); therefore, strategies aimed at promoting flourishing on campus have long-term effects for individuals, communities, and societies.

Additionally, good mental health is vital for learning and academic success (CACUSS & CMHA, 2013) and those who achieve a higher level of education generally tend to be healthier, have higher levels of income and job security, better working conditions and better access to societal and economic resources (Jané-Llopis et al., 2005; Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). Higher education affords individuals the ability to influence broader changes in the employment market, benefit from new training opportunities as

employment situations change and facilitate civic activities and engagement in political processes. These factors are capable of shaping and influencing one's health (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010).

The timeliness of this study aligns with a growing number of post-secondary settings acknowledging that intervening only when mental illness arises is a late intervention, and not the most effective approach (MacKean, 2011; Mount Royal University, 2013; University of Calgary, 2016, Ryerson, 2017). This coincides with a growing interest in understanding positive mental health, whereby, scholars agree that promoting flourishing is beneficial for individuals and society as a whole (Keyes, 2002; 2005a; 2007b; Peter et al., 2011; Seligman, 2012) and a protective factor against mental illness (Keyes & Martin, 2017). Although important, it is not enough to know the prevalence rate of students who are flourishing. Therefore, exploring the experiences of flourishing to gain an in-depth understanding of the dimensions of flourishing - particularly pertinent to this dual transition has provided additional insight and understanding into ways of easing this transition for those students who are struggling, and ways to promote continued flourishing among those who are thriving.

**Conclusion**

This chapter provided an introduction and background information on the phenomenon explored in this study. Chapter 2 will incorporate a review of the literature believed to be relevant to the developmental and academic transition that young people experience while making the transition to university directly from high school. A literature review of traditional and contemporary conceptualizations of mental health precede an overview and analysis of selected quantitative and qualitative research related

to the concept of flourishing, shedding light on the infancy of the concept of flourishing, the lack of consensus of the constituents of flourishing and the understudied nature of the phenomenon of flourishing using qualitative means. The literature review supports the case for engaging in a study to understand and explore how university students define and experience flourishing while transitioning directly from high school.

## Chapter 2:  Literature Review

"A researcher's knowledge of the research literature is what leads him or her to the realization that research is needed in an area that is understudied. It is the researcher's knowledge base that leads to specific ideas about how the inquiry needs to proceed to produce useful knowledge" (Lopez & Willis, 2004).  The purpose of this study was to explore and begin to understand how first-year university students define and experience flourishing while transitioning directly from high school and the factors promote student flourishing during this development and academic transition. This chapter begins by reviewing the literature on developmental and academic transitions pertaining to a cohort of students between the age of 18 and 20 years. The next section of this chapter will involve a review of traditional and contemporary conceptualizations of mental health and precede a literature review of mental health promotion within the post-secondary context. Lastly, relevant quantitative and qualitative research related to the concept of flourishing, and how flourishing is defined to date specifically within the postsecondary context will be explored to unearth gaps in the literature emphasizing a need to engage in a study of this nature.

**Transitions**

Transitions are experienced across the lifespan in which individuals experience dislocation, disorientation, and disruption in their life which require change and adaptation, (Meleis, Sawyer, Im, Hilfinger, De Anne & Schumacher, 2000; Schlossberg, 1981; Schumacher & Meleis, 1994). Ultimately, individuals approach transitions with the goal of incorporating these changes and finding new ways of being within the world while accounting for the contextual factors in which the transition is immersed (Kralik,

Visentin, & van Loon, 2006). Schlossberg defines a transition to be when, "…an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). Adaptation, according to Schlossberg, is a response to a transition and defined as, "…a process during which an individual moves from being totally preoccupied with the transition to integrating the transition into his or her life" (1981, p.7).

Whether one adapts depends on an ability to balance resources, deficits, and differences in pre- and post-transition environments, and involves factors such as 1) perception of the transition, 2) characteristics of the pre- and post-transition environment, and 3) characteristics of the individual (Schlossberg, 1981). Schumacher and colleagues (1994) found four commonalities among transition theorists to include: 1) processes that take place over time, 2) development, flow, or movement from one state to another, 3) stages or phases, and 4) resulting in changes in identity, roles, relationships, abilities, and patterns of behaviors.

Transitions are multidimensional, complex and uniquely experienced by individuals (Meleis et al., 2000). Transitioning directly from high school to university involves both a developmental and academic transition that requires young people between the ages of 18-20 to change and adapt within this context. This section on transitions will begin with a review of traditional and contemporary views of development in the physical, cognitive, social, emotional and moral domains, in addition to the influence of personality on development, provide insight into the unique considerations during this dual transition. The discussion will then turn to a relatively new developmental stage - emerging adulthood - still under debate followed by a review

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of the literature on academic transitions specific to making the transition from high school to university. An understanding of the complex, dynamic and multidimensional nature of this dual transitions is foundational for understanding the equally complex, dynamic and multidimensional nature of flourishing explored and analyzed later to conclude this chapter.

*Developmental Transition.* Growth and development no longer follows the linear path once theorized (Hewstone et al, 2005; Kloep et al., 2015) and instead is viewed as, "…lifelong, multidimensional and multidirectional, highly plastic, and affected by multiple interacting forces" (Berk, 2007, p.8) involving both universal and unique features that consider contemporary challenges, as well as contextual and cultural factors (Berk, 2007).  Late adolescence to young adulthood (approximately age 18-20) is a developmental transition whereby physical, cognitive, social, emotional and moral changes are a natural part of life and a time of exploration, risk-taking and experimentation with substances, sexual partners and societal rules and norms (Berk, 2007; Kloep et al., 2015; Lenz, 2001). This transition involves an exploration of one's identity, self-regulation of behavior and emotion, attachment relationships and the separation of the individual from the family (Humphrey, 2009).

Past theorizations of development have emphasized potential risks and problems that adolescents and young adults experience (Kloep et al., 2015) – similar to how mental health was and in some ways still viewed. Contemporary developmental theories have evolved from past humanistic approaches such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, Rodgers's Person-Centered Approach, Allport's Trait Theory and Jung's Theory of Individuation (as cited in Keyes et al., 2002) contributing to a more positive view of

development that is not so problematically informed (Kloep et al., 2015). Successful development and thriving amidst the transition from adolescence to young adulthood can be understood as, "…the active process by which individuals shape and engage with their development contexts in order to build competencies, skills, and behavioral repertoires that are simultaneously beneficial to self and to society" (as cited in Pashak, Handal, & Scales, 2016, p.2). An exploration of both traditional and contemporary approaches to development will provide a basis for understanding the developmental considerations that promote flourishing within this dual transition period within the university context.

*Physical development.* From a psychosocial functioning standpoint, physical development is important. Adolescence is a period of physical changes involving increased muscle mass, redistribution of body fat, hormonal changes and the emergence and maturation of secondary sexual characteristics (Kloep et al., 2015). The pace at which an adolescent develops varies, resulting in long-term psychological and social implications. For instance, in Western cultures, there is an increased risk for drug abuse, unwanted pregnancy, and poor career choices in adulthood associated with the early onset of puberty in females (Mendle, Turkheimer, & Emery, 2007). With the onset of puberty in both males and females, there is an increased likelihood of sexual activity, substance use, and abuse, and the onset of mental health concerns (Kloep et al., 2015). However, promoting positive youth development and understanding the protective and risk factors in adolescents can ease these challenges thus reducing the adverse effects carried into young adulthood (Pashak et al., 2016). For the most part, physical development is not problematic for the majority of young people (Kloep et al., 2015).

***Cognitive development.*** Linear approaches to cognitive development involve

Piaget's Theory of Formal Operations - one's ability to think abstractly - theorized to be

established by the age of 16 enabling the adolescent to analyze hypothetical situations

rather than focus strictly on observable facts (as cited in Fleming, 2006, Piaget, J., &

Inhelder, B., 2013). Piaget proposed that moral reasoning be dependent on the level of

cognitive development of the individual. The main limitation of his theory is its premise

in one longitudinal study, exploring children's conceptions of morality during play, thus

limiting the generalizability of his findings to adolescence (Piaget, 1997; Fleming, 2006;

Kohlberg, 1963). Piaget's findings would suggest that after the age of 16, the potential for

further cognitive development and learning new skills is no longer possible as the brain

ceases to develop in adolescence. His findings are in contrast with what is known today -

that brain development extends well into the late 20's (Label and Beaulieu, 2011).

A significant neurobiological feature of adolescence and young adulthood

involves the pruning away of non-firing neurons and the creation of new neuronal

connections between the prefrontal cortex and the limbic system. This effect is influenced

by environmental factors, resulting in strengthened pathways that are used the most in the

brain, thus speeding up how the brain communicates (Craik & Bialystok, 2006). This

pruning effect demonstrates the potential to promote flourishing during the transition

from adolescence to young adulthood, and beyond, with implications for further

development in the social and emotional domains.

***Social and emotional development.*** Practicing life skills, often referred to as

social and emotional learning or emotional intelligence, prior to entering post-secondary

education strengthens the neuronal pathways that help equip students with the necessary abilities to cope and adapt to changes and challenges such as, moving away from home, financial stress, adjusting to higher academic standards, navigating and establishing new social networks and supports (Johnson et al., 2010) to promote a successful transition to university and positively influencing later career success (Savitz-Romer, Rowan-Kenyon & Fancsali, 2015).

Brain development in adolescence and young adulthood involves the myelination of neuronal pathways between the prefrontal cortex (the decision making and self-regulation center of the brain responsible for executive functioning), and the limbic system (the emotional processing center of the brain). Building self-regulatory skills necessary for reducing the intensity of emotion allows for better decision making and less impulsivity associated with risk taking behaviors exhibited in adolescents and young adulthood (Choudhury, Blakemore & Charman, 2006; Steinberg, 2007; Humphrey, 2009). These findings offer significant support for promoting student mental health during the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. Successful adaptation and positive coping strategies while transitioning from adolescents to young adulthood and directly from high school to university is largely dependent on the development of skills in the areas of responsible decision making, relationship skills, social awareness, self-awareness and self-management (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2017) prior to, and during this dual transition.

A review of 83 controlled studies of mental health interventions involving college, graduate and professional students found that the most effective interventions were those that focused on improving emotional skills and self-perceptions, and reducing

symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress. In order of greatest impact were a)

mindfulness and cognitive behavioral interventions, and b) those with a specific focus on

mental health promotion and prevention (Conley et al., 2013). A weakness of this study

was the lack of identification of the specific CBT interventions/programs/techniques used

in the studies reviewed. Making this specification may have been helpful in informing

mental health professionals of the most effective interventions and best practices within

the post-secondary context (Conley et al., 2013, p.289). This finding is consistent with a

review study conducted by Sancassiani et al. (2015) of randomized controlled studies on

MHP programs focused on building social and emotional skills with children and youth,

and with another review conducted by Weare and Nind (2011) on mental health

interventions in schools to improve social and emotional skills. Theses studies provide

strong support for teaching similar skills to promote student flourishing.

*Moral development.* Kohlberg's traditional theory of moral development

expanded upon Piaget's work on cognitive development. Kohlberg proposed three stages

of moral reasoning: 1) pre-conventional - the individual thinks of morality as a

consequence of disobeying adult rules; leading to 2) conventional – the individual begins

to grasp social rules and develops a more objective perspective of what constitutes right

and wrong; and 3) post-conventional – the individual focuses on personal and idealized

principles rather than conventional and societal standards. Kohlberg theorized that only

enlightened adults could ever reach the post-conventional level (as cited in Fleming,

2006; Kohlberg, 1963) and that the moral development of the individual is highly

dependent on the advancement of cognitive processes (Kohlberg, 1963). A criticism of

Kohlberg's theory was its lack of universality due to cultural differences within

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individualistic and collectivist societies, and differing values within these societies (Fleming, 2006). Furthermore, according to Gillian (1982), Kohlberg's theory was based on male samples representing an all-male definition of morality highlighting the need to account for gender differences - a consideration in this study.

Gilligan (1982) argued that gender plays a role in moral reasoning. She proposed that male moral decisions be rooted in rules and principles of justice, while female moral reasoning is grounded in the principles of care and compassion. Bandura's (1999) theory of moral development differed, whereby, individuals are viewed as active agents capable of self-regulating their behaviors. He argued that mature individuals with strong values act in ways that are true to their beliefs even if the outcome results in punishment. Contemporary views on moral development account for the interrelated nature of moral development in particular in the area of identity and well-being. "Moral self-identity is crucial to living a life of purpose and for setting one's life projects on a pathway that contributes to well-being, generativity, and integrity" (Padilla-Walker et al., 2017, p.16).

*Personality.* Freud, one of the most influential developmental theorists on adult personality, theorized that the structure of one's personality before the age of seven determines one's personality and psychopathology in adulthood (as cited in Shiner, Masten & Tellegen, 2002). His view on development encompassed a pathogenic view of personality centered on psychosexual and psychosocial development and the correlation between psychosexuality, relationships with others, individual strengths and weaknesses, and perceptions of social order (Freud & Gay, 1989). Personality plays a significant role in mental well-being in young people and contributes to the development of self-awareness, strength of character, maturity, positive emotional balance, social and

emotional intelligence, life satisfaction and resiliency (Moreira, Cloninger, Dinis, Sa, Oliveira, Dias, & Oliveira, 2015).

Shiner and colleagues (2002) explored childhood antecedents of personality in young adulthood through a 10-year longitudinal study that followed a sample (n=205) of children (ages 8-12) into young adulthood (ages 17-23). The authors examined the relationship between personality and adaptive functioning in three domains: academic achievement, rule-abiding conduct, and social competence with peers during childhood. To capture domains specific to transitioning to adulthood these three domains, in addition to the domains of paid work and romantic relationships, were examined with the same sample later in young adulthood (Shiner et al., 2002). The authors found that childhood personality significantly predicted personality in young adulthood. Personality traits associated with negative emotionality related to poorer adaptive functioning in all domains in both life stages. Those personality traits involving positive emotionality and constraint (cautious, planful and harm avoidant) were exclusively linked to the domains of adaptation. For example, positive emotionality in adulthood could not be predicted from childhood success or failures at mastering developmental tasks and was unrelated to academic achievement, job competence, or rule-abiding conduct. While low constraint in young adulthood was related to antisocial behavior in childhood, it was not surprising that positive emotionality was related to positive peer relationships in both life stages and additionally to adaptation in romantic relationships in young adulthood (Shiner et al., 2002). Findings from this study highlight the social and emotional aspects influencing adaptive functioning in both childhood and young adulthood, thus the importance of promoting these skills early in life. Additionally, the results support Schlossberg's

theory, in which characteristics of the individual (such as personality traits in this study) influence whether one adapts while in transition (Schlossberg, 1981; Shiner et al., 2002).

The relationships between flourishing and the big five personality traits (neuroticism, conscientiousness, openness, extroversion, and agreeableness) were explored in a sample (n=403) of French sophomore students. Findings showed the highest positive correlation with conscientiousness and flourishing using Diener et al.'s flourishing scale (Diener et al., 2010) followed by extroversion and agreeableness. Openness showed a slight positive correlation with flourishing, while neuroticism was associated negatively with flourishing. Based on these findings personality traits show promise in predicting flourishing and identifying correlates of flourishing within this population (Villieux, Sovet, Jung, & Guilbert, 2016).

*Emerging adulthood.* The end of adolescence, around age 18, marks the beginning of a relatively newly identified and well debated developmental stage referred to as emerging adulthood - a period characterized as the age of identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities (Arnett, 2000; 2004). Arnett proposes that identity continues to develop until the emerging adult can make a full transition to young adulthood beginning around the age of 18 and ending for some in the early 30's (1998; 2000; 2007). In contrast, Erikson's traditional view theorized that identity versus role confusion as the central crisis to overcome during adolescence for a successful transition to adulthood to occur.  How this crisis is resolved can have a positive, or negative, effect on an individual (as cited in Stevens, 2008). To the emerging adult, instability is not a problem to overcome but rather viewed as a change of plans contributing to developing a sense of self and self-focus. The emerging adult - in contrast

with young adults of the past - is no longer confined to the social roles or norms that fall under the parental umbrella (Arnett, 2004). For young adults transitioning directly from high school, the university context provides a pathway influencing identity formation.

The trends and changes in societal values and cultural norms, economics and the socio-political climate between the 1950's and 60's along with the dawn of the self-esteem, feminist and civil rights movements and advancements in technology gave rise to the concept of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Clarke, 2007). The self-esteem movement in the 1970's brought about a wave of young people invested in improving themselves and the lives of their children, while feminism brought forth an increase in women graduating from college and university and delaying marriage and children in this pursuit (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Clarke, 2007).

An increase in the self-focus of young adults has contributed to an increase in the age of marriage over time (Arnett, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2011). The rate of common law partnerships between the ages of 20-29 has steadily increased (Statistics Canada, 2011), along with young adults returning to their family of origin following university, or remaining at home for extended periods of time, to pursue employment and educational opportunities (Arnett, 1998, 2004, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2011). Between 2001 and 2016, the percentage of young adults in Canada (ages 20-34) living in their parental homes increased from 30.6% to 34.7% (Statistics Canada, 2016). Additionally, the shift from gaining full-time, lifelong employment 30 years ago to young adults being offered more part-time employment with fewer benefits has contributed to a level of insecurity and delays starting a family (Clarke, 2007; Galarneau, Morissette & Usalcas, 2013). In contrast, although the deterioration in employment conditions have been less prevalent in

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oil-producing provinces like Alberta (Galarneau et al., 2013) the recent downturn in the oil industry (Alberta Government, 2017) has had a tremendous impact on the economy and unemployment rates, thus affecting job opportunities for young adults entering the workforce. Within the post-secondary context, students need to be adaptable, creative and open to opportunities as they arise and possess the ability to re-adjust and manage expectations amidst this economic crisis (Donaldson, 2016).

Arnett's theory is not universally accepted, and it is not clear that these elements are experienced by young people internationally or strictly in Western cultures. Much of the research to date exploring Arnett's theory has engaged only affluent populations (post-secondary students) (Swanson, 2016). Many critics challenge whether Arnett's theory applies to other young adult populations with differing characteristics (Côté & Bynner, 2008; Côté, 2014; Heinz, 2009; Hendry & Kloep, 2007; Hendry & Kloep, 2010; Reitzle, 2006; Silva, 2013). Findings from a qualitative study of Welsh young people between the ages of 17-20 in the category of working or unemployed highlighted this lack of universality (Hendry & Kloep, 2010). The study concluded that only some participants in this sample expressed narratives of identity exploration and feelings of instability during this period of life raising questions about the universality of emerging adulthood as a developmental stage (Hendry & Kloep, 2010). Many of the participants had established stable identities in their teens and identified with being more focused on others rather than self, attributing this to family care-taking responsibilities in their teens. A notable finding was that the majority of participants (25 of the 38) self-identified as adults, not feeling in-between adolescence and young adulthood or on the verge of adulthood, and nearly half of the participants were not optimistic about the future in terms

of possibilities - instead feeling trapped by a lack of opportunity (Hendry & Kloep, 2010).

A 2016 review of empirical studies on emerging adulthood from 2000-2015 examined the main topics, methods and current research trends concluding that there was sufficient support for emerging adulthood to be a global, cross-cultural developmental theory and field of study (Swanson, 2016). However, Côté argues that problems exist with the methodological basis and quality of these studies, and also challenges Arnett's interpretation of his own research to be of widespread misinformation, threatening to make the lives of some young people more problematic (2014).

From a Canadian context, and based on the trends previously discussed, many young people do experience the delay in reaching adulthood posed by Arnett (Clarke, 2007). While further research is needed - involving underrepresented groups, minorities, and cross-cultural populations - the current body of literature has laid the framework in support of emerging adulthood as a developmental theory (Swanson, 2016). Within the university context, I argue that Arnett's theory lacks representation of the experiences of all students in this development stage, particularly in light of the recent increase in student diversity and internationalization on Canadian campuses (Michalski, Cunningham, and Henry, 2017). At the same time, unlike traditional theorists, I recognize that Arnett has taken into account how Western society has evolved raising some valuable points about young people in today's Western context. This, however, does not account for our knowledge that more international and Indigenous students are making the transition from high school to Canadian universities than ever before (Michalski et al., 2017). In light of these findings, one particular developmental theory/theorist will not

adequately frame this study or account for the individual nuances and differences that students bring to the experience of flourishing while transitioning from adolescence to young adulthood. Additionally, while all young people experience a developmental transition, an academic transition, explored next, is one of choice influencing whether individuals flourish within this context.

    *__Academic Transition.__* The transition directly from high school to university is a highly anticipated life phase. Not only is it considered to be one of the most stressful periods of a person's life, it has the ability to affect adjustment later on in life (Bland, Melton, Welle, & Bigham, 2012; Pratt, Bowers, Terzian, & Hunsberger, 2000; Reason, Terenzi, & Domingo, 2007). Yet, young people are expected to become independent learners, manage time more effectively, and make decisions more responsibly than they were in high school. Unlike developmental transitions, the academic transition to university is an individual choice requiring students to adapt and cope with a new environment. This academic transition may involve leaving the parental home, experiencing financial strain, fitting into a new social environment, establishing new social networks and supports, navigating the post-secondary environment and adjusting to higher academic expectations and commitments (Clarke, 2007; Johnson et al., 2010).

    The inability to cope with stress during this transition can result in adverse health behaviors, affecting the mental health status of young people (Bland et al., 2012) at a time when students are at risk for leaving university (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013). While individual differences account for handling stress in different ways, many students are able to adapt and flourish during the transition from high school to university when faced with similar challenges. Some predictors of student success include practicing good

health habits and risk management skills, as well as positive, psychological, emotional, intellectual and social development – tying in the previously discussed developmental considerations - all of which promote healthy adult functioning in the areas of economic self-sufficiency, healthy habits, healthy relationships and civic engagement (Park, Adams, & Irwin, 2011).

Richardson, King, Garrett, and Wrench (2012) were interested in exploring the health and well-being of first-year students in Australia, comparing the experiences and coping strategies of "thriving" students with those of students who described themselves as "just surviving." The study surveyed 139 students (75 of the 139 students under age 21) concluding that those students who were socially, emotionally and intellectually engaged were thriving while those who perceived themselves as just surviving tended to be isolated, disillusioned and overwhelmed. A more successful transition to university encompassed the ability to form social relationships with peers, excellent time management skills and organizational skills and effective coping strategies characterized by taking action, as opposed to, avoiding or using passive strategies to handle stress (Richardson et al., 2012). Another finding in Richardson et al.'s study revealed that thriving students reported either no change or a change for the better, in their mental health in the areas of stress, anxiety, and feeling overwhelmed during their first year of university. Alternatively, students who were just surviving rated their mental health as changing for the worse during this transition (2012).

As mentioned earlier, factors influencing whether one adapts includes a balance of resources, deficits, and differences in pre- and post-transition environments, and involve characteristics of the pre- and post-transition environment and of the individual

(Schlossberg, 1981). Previous studies exploring the young people's pathways to post-secondary education include a Youth in Transition Survey–involving a cohort of Canadian students between the ages of 18-20 - compared students who participated in post-secondary education with those who withdrew from their studies (Lambert, Zeman & Allen, 2004). Participating students were more likely to be single women, living with parents before entering university, and students of parents with a higher level of education and positive values towards post-secondary education. Positive social and academic interactions in high school, hours spent on homework, school work performance, and impressions concerning the value of education accounted for academic success. A sense of belonging, the ability to count on the support of friends and ease of making friends accounted for social aspects of success (Lambert et al., 2004). Students withdrawing from their studies were more likely to be male, married, from families with lower levels of education, less engaged in high school, and had lower high school grades. Withdrawing from studies was more frequent among students with parents who did not value the importance of post-secondary education (Lambert et al., 2004). Academic and social engagement while in high school resulted in reduced chances of leaving university and an increased likelihood of being prepared for post-secondary studies. In contrast, students reporting barriers to furthering their schooling were more likely to drop out. Those who left, believed that they did not have the necessary skills to do well, had a hard time keeping up with the workload, had fewer friendships and fewer people to talk to about their personal matters, and were less likely to have higher grades in the first year of university (Lambert et al., 2004).

Lambert et al.'s (2004) survey holds similarities with the current context and characteristics of young people who participate in university. Women have surpassed men regarding completing bachelor degrees in Canada (56.3 percent of women of the over 2 million post-secondary enrollments in 2014/15) (Statistics Canada, 2015), and students of high-income families are more likely to attend university (Davies, Maldonado, & Zarifa, 2014). Parental education, a significant indicator of post-secondary participation, coincides with children of more highly educated parents are more likely to follow their parents' lead and complete post-secondary education. The youth of parents who have a university degree versus students whose parents have only a high school diploma, or less, have double the post-secondary participation rate (Lennon, Zhao, Wang & Gluszynski, 2011).

Positive social interactions and positive peer relationships are not only factors characteristic of whether one participates in university but are also critical components in how students adjust to challenges and flourish in their first year of university (Knoesen & Naudé, 2017). Academic performance in high school is an indicator of post-secondary participation. According to Lennon and colleagues (2011), students with high school averages between 90-100% go on to post-secondary education at a rate ten times higher than youth with an average between 70-79% (Lennon et al., 2011). Other studies have reported similar findings correlating academic achievement with flourishing in the postsecondary context (Antaramian, 2015; Howell, 2009). Socially supportive environments, ease with transitioning, sense of belonging, civic engagement (Fink, 2014; Nicotera et al., 2015) and study engagement and involvement (Bowman et al., 2010;

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Low, 2011) were also found to be predictors of flourishing within the post-secondary context.

Another study involving marginalized college freshman (age 18-19), examined changes in friendship quality and school belonging between 1st and 2nd semester during the transition to college to determine whether positive changes in these constructs linked positive outcomes in the second semester. A sense of belonging to the university environment was strongly correlated with the quality of friendships at both time points and linked to other measures such as positive feelings of social acceptance and academic competence. Furthermore, these students had lower levels of internalizing behavior problems over time (Pittman & Richmond, 2008).

The cohort of students (age 18-20) experiencing this academic transition in Canada is not homogeneous. With an increase in student diversity on Canadian campuses, factors such as ethnicity, gender identity, socio-economic status, disability status, cultural, and international status, may significantly heighten one's level of stress and psychological difficulties during this dual transition in contrast to the non-minority student population (Michalski et al., 2017). Therefore, campuses across Canada must find creative ways of promoting academic success and flourishing among diverse populations while ensuring inclusivity in this pursuit. It was therefore critical for the sample of students recruited in this study to account for this diversity factor.

Transitioning directly from high school to university involves both a developmental and academic transition. Thus far, chapter 2 has highlighted several considerations pertinent to developmental and academic transition that occurs while making the transition directly from high school to university. The final section of this

chapter will explore the concept of mental health and progress towards understanding how the relatively new concept of flourishing is defined to date, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

## Conceptualizations of Mental Health

Traditional approaches to mental health have largely been shaped by a medical model that focuses on problem-solving and the alleviation of negative symptoms associated with mental illness (Xie, 2013). Mental illness is seen as a biologically driven process, composed of a set of negative symptoms, detached from overall health, void of environmental influences, that is incurable (WHO, 2005). Within this model, mental health and mental illness are viewed as either/or phenomena. People are either mentally healthy and functioning well, or mentally ill and lack the ability to function well in society.

In the early half of the 20th Century, insane asylums were situated in isolated locations away from the public domain. Decades of mental health practice, policy and research were devoted to downstream approaches in health care delivery with the development of diagnostic criteria and medications aimed at curing and alleviating negative symptoms associated with mental illness (Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), 2006). While the concept of mental health began to take a positive turn in the years following the Second World War, by the end of the 1970's advances in psychiatric medications and changes in psychiatric treatment modalities resulted in the movement towards deinstitutionalization of psychiatric patients and the introduction of community based care (Anthony, 1993; Romanow & Marchildon, 2003). This resulted in inadequate and fragmented efforts to address the rehabilitation needs of patients – both within the

community and in psychiatric units in general hospitals (PHAC, 2006). However, mental health gained significant momentum in the l980's when the concept of recovery was introduced (Anthony, 1993; Jahoda, 1958; Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Magyary, 2002).

In response to these inadequate and fragmented efforts, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) introduced the concept of a community support system which was defined as, "a network of caring and responsible people committed to assisting a vulnerable population meet their needs and develop their potentials without being unnecessarily isolated and excluded from the community" (Anthony, 1993, p. 523). Arising concurrently was the field of psychiatric rehabilitation and its emphasis on symptoms of mental illness and impairment in functioning. While recovery from physical illness was considered well in advance of mental illness recovery, the possibility of recovery for people with a mental illness was not realized until the 1980's (Anthony, 1993). Measures of mental illness recovery included the dimensions of, "…self-esteem, adjustment to disability, empowerment, and self-determination" (Anthony, 1993, p. 528). Under the umbrella of recovery, a person with a severe mental illness was viewed as having the capability to "… grow beyond the limits imposed by his or her illness" (Anthony, 1993, p. 536), and develop new meaning and purpose in life beyond the historical confines imposed on those experiencing a mental illness (Anthony, 1993). In the late 1980's and early 1990's, advocacy for a more balanced approach, whereby, equal attention be given to mental health, as was given to mental illness, at the individual, community and societal levels was realized (Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Keyes, 2007b; Ng & Fisher, 2013; Seligman, 2012).

The continued focus on mental illness has done little to promote mental health or

help one achieve an optimal level of mental health. In a recent report published by the WHO, depression was cited as the single largest contributor to global disability with anxiety disorders ranking 6th (WHO, 2017). While it is important for timely and effective treatment for those experiencing mental illness (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2016), it is equally important to focus on promoting and sustaining mental health to achieve positive affective states and optimal functioning in the social and psychological domains.

Diverse approaches and conceptual models have evolved that have contributed to the growing understanding and articulation of mental health as a concept. The three main theoretical perspectives reflecting the evolution of mental health have arisen from a pathogenic approach, a salutogenic approach, and the complete state approach (Keyes, 2007a). The *pathogenic* approach views mental health as merely the absence of disease, while the *salutogenic* approach views mental health in a positive manner, whereby health is defined in terms of human capacities, and positive functioning in terms of thinking, feeling, and behavior (Keyes, 2007a). The *complete state* approach involves both the presence of a positive state of human capacities and functioning as well as the absence of disease (Keyes, 2007a). These approaches have contributed to our past and present understanding of mental health.

The Mental Health Continuum Model (Figure 2.1) (Government of Canada, 2016) represents a traditional, pathogenic approach to mental health - operationalizing mental health on a single continuum with mental health and mental illness at opposing ends of the continuum (Keyes 2007b). This conceptualization of mental health implies that people diagnosed with a mental illness lack the capacity to experience normal functioning or a level of good mental health (Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI), 2009).

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Within this model, "…the absence of mental illness implies the presence of mental health" and normal functioning in psychosocial domains (Keyes, 2007a, p.99).

Figure 2.1. *The Mental Health Continuum Model*
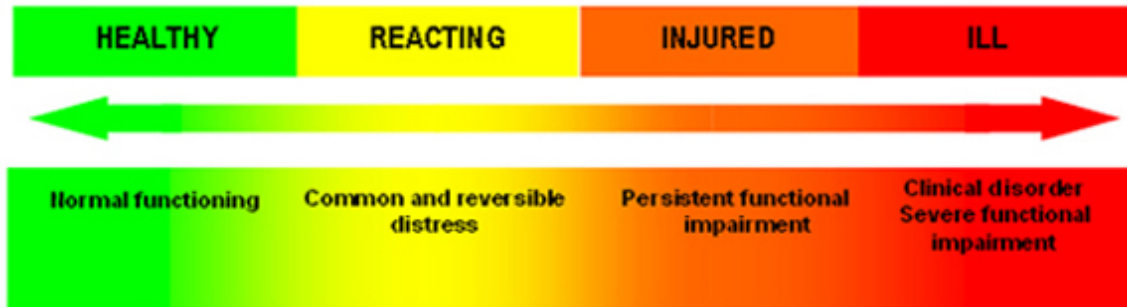


*Note.* Reprinted from *Road to mental readiness: Family members* by Government of Canada, 2016. Retrieved http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/caf-community-health-services-r2mr-family/index.page

Today, mental health is no longer viewed at either end of a continuum. The **Dual Continuum Model** – a complete salutogenic model - has challenged the traditional view of mental health and argues for a new and more balanced conceptualization, whereby "…the absence of mental illness does not mean the presence of good mental health…and the presence of mental illness does not imply the absence of some level of good mental health" (Keyes, 2010, p.21). Within this model (Figure 2.2), two intersecting continua are highlighted: (a) serious mental illness *versus* no mental illness on one continuum, and (b) optimal mental health *versus* poor mental health (Keyes, 2007a). In the upper left hand quadrant, an individual can be diagnosed with a serious mental illness and experience optimal mental health. Alternatively, in the lower right hand quadrant, an individual without a diagnosis can be in a state of poor mental health (Keyes, 2007a; 2010). The bigger idea communicated by Keyes is that high levels of mental health are accessible to all regardless of where one falls on the continuum of mental illness. Those with high

mental illness can flourish as well as those with low mental illness.

Figure 2.2. *The Dual Continuum Model of Mental Health*
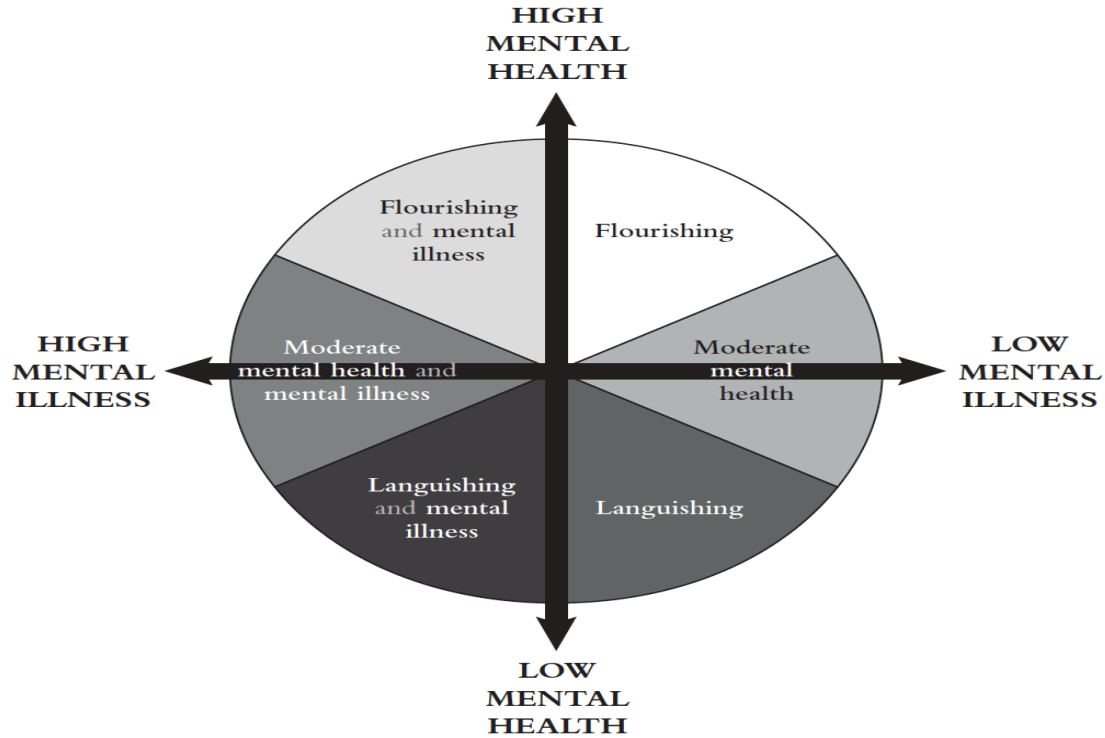
A high level of mental health (flourishing) depicted in the Keyes Model of Mental Health (figure 2.2; Keyes, 2010) can be achieved in such ways as: working to enhance or change social, environmental and biological conditions affecting young people and influencing the factors to promote a successful transition from high school to post-secondary settings (Fisher & Baum, 2010). This focus on well-being, rather than illness, aims to address student populations using strategies to enhance protective factors, reduce risk factors and inequities, and the effects that these inequities have on health (Barry, 2009; CAMH, 2014). The determinants of mental health consider the social determinants

of health along with social connectedness, social capital, civic engagement, freedom from discrimination and violence, and access to economic resources (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH, 2014). These determinants correlate with a student's ability to flourish within the post-secondary context and linked to improved productivity at work, contribute to developing positive personal relationships, reduces crime rates and substance use, contributes to human, social and economic development and improves educational achievement (Herrman & Jané-Llopis, 2012; WHO, 2005).

Our understanding of mental health has come a long way. Approaches that focus on the capabilities (Davidson, Ridgway, Wieland & O'Connell, 2009) and strengths of individuals (Galassi, 2017; Xie, 2013) support the argument that recovery is possible for those with a mental illness, marking significant turning points in the field of mental health. These approaches focus on promoting mental health and are recognized as important strategies alongside of treatment and prevention initiatives. Specific aspects of good mental health - such as positive affect, personality traits, resilience, and quality of life - have made further contributions to today's understanding of mental health (WHO, 2005). There is general agreement that mental health is an essential and integral component of overall health and well-being. Mental health contributes to one's ability to function well psychologically and socially, and allows one to experience positive emotions (WHO, 2001, 2005). These elements of mental health are also the components of individuals who are flourishing - experiencing a high level of mental health. An overview of the quantitative and qualitative literature on flourishing will follow.

**Flourishing**

The concept of flourishing dates back to ancient philosophical times involving two distinct philosophical teachings: hedonic and eudaimonic (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Keyes et al., 2002). The hedonic tradition conceived by the Greek philosopher Epicurus, is associated with subjective experiences related solely to happiness, pleasure, positive feelings and emotional well-being, with a focus on the simple pleasures in life. The concept of eudaimonia dates back to Aristotle who argued that the the hedonic tradition inadequately reflected well-being in its true sense, expanding the concept to include optimal functioning in accordance with one's own capabilities (Keyes et al., 2002; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Henderson & Knight, 2012). Flourishing is often used interchangeably in the literature, with a high level of subjective well-being, optimal mental health and high levels of mental health. For the purposes of this study the term flourishing will be employed.

Although consensus has not been reached on a single best model to examine and define flourishing, there is agreement that flourishing embraces both hedonic and eudaimonic traditions and characterized as multidimensional and dynamic in nature (Dodge, Daly, Huyton & Sanders, 2012; Henderson, Knight & Richardson, 2013). Differences and variations in frameworks, operational definitions and dimensions, study populations, and study contexts lead to inconsistencies in how flourishing has been defined to date (Butler & Kern, 2016; Diener, Diener & Diener, 1995; Diener, 2013; Diener & Scollon, 2014; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Dodge et al., 2012; Huppert & So, 2013; Keyes, 2007a; Seligman, 2012). Four main conceptual frameworks with assessment scales have been developed to measure flourishing across populations and cultures: 1)

Keyes' dimensions of flourishing (Keyes, 2007a); 2) Huppert and So's Flourishing Scale (Huppert & So, 2013); 3) Diener et al.'s Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010); and 4) Seligman's PERMA-Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016). *Table 2.1* compares the indicators of flourishing found within the four conceptualizations of flourishing (Hone et al., 2014).

*Table 2.1 Four Operational Definitions of Flourishing*

| KEYES | HUPPERT & SO | DIENER et al. | SELIGMAN et al. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Positive relationships | Positive relationships | Positive relationships | Positive relationships |
| Positive affect (interested) | Engagement | Engagement | Engagement |
| Purpose in life | Meaning | Purpose and meaning | Meaning and purpose |
| Self-acceptance | Self-esteem | Self-acceptance and Self-esteem | – |
| Positive affect (happy) | Positive emotion | – | Positive emotion |
| – | Competence | Competence | Accomplishment/ Competence |
| – | Optimism | Optimism | – |
| Social contribution | – | Social contribution | – |
| Social integration | – | – | – |
| Social growth | – | – | – |
| Social acceptance | – | – | – |
| Social coherence | – | – | – |
| Environmental mastery | – | – | – |
| Personal growth | – | – | – |
| Autonomy | – | – | – |
| Life satisfaction | – | – | – |
| – | Emotional stability | – | – |
| – | Vitality | – | – |
| – | Resilience | – | – |

*Note.* Reprinted from *Measuring flourishing: The impact of operational definitions on the prevalence of high levels of wellbeing* by Hone, Jarden, Schofield & Duncan, 2014. Retrieved from http://aut.researchgateway.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10292/9331/Lucy.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

These operational definitions and dimensions will now be explored further by defining the indicators within each of the four conceptualizations, followed by an analysis

of the similarities and differences that exist among the four models. I will begin with Keyes' conceptualization of flourishing - the most widely tested operational definition of flourishing among populations and cultures around the world and the most comprehensive in the area of social well-being. Therefore, the upcoming section that focuses on Keyes will involve the most extensive discussion of the four definitions. Following Keyes' I will define the indicators within the remaining three operational definitions of flourishing: Huppert and So's Flourishing Scale (Huppert & So, 2013), Diener et al.'s Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010) and The PERMA-Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016) respectively. Across the four operational definitions, where overlap exists (shown in table 2.1), I will refrain from redefining the indicators as they largely draw from the same body of research. For instance, the literature involving the hedonic indicators of flourishing are rooted in, but not limited to, the works of Diener and colleagues (Diener et al, 1995; Diener, Suh, & Oishi, 1997) while literature involving the eudaimonic indicators of flourishing are rooted in the scholarly work of Jahoda, Keyes, Ryff and Singer (Jahoda, 1958; Keyes, 1998; Ryff, 1989; Ryff and Singer, 1998). Indicators unique to each operational definition will be defined accordingly.

**Flourishing: Quantitative Research**

   *Keyes definition.* The most highly studied conceptualization of flourishing draws from previous studies on the emotional and psychological aspects of well-being emphasizing personal functioning and the intrinsic features of well-being (Jahoda, 1958; Ryff, 1989). Sociologist, Corey Keyes' expanded on these emotional and psychological components recognizing that individuals do not flourish solely in this way and are, "…embedded in social structures and communities, and face countless social tasks and

challenges" (Keyes, 1998, p.122). The inclusion of social well-being as an important

component of flourishing involves 5 key indicators: 1) social acceptance, 2) social

actualization, 3) social contribution, 4) social coherence and 5) social integration (Keyes,

1998). This gave rise to Keyes Components of Flourishing composed of 13 dimensions

within the emotional, psychological, and social domains of well-being (appendix, A;

Keyes, 2007a).

Similar to symptoms of mental illness, according to Keyes, mental health is

characterized by a set of indicators (appendix A) from both the hedonic and eudaimonic

traditions: a) hedonic tradition (*emotional well-being); b)* eudaimonic tradition *(positive*

*psychological functioning,* and *positive social functioning).* To be diagnosed as

flourishing one must experience high levels on at least one of the indicators under

*emotional well-being* and high levels on a minimum of six of the 11 indicators

corresponding to *psychological* and *social well-being*. The opposite of flourishing is

languishing -  situated within Keyes Dual Continuum Model of Mental Health (figure

2.2; Keyes, 2010).  Languishing individuals exhibit low levels on at least one measure of

emotional well-being and low levels on at least 6 of the psychological and social

functioning indicators. Those fitting within the moderately mentally healthy range are

neither flourishing or languishing (Keyes, 2007a). The indicators within Keyes definition

of flourishing that fall within the hedonic and eudaimonic traditions will be further

defined.

*Emotional well-being.* Individuals who experience an *avowed quality of life* and

*positive affect* are highly satisfied most of the time with life domains, are regularly

cheerful, interested in life and are in good spirits. Early well-being studies focused on

measuring the positive and negative affective states and life satisfaction (Diener, Suh, &

Oishi, 1997; Dodge et al., 2012). Defining well-being in this way resulted in a narrow and

largely superficial operational definition of the concept - equating well-being with

happiness with an assumption that happiness resulted in the maximization of well-being

and vice versa (Deci & Ryan., 2008). The expansion of the hedonic tradition aimed to

include the eudaimonic tradition that encompassed a high level of functioning within the

psychological and social domains (Keyes, 1998, Ryff, 1989).

*Psychological well-being.* In the late 1980's Ryff's work operationalized the

psychological components of wellbeing based on humanistic, existential and

philosophical sources (Ryff, 1989; Keyes & Martin, 2017) leading to the development of

a rating scale assessing the following six indicators of psychological well-being: self

acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in

life, and personal growth (Ryff, 1989).

A high score on *self-acceptance* requires that individuals hold a positive attitude

and acceptance of oneself and past life. This dimension is a central component of optimal

mental health, a characteristic of self-actualization and an indicator of maturity (Ryff,

1989). *Personal grow*th refers to the ability of one to seek out challenges, having insight

into one's own potential and the drive to continuously develop and grow as a person. The

opposite of personal growth would involve having a fixed mindset whereby one would

perceive that all problems would be solved (Ryff, 1989), with growth and development

viewed by the individual as a static process (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) – similar to how

development was traditionally viewed earlier in chapter 2. Ryff describes personal

growth as a key characteristic of a fully functioning person (Ryff, 1989).

"Mental health is defined to include beliefs that give one the feeling there is purpose and meaning in life" (Ryff, 1989, p. 1071). Having a *purpose in life* requires having a sense of direction, intentionality and purpose. Throughout the lifespan individuals experience a variety of changing goals; therefore, individuals who function well have intentions and direction to achieve these goals which contribute to a sense of meaning in life (Ryff, 1989). *Environmental mastery* is an individuals' ability to exercise, select, manage and mold personal environments to suit needs through both physical and mental activities to advance in the world where one must take advantage of opportunities in their environment to achieve this (Ryff, 1989). *Autonomy* involves having qualities of self-determination, independence, and self-regulation. Self-actualization is closely related to autonomy as individuals who are flourishing are those who have, "an internal locus of control of evaluation, whereby one does not look to others for approval, but evaluates oneself by personal standards" (Ryff, 1989, p.1071). An autonomous person doesn't subscribe to the beliefs, fears and laws of the majority and experiences a sense of freedom from social norms (Ryff, 1989).

Diener et al. (1995) propose, "…in individualistic societies, people are oriented toward their personal goals and desires, and they perceive the individual as the basic unit. In contrast, collectivists view the group as of primary importance and focus their attention on achieving group goals" (p.853). Autonomy may appear differently in cultures that uphold collectivist values; whereby, a high level of autonomy may not be indicative of individual flourishing (Huppert & So, 2013). While Deci & Ryan offer another perspective in their review of several studies supporting autonomy as a universal component of psychological well-being experienced in both Western and Eastern cultures

(2008). They propose in discussing their findings "…that having one's values for collectivism or individualism match the predominant values in one's culture was not as important for psychological health as was enacting the values autonomously. Satisfaction of the autonomy need was indeed important in each culture…consistent with the universality of that need" (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p.18).  Lastly, the ability to experience *positive relations* with others and love for others is indicative of optimal mental health. Self-actualized individuals experience strong feelings of empathy and affection for all human beings and experience a greater capacity for love, hold deeper friendships and identification with others - sharing a relationship with the next component of flourishing - social well-being (Keyes, 1998; Ryff, 1989).

      ***Social well-being.*** The emotional and psychological components of flourishing, according to Keyes, portray flourishing as a, "primarily private phenomenon" (Keyes, 1998, p.121) through the subjective evaluation of one's emotions (Diener et al., 1997) and one's level of subjective personal functioning (Ryff, 1989). Individuals, however, do not function in isolation of the social contexts in which they are embedded; therefore, social functioning is considered a component indicative of one's mental health (Keyes, 1998). Putnam (1995) argued the need for and the positive influence of civic engagement, social capital and social connectedness in society in the context of the socio-political influences in America in the 1990's which continues to hold true into the 21st Century (Keyes, 1998).

      According to Keyes, individuals with a high level of *social acceptance* trust and believe that others are capable of kindness. Furthermore, those who accept the good and bad aspects of their personality are likely to be more socially accepting of others and their

differences (Keyes, 1998). *Social actualization* refers to the belief that people, groups and society have potential and can evolve or grow in a positive way (Keyes, 1998). Mentally healthy people are more hopeful about the future direction of society, can benefit from social growth and has the belief that society has the ability to control its own destiny (Keyes, 1998). *Social contribution* refers to individuals seeing themselves as contributing members of society, believing that daily activities are useful to, and valued by, society and others (Keyes, 1998). In older adults providing social support to others (friends, relatives, neighbors and spouses) was found to be more important than receiving support from others in promoting longevity (Brown, Nesse, Vinokur & Smith, 2003). Those who are interested in society care about the kind of world they live in and feel they can understand what is happening around them. When faced with adversity individuals who have *social coherence* seek to maintain it when faced with life challenges (Keyes, 1998). Lastly, flourishing individuals feel they are *socially integrated* and experience a sense of belonging, comfort and support from a community (Keyes, 1998). The social aspects of well-being as previously mentioned are significant predictors of flourishing for students making the transition directly from high school to university. Studies utilizing Keyes' operational definition of flourishing situate flourishing within the Keyes' Dual Continuum Model of Mental Health.

Keyes (2006) drew from data obtained in a United States (US) national survey involving n=1,234 youth (12 to 18 years) and concluded that fewer than forty percent of youth in his study could be considered flourishing, while fifty-five percent fit the criteria of moderate mental health, and six percent were deemed languishing. Middle school students were flourishing more than high school students and among the youth surveyed,

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those who were flourishing had fewer conduct problems and symptoms of depression while languishing youth had the reverse (Keyes, 2006). From these findings it can be concluded that there are more students entering post-secondary settings who fall within the moderately mentally health or languishing rather than flourishing. The added challenges and pressures of entering an *academic* transition while immersed in a *developmental* transition has the potential to further compromise young peoples' ability to cope and adapt.

Interestingly, in a sample of Canadian first year university students (n=1200), Peter et al. (2011) tested dimensions of well-being using Keyes model to determine the percentage of flourishing, moderately mentally healthy and languishing students and identify significant predictors of mental health and well-being. Flourishing students represented 23.8% of the sample, while 55.2% of the students were moderately mentally healthy, and 4.2% of the students were languishing. Females had higher mental health scores despite having more depressive symptoms and anxiety, accounting for gender differences and supporting the Keyes' dual continuum model of mental health. The results further suggested that flourishing students function better and are more likely to have better physical health and a higher level of exercise and nutrition than moderately mentally healthy and languishing students (Peter et al, 2011), corroborating the positive relationship between mental and physical health found in other studies (Bray & Born, 2004; Bray & Kwan, 2006; Keyes, 2005a).

In another Canadian College sample, Howell (2009) examined achievement related correlates of well-being among a Canadian college sample of 397 introductory psychology students between the ages of 18-30 (mean age of 20.6 years). The Keyes'

model was used to examine whether well-being predicted a pattern of cognitive and behavioral processes reflective of self-regulated learning. Findings indicated that students who were flourishing (21.4%), in comparison to those who were moderately mentally healthy (59.4%) or languishing (19.1%), were less likely to adopt an entity view (perceive attributes as stable vs malleable to learning, growth and development). Furthermore, flourishers in this study were less likely to procrastinate and more likely to adopt a mastery-approach (have goals that are associated with intrinsic motivation and use elaborate cognitive strategies) and also scored higher on self-control and self-reported grades (Howell, 2009). In both Canadian samples, the percentage of flourishing students was relatively low - approximately 20% of the samples (Howell, 2009; Peter et al., 2011).

  **_Huppert and So's definition._** Huppert & So (2013) defined components of flourishing using similar conceptual means as Keyes in which the authors interpreted reciprocal symptoms of anxiety and depression, defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013 and the International Classification of Diseases (World Health Organization, 1993). As a result, like Keyes (Keyes, 2007a), developed a multidimensional construct of flourishing encompassing both the hedonic (feeling) and eudaimonic traditions (functioning) (Hone et al, 2014; Huppert & So, 2013) to include the following indicators: *competence, emotional stability, engagement, meaning, optimism, positive emotion, positive relationships, resilience, self-esteem, and vitality* (appendix B, Hone et al, 2014; Huppert & So, 2013).

  Within this operational definition *competence* is defined as being capable of thinking clearly, concentrating and making decisions.  Of the 4 operational definitions

Huppert & So' is the only definition that includes *emotional stability* as an indicator, referred to as having a balanced emotional response and feeling calm and relaxed and emotionally stable or even tempered. This is an important indicator as it relates to social and emotional developmental – the life skills important for flourishing amidst an academic transition. *Engagement* requires that one has an interest and enjoyment in most activities -an indicator appearing across all operational definitions (table 2.1, Hone et al., 2013) paralleling Keyes positive affect (interested) indicator (Hone et al., 2013; Keyes, 2007a) *Meaning* is defined by having a sense of purpose in life, feelings of worth and worthwhileness common to all definitions (table 2.1; Hone et al., 2013). *Optimism* unique only to Huppert and So (2013) and Diener et al. (2010) is defined by feeling hopeful about the future while *positive emotion* is feeling cheerful, contented and happy most of the time. *Positive relationships*, common to all definitions - requires that relationships with others hold meaning. Uniquely related to Huppert and So's (2013) definition is the *resilience* indicator and refers to emotional resilience – the ability to manage anxiety and worry and is linked to the emotional stability indicator. *Self-esteem* represents feelings of worth and self confidence and lastly *vitality* is when one feels energetic in life -  another stand alone indicator among the 4 definitions (Huppert & So, 2013).

These indicators were used to test their proposed operational definition of flourishing among a sample of 43,000 Europeans across 23 countries using data from a European Social Survey to test the 10 positive features that were closely related to the survey responses and adding in one more feature related to life satisfaction (Hone et al., 2013; Huppert & So, 2013). Factor analysis allowed for 3 categories of indicators to emerge: 1) *positive characteristics* (emotional stability, vitality, optimism, resilience, and

self- esteem) 2) *positive functioning* (engagement, competence, meaning and positive relationships) and 3) *positive appraisal* (life satisfaction and positive emotion). Flourishing individuals, "…had to show the presence of positive emotion together with all but one of the positive characteristics and all but one aspect of positive functioning." (Huppert & So, 2013, p.852), strongly endorsing each item in a Likert scale format (Hone et al., 2014; Huppert & So, 2013).

To date, a review of the literature revealed an absence of studies utilizing Huppert and So's Flourishing Scale specifically within the post-secondary context. To my knowledge there is an absence of research further utilizing this scale to determine the prevalence of flourishing across cultures and populations since Hone et al.'s study comparing the four operational definitions of flourishing on the prevalence of flourishing across New Zealand (2014). Findings from Hone and colleagues study resulted in Huppert and So's definition producing the lowest prevalence rate of flourishing (24%) in a sample of 10,009 adults compared to the remaining 3 definitions. The authors attribute this to, "…their more stringent theoretical conceptual criteria for flourishing" (2014, p.76).

**Diener et al.'s definition.** Diener's first generation work on subjective well-being was characterized by three hedonic indicators: a high level of positive affect, a low level of negative affect, and a high degree of life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1995; Busseri and Sadava, 2011; Keyes and Martin, 2017). Diener et al., (2010) have since incorporated Ryff's dimensions of psychological functioning, (Ryff, 1989; Ryff and Singer, 1998) defined earlier, Ryan and Deci's (2000) characterization of positive functioning (confidence, self-acceptance, meaningfulness and relatedness) and research

on the importance of social and psychological capital for well-being incorporating the constructs of *optimism* (Peterson, Seligman, & Vaillant, 1988; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994; Seligman, 2006) *giving* (Brown et al., 2003) *engagement* (Csikszentimihalyi, 1990), *involvement* (Helliwell, Barrington-Leigh, Harris, & Huang, 2009; Putman, 1995), and *purpos*e and *meaning* (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer 1998; Steger, Oishi & Kashdan, 2009) from previous well-being research. Components of the Diener et al.'s flourishing scale (2010) are included in appendix C. Within this operational definition of flourishing many of indicators similarly compare with Keyes and Huppert et al.'s definition (table 2.1). *Self-respect* is defined as seeing oneself as a good person that lives a good life. This indicator is paralleled to the indicators of *self-acceptance and self-esteem* (table 2.1) defined earlier in Huppert and So's (Huppert & So, 2013) and in Keyes operational definition (Keyes, 2007a).

Diener and colleagues measure each component of flourishing on a Likert scale with a minimum score of 8 and a maximum score of 56 (a high score indicative of a flourishing individual) to measure the functioning aspect of human flourishing (eudaimonic tradition). The Flourishing scale is suggested to be used in combination with *The Scale of Positive and Negative Experiences (SPANE)* (Diener, Wirtz, Biswas-Diener, Tov, Kim-Prieto, Choi, & Oishi, 2009; Diener et al., 2010) a brief 12-item scale with 6 items devoted to positive and 6 items devoted to negative experiences reflecting the hedonic tradition. Since Diener et al.'s Flourishing Scale (2010) was introduced, it has been tested for it's reliability and validity in several studies cross culturally (Gimpel, Von Scheidt, Jose, Sonntag, Stefano, Michalsen, & Esch, 2014; Diener et al., 2010; Dogan, Totan & Sapmaz, 2013; Hone et al., 2013; Khodarahimi, 2013; Silva & Caetano, 2011;

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Singh, Junnarkar & Jaswal, 2016; Sumi, 2014; Tang, Duan, Wang & Liu, 2014; Villieux et al., 2016), translated into a number of foreign languages (Esch, Jose, Gimpel, & Michalsen, 2013; Silva & Caetano, 2011; Sumi, 2014; Tang et al, 2014; Villieux et. al., 2016) and employed within the post-secondary context among student populations (Diener et al., 2010; Dogan et al., 2013; Silva & Caetano, 2011; Sumi, 2014; Villieux et al., 2016).

Of the studies involving post-secondary students where the SPANE was used with the Flourishing Scale - validity and reliability of both scales was confirmed (Diener et al., 2010; Howell & Buro, 2014; Silva & Caetano, 2011; Sumi, 2014). A study involving a sample of 478 Canadian university students (mean age 24.55) in the faculty of Arts, Science and Business concluded, despite the need for further research, that Diener et al.'s Flourishing Scale and the SPANE are viable measures for assessing well-being among university students in the Canadian context (Howell & Buro, 2014).

**Seligman et al.'s definition.** According to Seligman, the new standard for measuring well-being is flourishing (Seligman, 2012). As in the previously mentioned operational definitions, Seligman's definition has roots in both the hedonic and eudaimonic traditions, with recognition that flourishing is indeed a multidimensional concept. Seligman's PERMA model is comprised of 5 indicators of well-being (*positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment*), however a flourishing scale has been developed only recently using these 5 constructs (appendix D; Butler & Kern, 2016).

Positive emotions are largely defined the same way across all operational definitions and refer to hedonic feelings of happiness, pleasure and comfort (Butler &

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Kern, 2014; Seligman, 2012). *Engagement* as it pertains to student engagement involves, "…psychological, behavioral, cognitive and academic domains", (Butler & Kern, 2016) and constitutes a high level of psychological engagement that involves intense concentration, absorption and focus – referred to as "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). *Relationships* are defined as having social support and includes the number of persons in one's social sphere, the number and quality of social ties, objective and subjective perspective of resources, how satisfied one is with the support they have, and the ability to give support to others (Butler & Kern, 2016). *Meaning* is defined as having direction in one's life and connecting to something that is bigger than self and having a purpose in what one does (Butler & Kern, 2016). Lastly, *accomplishment* is a highly individual and subjective indicator of flourishing and rooted in the literature on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci and Ryan, 2008). Accomplishment involves working towards and reaching goals, mastery and self efficacy towards completing tasks (Butler & Kern, 2016).

The 16 item PERMA- Profiler, an instrument designed to measure flourishing, designates three components to each indicator and one component measuring overall well-being -  with flourishing individuals scoring in the upper range on all 5 indicators (appendix D, Butler & Kern, 2016). Components and the corresponding indicators of flourishing are highlighted in appendix D. The five factor model (PERMA) has been tested in a number of studies (Coffey, Wray-Lake, Mashek, Branand, 2016; Kern, Waters, Adler & White, 2015; Khaw, & Kern, 2014; Lovett, & Lovett, 2016; Sepulveda, 2013), while the PERMA-profiler, a scale used to measure the prevalence of flourishing

has only recently been developed (Iasiello, Bartholomaeus, Jarden & Kelly, 2017; Butler & Kern, 2016).

Kern and colleagues (2015) tested the PERMA model among 516 male students (age 13-18). Four of the five PERMA indicators (positive emotions, engagement, relationships and accomplishment) were recovered with the exception of meaning. The authors account for this exception by making reference to the developmental stage (adolescents) of the sample and that the *meaning* indicator of flourishing may be embedded within the social relationships adolescence engage in. *Meaning* however, was not a strong enough stand alone factor for this population. Additionally, other well-being constructs were tested to determine a relationship with the PERMA model. *Positive emotion* was associated with life satisfaction, hope, gratitude, school engagement, physical vitality and physical activity. *Engagement* was associated with absorption and interest, a greater commitment to and engagement in school and hope. *Relationships* was associated feeling connected and supported by others and having greater life satisfaction, hope, gratitude and spirituality. *Accomplishment* was associated with objective achievement in the areas of receiving awards or honors and competitions won especially in the academic context. More subjective associations were seen in the areas of perseverance and mastery, both components of self determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Additional correlates of accomplishment included life satisfaction, hope, school engagement, growth mindset, physical vitality and physical activity (Kern et al., 2015).

Some studies have been conducted since the introduction of the PERMA-profiler to measure flourishing (Butler & Kern, 2016; Lovett & Lovett, 2016; Khaw & Kern, 2014). In Khaw & Kern's study, the PERMA profiler was used in a sample of 322

Malaysian's (mean age=26, 50% students). The study combined quantitative (PERMA profiler measure) and qualitative methods (two general open ended questions about overall well-being, happiness and meaning) to examine its cross cultural application. Findings showed that a three correlated factors (positive emotion/relationships, meaning/accomplishment, and engagement fit the data better than the original 5 factor structure. Additionally, this study unearthed other constructs from the qualitative findings - religion, health and security (2014) not identified in any of the 4 operational definitions. These findings highlight the importance for testing operational definitions within other cultures as indicators may not represent a universal conceptualization of flourishing. Furthermore, this study demonstrates the value of a qualitative approach to uncover hidden nuances and other dimensions pertinent to a culture, context and population.

**Analyses of the Operational Definitions**

To date, a lack of consensus on a theory, conceptualization or definition of flourishing exists and further refinement of the concept is required (Agenor et al., 2017; Hone et al., 2014). There is strong agreement among all operational definitions, that flourishing is a combination of a set of hedonic and eudaimonic indicators, with overlap in the areas of: 1) positive relationships, 2) positive affect (interested) and engagement and 3) meaning and purpose (Hone et al., 2014; table 2.1). Three of the four scales used to measure the prevalence of flourishing measure both positive *feelings* and positive *functioning* combined in one flourishing assessment tool: 1. Keyes' dimensions of flourishing (Keyes, 2007a); 2. Huppert and So's Flourishing Scale (Huppert and So, 2013); and The PERMA-Profiler (Butler and Kern, 2016). Diener and colleagues use a flourishing scale to measure positive functioning (Diener et al., 2010) with a separate

rating scale (SPANE) for positive and negative emotions (Diener et al., 2009; Diener et al., 2010). Some studies using Diener's Flourishing Scale do not consistently use the SPANE to assess positive and negative emotions (Villieux et al., 2016; Hone et al, 2014; Tang et al., 2014), potentially leading to variations in the prevalence of flourishing.

Of the four operational definitions Keyes' conceptualization (Keyes, 2007a) has been the most widely tested for it's reliability and validated in multiple studies around the world - followed by Diener (Diener et al., 2010), Seligman (Butler & Kern, 2016) and Huppert and So (Huppert & So, 2013) respectively (Hone et al., 2014). Huppert and So's scale (2013) is reported to have the most stringent theoretical and conceptual criteria for flourishing compared to Keyes, Diener and Seligman which may account for the limited number of studies and lower prevalence rates associated with using Huppert and So's flourishing scale (Hone et al, 2014). While the remaining 3 models offer more flexibility in how they measure flourishing this may have resulted in a higher prevalence rates of flourishing: Keyes' (39%), Diener et al.'s (41%) and Seligman's (47%) flourishing scale and lower prevalence rates using Huppert and So's flourishing scale in Hone et al.'s study, as suggested by the authors of this study (2014).

The aim of a two-part online survey, examining correlates of meaningfulness of educational experiences (study 1) and correlates of meaningfulness of interpersonal relationships (study 2) was to determine if university students who attached meaning to their education and interpersonal relationships concurrently experienced anxiety and negative affect about their experiences. Findings from this study suggest that across studies 1 and 2 meaningfulness was associated with both happiness (positive affect) and worry over losing meaning (fear of failure) in both academics and relationships with

others. Worry over losing meaningful relationships was not associated with overall negative affect but only with the associated anxiety with losing the meaningful experiences (Lane & Mathes, 2018). These results suggest that although meaning is a prominent indicator of flourishing seen across all operational definitions, these results also demonstrate that a life of meaning also involves feelings of negative anxiety and concern over the potential loss of meaning in one's life. Further extrapolation of these findings may suggest the potential for similar associations to exist among other indicators of flourishing and that negative affect associated with meaning may not necessarily be indicative of a non-flourishing individual but may demonstrate the significance of meaningful relationships and academic success. I speculate whether this may in fact propel individuals towards flourishing within the university context. On the other hand, excessing worry of failure may have the opposite effect in hindering one's ability to flourish.

Stand alone indicators were largely related to Keyes's indicators within the eudaimonic social well-being category and Huppert and & So's indicators (emotional stability, vitality and resilience) (Hone et al., 2014; table 2.1). Within the eudaimonic tradition there is consensus, with the exception of Seligman, among the indicators self-acceptance, self-esteem and self-respect (Hone et al., 2014; table 2.1), while competence did not appear as an indicator in Keyes operational definition. Although slight differences exist in how these indicators are defined, they are defined largely from the same body of well-being literature. Current evidence supports the Keyes's model as the most comprehensive in the area of social well-being (Hone et al., 2013) evident when comparing the four definitions. Furthermore, it is the only operational definition that

situates flourishing within a model of mental health (Dual Continuum Model of Mental Health) (Keyes, 2007a; Keyes, 2010). This resulted in a lengthier exploration Keyes' definition.

Although growth mindset was not an indicator included in any of the four operational definition it deserves mention as it relates to flourishing. An individual with a growth mindset believes intelligence can be developed and embraces challenges, persists in the face of setbacks, see's effort as the road towards mastery, learns from criticism and learns from the success of others (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Mindsetworks, 2017). While someone with a fixed mindset views intelligence as a static process where one avoids challenges, gives up easily, sees effort as a fruitless option, ignores useful and negative feedback and feels threatened by the success of others (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Mindsetworks, 2017). Inevitably, it is no surprise that students possessing a growth mindset tend to respond more positively when faced with academic and social challenges (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Of equal importance is the students' interpretation of these adversities that determines whether they will flourish (as cited in Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

Another body of research requiring attention involves the concept of *grit* and its contribution to the field of well-being research. Grit is a personality trait defined simply as "perseverance and passion for long term goals" (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007, p.1087). In a meta-analytic synthesis of the *grit* literature the authors set out to determine the structure of this construct, and the relationship between grit and academic performance, retention, conscientiousness, cognitive ability and demographic variables of studies involving high school and undergraduate students involving total of

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88 samples and 66, 807 individuals. Among these studies grit was not confirmed to be a higher order structure, was only moderately correlated with academic performance and retention, and strongly correlated with conscientiousness. Grit was weakly related to cognitive ability and among the demographic variables - gender, year in school, ethnic minority status and age – age was the only variable that showed a slight positive correlation with grit (Credé, Tynan, & Harms, 2017). The findings from this meta-analytic synthesis concluded a lack of evidence supporting grit as a higher order construct – potentially suggesting a reason for it's exclusion as an indicator of flourishing within the four operational definitions.

Vanderweel (2017) argues that certain indicators such as virtue and physical health are absent from how flourishing is defined to date. He suggests "…health is arguably central to a person's sense of wholeness and well-being…the reason health is excluded is so as to be able to examine relationships between positive psychological states and subsequent physical health, and indeed there is a reasonably well established literature that has done this" (2017, p.8149). Based on this inextricable link he questions why physical health is not included in an operational definition of flourishing. In terms of the absence of moral virtues and character strengths he argues that four fundamental virtues humans are dependent upon in order to flourish: prudence or practical wisdom, justice, fortitude or courage and moderation or temperance. He does link fortitude to resilience (found in Huppert & So's definition) and temperance to self determination (Vanderweel, 2017).

There are four main theories proposing similarities and differences among the constituent indicators of flourishing, however a lack of consensus exists on a single

measure to examine the prevalence of flourishing among populations and cross culturally. The 4 theorists agree on similar indicators at times different language is used to describe these indicators (i.e.: purpose in life vs. purpose and meaning). All operational definitions make valuable contributions to how flourishing has been defined to date. In light of these contributions and what others would see as an omission of certain indicators such as (virtue, physical health, religion, security, grit and growth mindset) one particular operational definition was not chosen to frame this study. Alternatively, the value of having an awareness of all indicators and the potential outliers of flourishing will shape my preunderstandings and provide a space to remain open to all the possibilities of how university students define and experience flourishing while transitioning directly from high school. A literature review would be incomplete without a review of the limited qualitative literature on flourishing within the post-secondary context.

**Flourishing: Qualitative Research**

To my knowledge, studies specifically exploring the experiences of flourishing among university students transitioning directly from high school within the Canadian context are non-existent. A South African study explored both experiences of flourishing and languishing using the Keyes Dual Continuum Model of Mental Health employing a nominal group technique with a sample of 22 first year students. Although participants were first year students, it is not known whether these students had transitioned directly from high school (Knoesen et al., 2017). Thematic analysis resulted in the following themes related to participants' experiences of flourishing to include: *achieving academic mastery, experiencing personal growth and independence, finding a social support system, and making it – day by day*. Themes associated with experiences of languishing

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included: *facing the unknown, being confronted with practical difficulties, finding academics overwhelming, experiencing social isolation and being a victim of crime.* The study highlighted the important role context plays, particularly within the languishing category under the theme *"being a victim of crime".* Although the authors do not account for this, this theme is likely attributed to South Africa having one the highest crime rates internationally (Carmichael, 2017).

In a British study, using Seligman's PERMA model involved students from two polytechnic universities (n=222), aged 18-52 years. The authors distributed a qualitative survey to gain student understandings of flourishing at university and student perceptions of the characteristics of flourishing and non-flourishing students. *Academic* and *social engagement* were identified as significant indicators of flourishing students. Furthermore, the flourishers in this study were found to be *committed* and *engaged in learning* and *oriented towards personal growth* (Gokcen et al., 2012). This study was not exclusive to students making the transition to university directly from high school, consisting of a wide age variation not representative of the cohort I was concerned with targeting in this study (age 18-20). This study does confirm the predictors of flourishing (academic and social engagement) mentioned previously (Antaramian, 2015; Bowman et al., 2010; Fink, 2014; Nicotera et al., 2015; Howell, 2009; Low, 2011). Context analysis using an inductive approach unearthed 4 of the 5 components of Seligman's well-being theory (positive emotions, engagement, relationships and achievement). The data constructed flourishing as mainly a self-actualization and success construct – not surprising within a university setting as this context is a pathway for growth and development and those students who are flourishing are more likely to be successful in university.

In another study, the athlete's experience of flourishing was explored in a sample (mean age 21.3) of international competitors (n=7) who were concurrently employed part-time or studying (type in ether categories not specified). This study was significant as it explored the *experiences of flourishing* using a phenomenological approach. The philosophical underpinnings or branch of phenomenology was not specified, however the authors eluded to both descriptive and interpretive elements to arrive at 5 meaning clusters associated with the experience of flourishing within this cohort: *future focused, being challenged, being confident, happy and achievement*. Findings from this study support flourishing as a phenomenon that is specific to the population and context, as well as having elements that are universally experienced – in this study's case - important for the athlete (Ashfield et al., 2012). A methodological challenge reported by the authors was the emotional denseness of the concept of flourishing, resulting in two rounds of interviews with each participant to reach data saturation. This was taken into account in order to mitigate challenges related to the data collection phase of this study.

**Conclusion**

This chapter concludes a review of the literature on developmental and academic transitions associated with making the transition from high school to university. A review of traditional and contemporary conceptualizations of mental health preceded the four operational definitions of flourishing explored to date using quantitative means. This uncovered the infancy of the concept of flourishing, the lack of consensus of the constituents of flourishing and awareness of the understudied nature of flourishing using qualitative means. This is evident particularly as it pertains to exploring the experiences of flourishing among university students amidst this dual transitional period, therefore, a

study of this nature has the potential to make an original contribution to the flourishing

literature. Chapter 3 will detail a plan and approach to inquiry commonly referred to as

methodology.

## Chapter 3: Plan of Inquiry

To gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and research question: *How do university students define and experience flourishing while making the transition directly from high school?* an interpretive phenomenological approach was chosen underpinned by Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy (Moules, McCaffrey, Field and Laing, 2015). Phenomenology seeks to understand the lived experience, or the life worlds of individuals (van Manen, 1984) while taking into account the unique meanings held by individuals and the common themes among individuals (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000).

I will begin this chapter by revealing my assumptions and preunderstandings of the concept of flourishing within the university context. This will be followed by an overview of the historical development of phenomenology as philosophy, introducing the two main branches of phenomenology – descriptive and interpretive. The meshing of my pre-understandings, personal philosophy and gaps in the literature support choosing a qualitative approach using Gadamer's hermeneutic phenomenology as a framework to gain a deeper understanding of the chosen phenomenon. In Gadamerian philosophy, a plan of, and approach to, inquiry replaces what is commonly referred to as methodology and methods (Moules et al., 2015) in most studies. Key concepts and guidelines for conducting Gadamerian hermeneutic research are described and have guided the process of inquiry. Procedures for recruitment and sampling followed by data collection and a process for hermeneutic analysis follow. Lastly, ensuring trustworthiness of the findings, and ethical considerations are detailed - ending with my concluding thoughts.

**Pre-Understandings**

Prior to engaging in hermeneutic research I have an obligation to bring my pre-understandings to consciousness in order to take into account the influence that they have throughout all stages of the research. Bringing to consciousness pre-understandings and assumptions allows the researcher to reflect and question the "origins, adequacy and legitimacy" (Geanellos, 1998b, p. 238) of these pre-understandings in relation to textual interpretation, while being aware of the dominant influences that make one prone to seek out particular information or to favor particular information either from participants, the literature or text (Geanellos, 1998b).

As my own personal philosophy of well-being evolved it began to conflict with the way institutional policies and practices influenced and constricted my nursing practice. I recognized that the majority of my 20 years plus of combined education and practicing as a psychiatric nurse rested in the positivist paradigm with a focus on assessment, diagnosis, treatment and intervention. Over time this led to the realization that this approach concentrates on *fixing* and fails to consider the critical role of *promoting* and *protecting* mental health and well-being and of *preventing* mental illness. This discovery dramatically altered my perspective resulting in mental health promotion becoming the focus for my master's level course work, practicum experience and thesis topic.

Interpretive phenomenology involves a back and forth process between the researcher and participant gain a deeper understanding (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007) and can be paralleled to the patient and mental health nurse relationship. In my early experiences working as a nurse in an emergency room setting there was often little time

to focus on the human aspects of what the experience of being ill was like for the patient or the understanding and meaning that patients ascribed to this way of being. Patients were often treated like objects to be fixed without consideration of the emotional, psychological and social aspects equally important to overall well-being.

My interest in flourishing in the educational settings is rooted in having school-aged children and having focused on mental health promotion in a Yellowknife, Northwest Territories middle school during my graduate practicum. The prevalence and focus on mental health concerns among adolescents within this school population was concerning and reflected the literature that I was reading about - the need to shift school culture from a problem focus to a mental well-being approach. I realized that it was likely that some students pursuing post-secondary education in the North would be making the transition without the life skills necessary for them to flourish – both in school and more broadly in life. This real life experience was pivotal in solidifying my understanding of the capacity and responsibility that I believe educational institutions need to assist student populations to flourish. Reflecting on my experiences as an undergraduate clinical nursing instructor, those students who were highly engaged and involved in their learning through regular interactions with me, supportive interactions with their peers and showing up well prepared for clinical, tended to be the students who were perceived to be coping and adapting well.

Watching my own children flourish in life and school made me think seriously about the factors contributing to their ability to flourish. I believe that by focusing on their individual strengths, providing them with opportunities to grow, not making things too easy and exposing them to just enough challenge to build perseverance is helping

them reach their full potential. This, combined with love, compassion and empathy in difficult times, and modelling the qualities that I hope they will build, has made a difference. I realize that asking them what makes them flourish may produce a very different view in comparison to how I have come to understand the concept of flourishing – so I did. Not far off in her understanding my oldest daughter said it meant "to grow". My youngest said, "like a flower".

Personal growth often coincides with times of challenge. As I gain more knowledge of the concept of flourishing I have found myself drawing parallels with the literature and my own well-being. In this time of educational challenge, I have come to know myself - in a metaphoric sense – as more of a sprinter than a marathoner. In the past I've felt comfortable thriving in environments where short term goals can be achieved that involve intense, short bursts of productivity and am challenged more in process oriented endeavors that involve long term rewards. At times, I isolated myself from others as they were challenged to empathize with my struggles - which I realize may have contributed to my struggling more than necessary at times during this process. My conscious awareness of the indicators that promote flourishing, in particular the importance of the social aspect of flourishing, alerted me to work on this area to promote my own well-being. It is true everyone has a different and unique journey where challenges are unavoidable, it's how we cope and adapt to these challenges that lead to happiness, life satisfaction and functioning well both socially and psychologically.

I anticipate that participants in this study who perceive themselves as flourishing will no doubt experience challenges. I also suspect that making the transition to university will evoke a wide range of emotions both positive and negative mediated by a

high level of social and psychological functioning. These flourishers will likely be influenced by the past, present and the future; the cultural, political, social and economic contexts; the school environment; and the internal resources they possess. What I've come to know about flourishing is that it is complex and can only be defined by the individuals experiencing it. Happiness does not equate flourishing and the pathways to flourishing are not straightforward. It is only through a qualitative approach that the essence of the phenomenon of flourishing can truly be understood.

**Assumptions of a Qualitative Approach**

This study is viewed from a constructivist lens aligning with both the knowledge that will be gained within the study and the qualitative nature of understanding perceptions. The ontological beliefs within constructivism denote the assumption that multiple realities are constructed through the lived experiences of others (Creswell, 2013; Streubert, Speziale, & Carpenter, 2007). The epistemology, simply defined as 'what knowledge is, and how it can be acquired', aspires to the belief that, "reality is co-constructed between the researcher and those researched and shaped by individual experiences" (Creswell, 2013, p.24). The axiology, or alternatively the role of values, is foundational throughout the research process and inherently true to the belief that values are honored and negotiated among individuals. The final assumption relates to the procedures of methodology that will be used (Creswell, 2013). The approach deemed to be the most appropriate qualitative approach from a philosophical and methodological perspective to answer the research question: *How do university students define and experience flourishing while transitioning directly from high school?* is phenomenology.

Next, I will explore phenomenology as a philosophy and as a research methodology, with an emphasis on the branch of interpretive phenomenology, underpinning this study.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a methodology (Bergum, 1991) and should be considered when the purpose of a study is to clarify meanings of a phenomenon from the lived experiences of individuals (Bergum, 1991). Philosophy aims to shape the way research questions are formulated and how we go about answering questions (Creswell, 2013). As such, phenomenology offers "…an important shift from a positivist cause-effect focus to one of human subjectivity and discovering the meaning of actions" (as cited in Penner & McClement, 2008, p.93). Phenomenology seeks to understand the lived experience, or the life worlds, of individuals (van Manen, 1984) while taking into account the unique meanings that each individual holds and common themes among individuals as they are brought to light (Cohen et al., 2000). It emphasizes the world as lived by the individual, not the world as a separate entity from the individual and asks the question, "What is this experience like?" (Laverty, 2003, p.4). More broadly, phenomenology involves three common assumptions: 1) the study of lived experiences, 2) development of descriptions of the essences of these experiences not an explanation or analysis, and the notion that 3) lived experiences are conscious in nature (Creswell, 2013).

Many different philosophical perspectives, approaches and interpretations of phenomenology have evolved over the past century. I begin by providing a brief overview of phenomenology, exploring the two main branches (descriptive and interpretive) to arrive at a plan for approaching this study that is congruent with my own

worldview and best suited for exploring and understanding *the experiences of flourishing among university students making the transition directly from high school*.

**Descriptive phenomenology.** Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) widely regarded as the founding father of phenomenology formalized phenomenology from 18th century philosophers Kant, Hegel, and Mach and emerged from his disenchantment with the natural sciences (as cited in Earl, 2010). His philosophy - eidetic (descriptive) in nature - referred to the way in which things appear to individuals experiencing a phenomenon – defining eidetic reduction as the process of identifying essential elements that make a phenomenon unique (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The aim of this approach was to describe the general characteristics of a phenomenon rather than the individual's experience to determine the essence or meaning of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1997). Of central importance to his philosophy was the science of pure consciousness and pure description of lived experiences (Tuohy et al., 2013, van Manen, 1984) rooted in the assumption that reality is objective without consideration of history and context (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Of critical importance to Husserl's work is the concept of *intentionality* – "it relates to being conscious of something, some object, such that all forms of consciousness are characterized by intending objects" (as cited in Earle, 2010, p.287). This is consistent with a positivist attempt to ignore the intentionality of the individual (Scotland, 2012).

To achieve this purity and objectivity, Husserl believed that it was necessary for the researcher to *bracket* (set aside conscious and unconscious thoughts, beliefs and influences) in order to understand common features of a phenomenon to ensure objectivity and explore the phenomenon without preconceptions (Tuohy et al., 2013;

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Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Bracketing is described as the process of "(a) separating the phenomenon from the world and inspecting it; (b) dissecting the phenomenon to unravel the structure, define it, and analyze it; and (c) suspending all preconceptions regarding the phenomenon, and confronting the subject matter on its own terms, to ensure that the researcher holds in abeyance any preconceived ideas while he or she is listening to, interacting with, and analyzing the stories of the participants" (as cited in Wojnar & Swanson, 2007, p. 173). My belief is that bracketing cannot be fully achieved for the following reasons: 1) individuals do not have the capability of setting aside unconscious thoughts, if there is not a conscious awareness of the unconscious in the first place; 2) it would be impossible to set aside what I have come to know of the concept of flourishing through review of the literature and, in the absence of a literature review, my ability to understand and gain meaning from participant experiences would be lost; and 3) this would be an attempt to eliminate bias which would be in direct conflict with the interpretive branch of phenomenology explored next.

**Interpretive phenomenology.** The goal of interpretive phenomenology is to build understanding of human experience through an on-going process of interpretation with the assumption that individuals are capable of finding significance and meaning in their own lives (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). The interpretive branch of phenomenology began with Heidegger (1889-1976) a student of Husserl. Rejecting his purely objective and descriptive approach, Heidegger was interested in finding the essence of meanings embedded in common life practices (Fleming, Gaidys and Robb, 2002; Lopez & Willis, 2004). Heidegger introduced the concept of *Daesin* (as cited in Earle, 2010), meaning

*being there* (Fleming et al., 2003), to imply that humans are already immersed in a world of meaning and are capable of finding significance and meaning in their own lives (Cohen et al., 2000; van Manen, 2017; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007) through, "…an awareness of one's being, belonging to the world, availability and use of the world and relating to others" (Fleming et al., 2003, p.115). Concepts central to Heidegger's philosophy include: *temporality* - the horizon of possibility of being or existence which make sense in reference to past, present and future; *spatiality* – lived space; and *authenticity* – a reclaiming of oneself from the way we typically fall into our everyday ways of being. Heidegger rejected Husserl's concepts of *bracketing*, *reduction* and *intentionality* (Earle, 2010).

Gadamer (1900-2002), a student of Heidegger, focused on philosophical hermeneutics and contextual understanding (Gadamer, 2013), emphasizing historical awareness - a necessary condition for understanding and knowledge (Gadamer, 2013; as cited in Flemming et al., 2003). Gadamer referred to *prejudice* -seen as a positive term synonymous with *preunderstandings* -  as the only way that understanding can be possible because without the recognition that preunderstandings exist there is potential for misunderstanding, or meaning to be misjudged (Moules et al., 2015; Flemming et al., 2003). This highlights one of the main differences between *descriptive* phenomenology (the belief that these preunderstandings must be bracketed) and *interpretive* phenomenology (the belief that the preunderstandings are necessary for understanding). "The technique of bracketing, as described by descriptive phenomenologists, is inconsistent and questionable within a hermeneutic approach" (as cited in Lopez &

Willis, 2004, p.730) and furthermore limits the dialogue between the researcher and participants to achieve a true and deeper meaning (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

From Merleau-Ponty's (1908-1961) perspective understanding could be gained through the concepts of *perceptions, intentionality* and *embodiment* (Thomas, 2005). The phenomenology of *perception* that Merleau-Ponty refers to is how an individual perceives their lived experience and this perception is influenced by culture and the environment in which the individual is immersed (Thomas, 2005) and, "all knowledge takes place within the horizons opened up by perception, and all meaning occurs through perception" (Thomas, 2005, 69). *Intentionality* cannot be viewed as some kind of planned event but more accurately referred to as the individual and the researchers situated perspective and what is found meaningful, how we are connected to the world, it is our situated perspective (Thomas, 2005). *Embodiment* refers to the body as the source of all understanding through the exploration of four concepts: 1) *lived space* - the space where we are located; 2) *lived time* - the way in which individuals ascribe meaning to events that occur at a particular time; 3) *lived body* – or *embodiment* – meaning that we are always in our body and; 4) *lived human relation* - we influence, and are influenced by, others in our relationships (Dowling, 2007; Tuohy et al., 2013).

French hermeneutic phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur's philosophical underpinnings sought to understand human existence through the meaning of language and discourse. The way in which we communicate and use language is beyond space and time and a sign that points to other signs (Singsuriya, 2015). In Ricoeur's view, the search for meaning behind words helps us perceive a phenomenon in its totality. The text becomes the language system in that it is above the spatio-temporal context and awaits

realization by readers, the process in which the text addressed its reading subjects in their own horizons to a new way of being in the world (Singsuriya, 2015). Kaplan (2008) discussed the challenge with Ricoeur's philosophical style and writings that often leave the reader puzzled in an effort to search for a common thread within his extensive works. This became evident in the sources reviewed for this study (Kaplan, 2008; Ricoeur, 1975; Singsuriya, 2015)

Drawing upon the philosophical writings of both Husserl and Heidegger, van Manen's writings include both descriptive and interpretive elements with more emphasis on the interpretive domain of phenomenological inquiry (van Manen, 1984; 1989). He questions Husserl's concept of bracketing (Dowling, 2007), and emphasizes the responsibility and necessity for making one's presuppositions, assumptions, biases, beliefs and understandings known, as they have the tendency to "…creep back in our reflections" (van Manen, 1984, p. 9). This suggests that van Manen's employment of descriptive elements are not equated to Husserl's philosophical underpinnings. Descriptive - within van Manen's philosophical viewpoint means that, "…every phenomenological description is in a sense only an example, an icon that points at the 'thing' which we attempt to describe…" (van Manen, 1984, p.25). Whereas, in Husserl's view general characteristics of a phenomenon were of importance rather than the essence of experience (Giorgi, 2008).

What sets van Manen apart from his previously mentioned philosophers are the methodological guidelines that he has developed for conducting phenomenological inquiry (van Manen, 1984; 1989). These guidelines for carrying out phenomenological research, involve a six step process: 1) turning to the nature of lived experience requires

an unwavering commitment to make sense of the phenomenon; 2) investigation of the experience as we live it requires the researcher to become immersed in the phenomenon to develop a deep understanding of the nature of the lived experience; 3) hermeneutic phenomenological reflection or reflecting on essential themes that characterize the phenomenon; 4) hermeneutic phenomenological writing is a process of bringing meaning to light through the process of writing and rewriting of themes; 5) maintaining a strong and oriented relation aims for the strongest possible interpretation of the phenomenon producing rich and deep research text and 6) balancing the research context by considering parts as well as the whole (Earle, 2010; van Manen, 2017).

**Approach to Inquiry**

The philosophical underpinnings for this study are rooted in interpretive phenomenology; an approach that is consistent with the nature of the research question and my own worldview. Although Husserl's method of phenomenology is used by some scholars who ascribe to exploring one's lived experience from a purely descriptive sense, this approach lies within the positivist paradigm. Approaching this study from a purely descriptive lens would require bracketing my understanding and knowledge of flourishing which I believe would limit the richness of the data as the participants' experience of flourishing would be *described* rather than *interpreted*. I value gaining meaning through reflection and interpretation of self and the world around me.

There are many phenomenological approaches and methods for guiding phenomenological inquiry outlined in the literature such as Colazzi, van Manen, Giorgi, Diekelmann and Koch's approach (as cited in Fleming et al., 2003). The philosophical writings that underpin these approaches pose a challenge as they rely on the translation of

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the original translated writings (Flemming and Robb, 2003). Geanellos (1998a) wrote, "All these works, however, come into the English language through translation. While this in itself is problematic, multiple translations of the same text, as with Gadamer…result in reduced continuity in an author's work" (p. 155). Although this appears to be a challenge for some, as a novice researcher, I see it as an opportunity to gain understanding of phenomenology through these many interpretations of the original writings. Of these interpretations Gadamer's hermeneutic phenomenology resonated with me the most. His less prescriptive approach to inquiry and the common understandings among interpretations of his translated works paralleling his own work in Truth and Method gained my interest. Moules and colleagues (2015) text on *Conducting Hermeneutic Research* allowed me to gain more access into Gadamer's world in a way I could comprehend as a novice research. Although van Manen's original writings were accessible and included a step by step approach to inquiry it was inconsistent with the way in which I interpret the world around me.

   ***Rational for Approach to Inquiry.*** "Often…qualitative researchers subscribe to a particular school of thought regarding their research based on the specific philosophical position they believe most closely aligns with their personal understanding", (Speziale, Streubert, & Carpenter, 2011, p.11). I chose Moules and Colleagues (2015) guidelines inspired by Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics to guide this study for the following reasons: 1) it lies within the qualitative interpretive realm congruent with both answering the research question and my own worldview; 2) it provides guidelines, not a strict method for how phenomenological research can be pursued; and 3) it encourages flexibility within these guidelines.  Although I have an

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awareness of the value that other qualitative approaches could contribute to understanding the nature of flourishing. I am interested in the meaning that participants ascribe to their experiences of flourishing in contrast with exploring social processes more suitable for a grounded theory study or understanding cultures and traditions consistent with ethnography (Cohen et al., 2000, Creswell, 2013).

Furthermore, Gadamer's writings resonate with me as I can relate to them in my practice as a psychiatric nurse and my interactions with patients. Hermeneutics is equally an art of strengthening (Moules et al., 2015), illustrated in such examples as, "What can I learn from this child or this patient, in this situation, at this particular time to help them flourish? What can I learn from this patient or child that will help me strengthen my own practice? What can I add to the larger conversation, in the discipline, that might help us see, think about, act differently toward the phenomenon?" (Moules et al., 2015, p.58). To replace the term *child* and *patient* with *participant,* one is able to see the value of hermeneutic inquiry and its relevance for exploring the experiences of flourishing among university students transitioning directly from high school.

**Gadamerian Concepts.** According to Gadamer, "Hermeneutics refers, first of all, to a practice, an art, that requires a special skill" or *techne* (technique) (Gadamer, 2006, p.29). Many philosophers, from Aristotle to van Manen, have pondered the ontological nature of hermeneutic phenomenology; however, in-depth writings on philosophical hermeneutics largely rest with Gadamer (Moules et al., 2015). This is evident in both his translated works (Gadamer, 2006; Gadamer, 2013) and interpretations of his works (Moules et al., 2015).

Gadamer's translated writings in *Truth and Method* are a testament to his extensive works on hermeneutics and the advancement of its central concepts (Gadamer, 2013; Moules et al., 2015). The key concepts that underpin Gadamer's philosophy include: *Universality and Finitude, History (historically effected consciousness), Language and Linguistic Being, Conversation, Questions, Play, Prejudices, The Hermeneutic Circle, Experience (Erlebnis and Erfahrung), Bildung, Fusion of Horizons, Application and Phronesis, Transformation into Structure* (Gadamer, 2013; Moules et al., 2015). These concepts will be discussed in more detail, defined largely Moules et al.'s interpretation of Gadamer's writings and are central for understanding and guiding the process of hermeneutic inquiry.

*Universality and finitude.* Universality is referred to as the point that understanding happens in language. Finitude means that understanding is never complete or finished. There is no beginning point or end point to interpretation. "Understanding-in-language presents a horizon of infinite possibility" (Gadamer, 2013; Moules et al., 2015, p.35-35).

*History (historically affected consciousness).* "Understanding has a temporal dimension…there has to be something already there to interpret – then good interpretation attends to the history of the topic…we are in the flux of history, under the multifarious influences of our time and place. We can conscientiously do our best to clarify our understanding from within this flux, but what we cannot do is step out of history into a view from nowhere" (Moules et al., 2015, p.37-38). Historical awareness is always at work (Gadamer, 2006). Historically affected consciousness is closely connected to the concept of fusion of horizons where the horizon of the past is always in

motion and that the horizon of the present is always affected by the past (McManus

Holroyd, 2007). I interpret this to account for contextual and cultural factors that the

researcher and participant brings into the present – this fusion of horizons – based on

conscious awareness of the history that exists to illuminate the essence of experience and

enhance understanding.

*Language and linguistic being.* Much attention is devoted to understanding

language and the meaning of words as language is a way of expressing meanings in

hermeneutic phenomenology (Cohen et al., 2000). "Language is fundamental to

Gadamerian hermeneutics…because it has the universal significance of being the air that

understanding breaths" (Moules et al., 2015, p.39-40). One's relationship to the world as

a whole is expressed in language (Gadamer, 2013, p.468).  It is both universal and always

changing at the same time and reminds us of our limitations, insecurities and breakdown

of meaning. There are parts of the human experience that are sensory and non-linguistic

in nature such as viewing art or listening to music. This sensory experience only makes

sense as an experience and as it relates to the meaning that the individual brings to the

experience. (Moules et al., 2015).

*Conversation.*  Participant interviews should resemble a conversation that is

highly unstructured, where there is a two-way interactive exchange that is participant

guided (Cohen et al., 2000). "Conversation is a natural, social form of the open dialectic

that lets new understanding appear as each one speaks – and more importantly, listens –

to the other…Participants in a conversation are not two separate rational agents starting

every conversation as if from nothing, but beings who are speaking out of traditions that

precede them, using words that are already saturated in cultural meanings" (Moules et al.,

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2015, p.41). This emphasizes the need for communication that truly engages and explores.

*Questions.* "Hermeneutical questioning is informed by a humility toward one's own not knowing, a genuine curiosity toward what the other might have to say, and the goal of shared understanding…Thus, the importance of a well-formed research question is that it identifies a topic clearly while also leaving it open", (Moules et al., 2015, p.42). I interpret this as referring to both research question and interview questions. "Questions always bring out the undetermined possibilities of a thing" (Gadamer, 2013, p.383). Thus a need for communication skills that engage, explore, empathize and clarify (Shea, 1988).

*Play.* "When one is fully involved in play, it takes one outside of oneself and the game becomes more than a subjective experience. Play at the same time requires seriousness to be properly absorbing but also frees the player into responsiveness to the flow of the game. Play is not random: it has rules, participants, and a field of play but its possible outcome is open…Play is another example of the movement of interpretation, of its vitality and contrast to prescribed formulae…To be caught up in the play of possible meanings demands more than merely forming a subjective opinion…" (Moules et al., 2015, p.42-43)

*Prejudices.* "We never approach a text, experience, or topic as a completely blank slate – we already have a fabric of meaning into which we accommodate, with more or less difficulty, the next new event. Interpretation happens in dialogue with new experience. So far this idea of prejudice is neutral in that it is only making the point that we always bring existing understanding to bear a topic" (Moules et al, 2015, p.43).

***The hermeneutic circle.*** "The movement of existing understanding, or prejudice, into constructive interchange with another is described by the image of the hermeneutic circle…the dialectic part of the whole in a narrow sense of an actual text…the whole is not a fixed quantity, a puzzle that only needs all the pieces in the right places to be complete, but more of a complex and living assemblage of meaning" (Moules et al., 2015, p.44). In research it is conceptualized as a back and forth process with study participants in which neither the whole, or the individual parts, are viewed separately; but rather understood only in reference to one another (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). In this circular interpretive process interpretation is never final or complete stressing the absence of a beginning or ending for understanding (Geanellos, 1998a).

***Experience (Erlebnis and Erfahrung).*** Experience is a way of getting at the immediacy of what it is like to be a human in the world. *Erlebnis* refers to an intense or remarkable experience that stands or lingers in one's memory through reflection and contemplation (Gadamer, 2013, p. 58-64) *Erfahrung*…is a raw experience that takes one to a deeper understanding and occurs through networks of meaning that are already present. When the singular experience is brought into a form of developmental life, through reflection, association, and dialogue – for example, with other teachers, with research literature, with fictional or artistic representations, with similar experiences of other professionals – the experience takes on the character of Erfahrung.  (Moules et al., 2015, p.44-45)

***Bildung.*** Translated from the German meaning "cultivation". The process by which the researcher is changed by doing the research. "Experiences – of reading, discovering new sources, interviewing participants and reviewing transcripts,

conversations about the work and so on – alter the researcher's own field of understanding as she or he become more…cultivated" (Moules et al., 2015, p.46).

*Fusion of horizons.* Fusion means blending or bonding. Horizons are in reference to the past and present. "Our horizon of the present – formed by the values, assumptions, concerns that condition how we look out on the world – is inextricably influenced by horizons of the past". Further, the horizon of the present is always changing in light of new circumstances and new knowledge (Moules et al., 2015, p.47). This relates closely to the consideration for context, culture and ones past experiences and preunderstandings.

*Application and phronesis.* Phronesis is both practical and moral knowledge. This knowledge is helpful when referring to the conduct of interpretive research (Moules et al., 2015).

*Transformation into structure.* "The point at which creative play comes to an end through the achievement of the work of art. Writing a finished version of hermeneutic research similarly brings to an end the play of interpretation, at least for the moment and, in doing so, it reconstitutes the topic in ways that bring to the fore new possibilities for practice…and writes from within a new horizon of the self", (Moules et al., 2015, p.50-51).

A study underpinned by Gadamer's philosophy poses difficulties if the researcher is looking for a specific method for engaging in this type of research as there is no prescription for the way a hermeneutic study should unfold as it runs the risk of "creating a fixed standpoint and a solitary horizon" (McManus Holroyd, 2007, p. 7) that is distant and very different from the humanistic approach – an approach open to possibilities that exist within the human consciousness (McManus Holroyd, 2007). For this reason, the

following guidelines for a hermeneutic practice provided the foundation and guidance in all stages of the research process.

        ***Guidelines for a Hermeneutic Research Practice***. The Guidelines for a Hermeneutic Research Praxis outlined in *Conducting Hermeneutic Research: From Philosophy to Practice* (Moules et al., 2015) were used to guide this study. The authors developed these guidelines based on Gadamer's philosophical writings in order to bring clarity and understanding of how to engage in hermeneutics. These guidelines are not methodological per se and not meant to replace good judgment, or tell, the researcher what to do during the research process, but simply there to orient the researcher in making, "responsible, reliable and defensible decisions" (Gadamer, 2013, p. 306; Moules, 2015, p.61). This flexibility allows the opportunity to respond to the research process as it unfolds, in contrast with prescribing a method in advance (Moules et al., 2015). This is in keeping with Gadamer's philosophy that, "A theory of praxis of understanding is obviously theory and not practice, but a theory of praxis is still not some kind of 'technique', nor an effort to make societal practice more scientific" (Gadamer, 2006, p. 52), thus noting Gadamer's "ambivalence toward anything that would qualify as a procedure for doing hermeneutics" (Moules et al., 2015, p.55).

        Moules and colleagues (Moules et al., 2015) offer the following guidelines, underpinned by Gadamer's philosophy, as a means of being in service to the phenomenon, acknowledging that they are constructed by humans and therefore, "incomplete or fallible", encouraging the guidelines to be "interpreted anew" (Moules et al., 2015, p.61).

1. *The way of hermeneutic practice is determined by the phenomenon, not the method*. The authors liken this to detective work, in which the detective doesn't solve a crime by jumping in with a predetermined method. Hermeneutics is a thoughtful process, a way of attending to the phenomenon through careful probing and questioning that will drive the exploration. It is a way of seeing the phenomenon from different perspectives and angles and understanding the phenomenon by learning from it and its relationship with context. There is never a single round of asking questions, every encounter with the phenomenon is interpreted and as a result a new set of questions is generated. In this process the hermeneutic practice is not driven by the methods or procedures but rather by being responsive to what is appearing in the life world of the participant and their experience of the phenomenon. This process involves responding carefully to the unpredictable "twists and turns" while staying with the phenomenon, the researcher is essentially learning from the experience (Moules et al., 2015, p.62-63)

2. *Hermeneutic practice requires a disciplined (phenomenological) focus on the particular*. My interpretation of the "particular" that the authors speak of makes reference to not just the "examples or cases" that participants describe within their life world. Rather, 'particular' goes beyond this to include both the historical and contextual. The researcher engaged in interpretive work is skilled at, "…being critically distant, while being involved, caring and attentive", done through the process of, "…reading cases into the past, into our lives, and into the future..." (as

cited in Moules et al., 2015, p.65) this provides the necessary distance to view the phenomenon as it manifests itself differently.

3. *Hermeneutic practice requires that we be vigilant and open in our encounters with the life world.* This vigilance relates to being open to the life world of the participants so that understandings and interpretations are not lost, while also being mindful of one's preunderstandings, presuppositions or what Gadamer refers to as prejudice in our encounters with participants and in our interpretations as a way of, "putting what we know at risk, to make our pre-understanding part of the phenomenon of study by seeking out what was strange and foreign to us, such that, confronted by difference, our understanding is broken open, refigured so a new world could open in from our prefiguration" (Moules et al., 2015, p.65).

4. *Reading in the hermeneutic tradition involves a practice of learning to read self and world differently.* It is not necessary to read every text on hermeneutic philosophy literally or to understand every aspect of hermeneutics. Part of the uncertainty of reading original philosophical writings is to emerge from the readings with one's own interpretations. Reading about the works of original philosophers such as Gadamer and Heidegger through scholars who are devoted to these works, "yields dependable and accessible translations" (Moules et al., 2015, p.67) and the many ways in which they deepen one's understanding from their point of view.

5. *The nature of hermeneutic practice is dialogical.* This is not a tool or technique for hermeneutics but a fundamental practice in hermeneutics. A dialogue from which to understand the world, self and others. It is more about the foundation of

who we are. I immediately connected with hermeneutics as I could relate to it's

philosophical grounding. In my nursing practice and personal life, I have always

been interested in the language that others use to describe their experiences and

the deeper meaning behind this language. In my interactions, it is less important

for me to be right, or to have the final word, and more important to engage in, and

keep the conversation going to gain a deeper understanding (Moules et al., 2015,

p.67-68).

Gadamer's hermeneutic phenomenology is not driven by a process of formal logic

but rather a practice that is underpinned by substance and not procedure (Moules et al.,

2015). There are no rules to understanding and understanding doesn't evolve from the

awareness of a set of rules (Fleming et al., 2002). Further, hermeneutics recognizes that a

phenomenon cannot exist without context and the awareness of preunderstandings,

central to understanding. Next I will provide a description of Mount Royal University, the

context in which the experiences of flourishing have been explored.

**Context**

Mount Royal University (MRU) is set in the southwest quadrant of Calgary,

Alberta, Canada. Operating since 1910, MRU became an undergraduate university in

2009 (MRU, 2019b). In the 2016/17 academic year, MRU's student population reached

approximately 9,534 full-time students, with 74.3% of these students enrolled in degree

programs. Students enrolled from Calgary made up approximately 73% of the total

student population while international students comprised of 3.5% of students across all

programs (certificate, diploma, and degree) – an increase from the 2015/16 academic

year. Those who self-identified as Indigenous students made up 5% of the total population across all programs (MRU, 2019a).

MRU has two residence complexes (East and West Residence) with a maximum combined accommodation of up to 1,000 students (MRU, 2019c). With 12 degree programs and 32 majors, the average class size was 29 students in the 2016/17 academic year (MRU, 2019a). In addition to academic programs, Mount Royal hosts hockey, soccer, volleyball and basketball teams for both men and women (MRU, 2017a). There are a number of other activities for students to become involved on campus such as: student clubs, student council and committees, peer support groups, intramural sports, drop in sports, volunteer and employment opportunities on campus, recreational programs, workshops, student support groups and international committees.

In 2012, a presidential task force on student mental health was established at MRU to explore MRU's mental health initiatives (promotion, prevention and intervention focused) covering seven key areas as a beginning measure to understand how the university was positioned. As a result, several recommendations were made to enhance and support existing initiatives and develop new ones to support and promote student mental well-being at MRU (MRU, 2013), followed by yearly updates to track initiatives (MRU, 2017b). Recently, MRU became one of seven Canadian universities and colleges to partner with the Mental Health Commission of Canada to pilot *The Inquiring Mind* project to train first year students how to better understand and manage their mental health. The program focuses on stigma reduction, building resiliency utilizing the Mental Health Continuum Model (Government of Canada, 2016) as a framework to explore these concepts with students (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2017) Although this

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model portrays either or approach to mental health (mentally healthy or mentally ill) conceptualization of mental health, MRU has found that students relate to this model more readily than the abstract conceptualization of mental health proposed in Keyes Dual Continuum Model (anonymous personal communication, November, 17, 2017; Keyes, 2010), while interestingly the Keyes model is used to conceptualize mental health in the MRU's presidential task force on mental health report (MRU 2013).

Choosing MRU as the context for the study came about after a family move to the Calgary, Alberta area. With an absence of connections or previous employment in Calgary it was important for me to seek out committee members with an expertise in MHP within the university context to provide the necessary guidance and expertise. Having investigated several faculty profiles at both the University of Calgary and MRU websites within various disciplines (Nursing, Social Science, Psychology and Public Health), I located a Nursing faculty member with interest and expertise in MHP. This led to being introduced to a Psychologist in the Student Wellness Department at MRU with an interest positive psychology and strength-based approaches. Both agreed to become committee members, facilitating the decision to choose MRU as the setting, in which this study was conducted.

## Population

The population chosen for this study involves a specific cohort of students between the ages of 18-20 who transferred directly from high school into their first year of university at MRU and enrolled in a full time degree program. This particular cohort was chosen over students in their second, third or fourth year due to heightened challenges that these students may experience adjusting to the first year. As mentioned in

chapter 1 some of these challenges involve moving away from the parental home,

financial strain, adjusting to higher academic expectations, navigating a new social

environment and establishing new social networks and supports (Clarke, 2007; Johnson,

et al., 2010).

**Sampling**

Qualitative studies select participants in a purposeful manner to best answer the

research question at hand (Creswell, 2013). The scope of the study, nature of the topic,

quality of the data and study design are factors requiring consideration when determining

sample size (Morse, 2000). Interpretive phenomenological approaches tend to produce a

large amount of data; therefore, smaller sample sizes are recommended (Smith and

Osborn, 2015). Moules and colleagues are reluctant to provide a specific number or range

of participants needed for a hermeneutic study stating, "Hermeneutic research is not

validated by numbers but by the completeness of examining the topic under study and the

fullness and depth to which the interpretation extends understanding" (2015, p. 90). For a

phenomenological study Creswell recommends anywhere from 5 to 25 (2013), while

Morse recommends 6 to 10 participants (2000).  Given the lack of any precise guidelines

for hermeneutic inquiry (Moules et al., 2015), the guiding principle for determining the

number of participants for qualitative studies is data saturation (Mason, 2010). For this

study data saturation was reached when further interviews failed to provide a clearer

understanding of the experience (Laverty, 2003) and there was diversity among

participants in terms of gender, ethnicity, degree program, living arrangements in pre-

transition and transition periods.

A sample of nine participants (self-identifying as 8 females and 1 male) ages 18-20 volunteered for the study. Six of the 9 participants were enrolled full time in the Bachelor of Nursing program, 1 in the Bachelor of Education program, 1 in the Bachelor of Administration program and 1 in the Bachelor of Child Studies program. Diversity among participants' ethnic backgrounds included: Caucasian, Caucasian/Metis, Caucasian/Filipino, Chinese/Irish/English/Scottish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Russian and Pakistani. Two participants lived on campus in residence, 4 participants continued with the same living arrangements as with high school (either living with parents or extended family), and three participants lived independently off campus (in an apartment owned by family, or with extended family members). All participants but two were enrolled in 5 winter semester courses, while two students had completed winter semester and were continuing with part-time first year spring semester courses.  Six participants grew up in Alberta, 1 participant was from British Columbia and 2 immigrated to Canada from the Eurasian region and South Asia before the age of 10 and have resided in Calgary since. In consultation with committee members, the decision to cease recruitment efforts was based on sample diversity and hearing similar stories and themes from participants.

A consideration and common problem faced when recruiting participants involves the requirement by ethics that participants must volunteer, and not be coerced or invited to participate in a study. The problem arises when those volunteering do not necessarily offer the best data (Moules et al, 2015). However, if a student volunteers, it must be assumed that they volunteered for a reason and "…when one listens deeply enough, there is a truth that needs to be heard" (Moules et al., 2015, p.90). Three participants in this study who perceived themselves to be flourishing did, in fact, experience mental and

physical health challenges but were, however, able to share many experiences of flourishing. An in-depth exploration of these challenges, explored in chapter 4, will unearth how these participants managed and persevered and coped with these challenges.

**Recruitment**

Predictors of flourishing within post-secondary contexts include student engagement, involvement and academic preparedness. Since students were not given a rating scale to pre-determine whether they were flourishing, students who came forward self-identified as flourishing (feeling good and functioning well most of the time) within while making the transition directly from high school to their first year of university. It was assumed that those students who have already achieved high academic grades, as a prerequisite for being accepted into a degree program, most likely will have at least one reason to experience flourishing. Student involvement was excluded from the criteria it may have hindered students' participation as these students may have made the conscious decision to not be involved on or off campus to focus on their studies, which was the case for some students in this study. Students with previous life experience (work or other post-secondary schooling) prior to entering university may adapt and cope better with the transition than students transitioning directly from high school with no previous experience and may find the transition to be more challenging as a result of unrealistic expectations of university and unfamiliarity with the university environment prior to entrance.  For this reason, the study focused on a specific cohort of 1$^{st}$ year students – those transitioning directly from high school. Participant were therefore included based on the following criteria:

- Age 18-20

- First year of university

- Graduated from high school in the last 12-18 months

- Enrolled in a full time degree program

- Perceive self as feeling good and functioning well most of the time

According to the Keyes' Dual Continuum Model of Mental Health, it is possible for individuals to flourish with a mental illness; therefore, students were not excluded from the study for voluntarily disclosing a diagnoses of mental illness as long as they met the inclusion criteria. Keyes' operational definition of flourishing situates flourishing within a model of mental health that conceptualizes mental health as a state in which all members of society can flourish even those with a mental illness (Keyes, 2010).

A total of 40 recruitment posters were displayed in designated pre-approved common areas around campus (adjacent to the wellness center, on all floors of the library, within faculty common areas, in main hallways on campus, outside of the food court, adjacent to the campus recreation center). The posters used plain language, various fonts and color to engage students in becoming familiar with the study (appendix F). Recruitment efforts involved contacting and meeting with various stakeholders engaged with first year students. In a meeting with the Residence Manager I was able to gain permission to display recruitment posters in the various residences on campus. I was not permitted to gain access to the email addresses of first year students, therefore, faculty chairs were contacted to request permission for them to forward recruitment emails (appendix G) to 1st year students across all MRU degree programs. The recruitment email was then forwarded to Student Advisors within each degree programs or sent directly to

students by the Faculty Chair. Degree programs were encouraged to post on or share with MRU approved social media outlets on campus.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Once contacted by a student, and the inclusion criteria were met, the student was emailed a copy of the consent form (appendix H) for review. This provided students with an opportunity to review consent at their own leisure and ask questions before making any commitment to participate in the study. Students were encouraged to contact the lead researcher with questions and/or clarification regarding the content of the form or the study itself. After receiving confirmation of interest in proceeding, a mutually agreed time and date for the interview was arranged in an MRU library meeting room. On the day of the interview, a $20.00 honorarium (gift card to the Chinook Centre Mall) was given prior to reviewing the consent form in person with the lead research and ensuring that all aspects of the consent were clearly understood, questions were answered and clarification was provided to the student's satisfaction.

*Demographic information.* The information contained in the Demographic Form (appendix I) was reviewed briefly prior to the interview. This form was a helpful to prompt me in asking more pointed questions to facilitate a deeper discussion and understanding of the factors contributing to flourishing within the university context. For example, a list of on campus involvement would provide an opportunity to engage in a conversation about how this involvement contributed to ability to feel good and function well while making the transition to first year, whether it resulted in them experiencing a sense of belonging to the university environment or their ability to expand social networks. Obtaining demographic information from each participant contributed to a

deeper understanding of the individual differences and nuances among a diverse sample

of students of different ethnic, cultural and geographic backgrounds who have lived

experience of flourishing within this context and transitional period to enhance the rich

and unique experience of flourishing (Laverty, 2003).

   ***Semi-structured interview.*** In-depth semi-structured interviews are the most

common data collection method involving interpretive research (Smith, Flowers &

Larkin, 2009) and was the prime method for collecting data in this study. An open ended,

less structured interview process allowed participants to define the world in their own

way (Creswell, 2013). The interview took on a conversational nature keeping in mind that

the topic is the central component of the interview. Listening intently to what the

participant was saying and exploring, as opposed to guiding and controlling the

conversation (Fleming et al., 2003; Cohen et al., 2000). The aim of having a conversation

with the participant is to become fully immersed in the phenomenon of interest (Fleming

et al., 2003) and encourages the interview process to say as close as possible to the lived

experience (Laverty, 2003). The interviewer guides them into deeper interpretation

through "careful and mindful listening and skilled questioning…" (Moules, 2015, p.89).

My experience as a psychiatric nurse contributed to gaining a deeper understanding of

flourishing. An awareness that part of this role was to counsel and teach, therefore, a

conscious effort to remind myself of my role as a researcher – that I'm not a clinician

and, therefore, must curb the tendency to slip back into these familiar ways. Psychiatric

interviewing is in many ways similar to the conversational style of the semi-structure

interview, "…a creative act. It is a study of movement and change. It is unique. The

circumstances, the environment, and the people involved can never be duplicated. Even if

the interviewer and interviewee wanted to replicate their own interaction, they could not for with each sentence their relationship has subtly changed. With each sentence they define a new phenomenon" (Shea, 1988, p. v).

The exact wording, or order, of questions is not predetermined for the semi-structured interview and involves open ended questions with probes (Merriam, 1998), allowing the researcher to respond to the "situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam, 1998, p. 951). The semi-structured interview guide for this study was informed by the four operational definitions of flourishing and indicators found within each of the definitions (Butler and Kern, 2016; Diener et al., 2010; Huppert and So, 2013; Keyes, 2007a). By exploring the similarities and differences among each of the four operational definitions with my thesis supervisor led to re-working the questions to ensure that they were worded in a way that would engage participants and encourage them to elaborate on their experiences of flourishing.

In the development of this guide, I wanted to ensure that questions were broad and open ended to prompt participants to have a conversation about their experiences of flourishing. To ensure questions were appropriate for the cohort of students in this study I consulted four young adults accessible to me between the ages of 16 and 21 (two in first year university, one in fourth year university and one in grade 12). Suggestions and comments were put forth by the students and then discussed with my thesis supervisor prior to making any changes to the final draft. A MHP Specialist at MRU reviewed the final draft and no further changes were made. The following provides a rationale for including each question within the semi-structured interview guide (appendix E).

**Question 1.** *Making the transition to university can be both exciting and challenging at the same time. What has it been like for you?* Beginning with a broad question is a non-threatening way of engaging the participant in conversation and a general direction for the inquiry (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This question allowed participants to describe both the excitement and challenge of making the transition to university while opening the door to probe deeper into the specifics that may lead to understanding how challenges have been overcome to unearth aspects of their psychosocial functioning.

Potential Prompts: *Tell me a bit about what you thought university life was going to be like when you were in high school? How do these thoughts compare with your actual experience since coming to university?*

**Question 2.** *Tell me about some of the challenges that you have faced and good things that have come about (meeting new people, getting involved on campus, developing new skills/knowledge) while making this transition.*

This question is an attempt to unearth how participants perceive challenges and to explore particular elements of flourishing related to psychological and social functioning once again. This question encourages another opportunity to explore the challenges during this transition particularly if only the exciting experiences were shared. How participants respond to challenges in the experiences they share may provide an understanding of the strategies they used and resources they have drawn upon and understand individual level factors that promote flourishing during this dual transition.

Potential Prompts: *Looking back on these challenges and opportunities what impact have they had on you? What strategies have you used or are you using to help you work*

*through some of the opportunities and challenges? Can you tell me about some of the*

*emotions that are running through your head when faced with challenges and*

*opportunities at university? What goals do you hope university will help you achieve and*

*how do you stay focused on your goals during this transition?*

      ***Question 3.*** *How have you changed or grown since coming to university?* This

question focuses on the indicators related to psychological functioning. Students who are

flourishing see challenges in terms of the ability to grow from experiences even when

they are challenging. Originally, I suspect that this question may be challenging for

participants to answer as it is broad, however, the next chapter will reveal how insightful

participants were and how the university context is an environment that encourages

personal growth and development. The prompts were designed to allow participants to

elaborate on the factors contributing to personal and social growth, in addition to

individual and external level factors.

Potential Prompts: *What experiences have you had that contributed to this change?*

*If you were to compare yourself to the person you were in high school, what things have*

*you noticed to be different about yourself? I'm curious to know what*

*personality/character traits helped you finish high school and get into university? How*

*are these traits helping you now during this transition? What life experiences including*

*those outside of university contributed to where you are today? How might your close*

*friends and family describe you as a person now? Are there any changes from when you*

*were in high school?*

      ***Question 4.*** *What has it been like establishing a social life and making new*

*friends in university? What do you value most about these friendships? How do they*

*differ from your relationships off campus?* This question was developed based on

involvement and social functioning as strong predictors of flourishing within the

university context. The prompts included account for other aspects of social well-being,

such as civic engagement and sense of belonging to the university environment and social

support/resources internal and external to the university context.

Potential Prompts: *What has it been like for you to make connections and be*

*engaged in university life? Has it been easy for you? Does this hinder or help with the*

*transition to university? This may include things like campus activities, involvement in*

*sports, clubs or support groups, volunteering time, learning communities, student*

*council, meeting with faculty, cultural events. What experiences help you feel a sense of*

*belonging to the university environment? We're all human and need help at times and*

*need the support of others. What are your experiences with seeking out the support of*

*others in this transition? This could be people, places, things both informal or formal.*

*Examples might include faculty, the wellness center, friends in time of need, support*

*outside of university such as family, friends and community organizations, services or*

*resources.*

**Question 5.** *From your perspective what does it mean to flourish while making*

*the transition to university? If you reflect back on the experiences you've shared with me*

*today would you describe yourself as someone who is flourishing? How so?* I am

interested to know how university students define and experience flourishing while

making the transition from high school. Leaving this question until the end gives

participants an opportunity to reflect on the experiences they've shared. This question is

too broad and abstract to begin the conversation therefore other ways of understanding student's experiences was accomplished by avoiding the term flourishing up front.

*Question 6.* *Some researchers have studied and written about flourishing in similar and different ways. Is there any one indicator or combination of indicators that best defines flourishing for you? Why? Show the participant Hone et al.'s chart containing the 4 operational definitions by Keyes, Seligman, Diener, and Huppert.* Asking participants about flourishing and showing them definitions of the four operational definitions of flourishing *at the end* of the interview is designed to allow participants to make meaning of their own experiences without influence of the four operational definitions of flourishing in the literature. If participants were asked at the beginning of the interview this may influence how they might answer the interview questions thereafter.

As the interviewer, my job was to cue into those aspects of the participants' responses that signal to me their experiences of flourishing. Then, based on my pre-understandings pursue experiences of flourishing and ignore responses that detract from exploring participant's experiences of flourishing (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). A concern of the participant-led conversational interview is that the participant may not talk about what is of interest to the researcher; therefore, the researcher must be skilled in redirecting the conversation back to the phenomenon of interest (Cohen et al., 2000). For example, flourishing may be too broad or abstract a concept for students to discuss. Therefore, the word flourishing in the interview guide questions was left at the end once participants shared their experiences and were able to reflect back on the conversation.

**Field notes.** Field notes provide an opportunity to record details that emerge during the recorded interview (such as initial interpretations, adjustments for subsequent interviews, early impressions and emerging understandings) and serve as a basis for analysis (Kahn, 2000). It is "…a record of the researcher's own construction of meaning" (Kahn, 2000, p.66). Initial notes were taken immediately after the interview in the MRU library. Brief phrases and words were written as a reminder of critical points in the conversation - further expansion and reflection followed. Notes were written as comprehensively as possible without judgment or evaluation (Lofland & Lofland, 1999). Each interview was transcribed meticulously, indicating pauses, mis-hearings, mistakes and speech dynamics (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008) by the lead researcher. Reflective notes were written after each encounter with the data and after weekly discussions with my thesis supervisor and with each encounter with the data. Re-reading of chapters 1, 2 and 3 facilitated further though and reflective noting in terms of how to incorporate my preunderstandings in the unfolding of data analysis and writing in the chapters that follow.

## Hermeneutic Analysis

Hermeneutics goes beyond mere description of core concepts and essences in search of meanings that are not always apparent to participants in their common life practices (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Hermeneutic analysis takes on a different approach to analysis than would a purely descriptive phenomenological approach. Descriptive phenomenology aims to yield a synthesis of meaning units from the data to arrive at a place of understanding about participants' experiences referred to as the structure of experience. The goal of this process involves working towards meaning through a

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predetermined structured process resulting in an integrated statement about the experience (Laverty, 2003). In contrast with a purely descriptive approach, the goal of hermeneutic analysis is aimed at the process of *co-construction* between the researcher and participant, by engaging in a hermeneutic circle - an expanding circle of ideas that is created by using a back and forth process with study participants, which helps the researcher to discover true meaning in the experiences (Gadamer, 2013, p. 302; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

Central to hermeneutic analysis is the notion that neither the whole, or the individual parts, can be viewed separately and must be understood in reference to one another (Laverty, 2003; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As a result, multiple realities and pre-understandings are brought to light amidst a dialectical movement among the parts and the whole, whereby the context in which the text and language are immersed is brought forth in the interpretation of meaning. This interpretation arises from this fusion of horizons of both participant and researcher (Laverty, 2003). Interpretive phenomenological analysis is strongly influenced by Gadamer and Heidegger's philosophical underpinnings, therefore the following step by step approach outlined by Smith and colleagues (2009, p. 82-103) was used to guide the analysis phase of this study:

1. *Reading and re-reading* – Listening and re-listening to audiotaped interviews to become reacquainted with the atmosphere and setting of the interview. Close reading and rereading of transcribed texts as a means of becoming immersed in the data. This is a stage of active engagement with the data and a process of

getting to know the participant's world. Transcribing interviews on my own allowed for a deeper immersion and familiarity with the data.

2. *Initial noting* – Field notes were used to record the details of the nature and origin of emerging interpretations. This step merged with multiple readings, making notes of thoughts, observations and reflections while reading the texts, taking note of reoccurring phrases, questions, emotions while reading and descriptions of texts and language used (recorded in the margins of the transcript and as separate documents shared with my thesis supervisor). Reflections involved the following: what was actually being discussed, the use of language, how might my personal characteristic affect rapport with the participant, how my presuppositions (preunderstandings) influence my interpretations. In cases where a participant's narrative or theme did not fit with the emerging interpretations, transcripts were revisited in case something was been missed or misunderstood.

3. *Developing emergent themes* – At this stage the researcher attempts to reduce the amount of detail produced from the transcription and written notes while at the same time engages in mapping interrelationships, making connections and patterns between exploratory notes. If the exploratory notes are done in a comprehensive manner initially they should closely tie to the original transcript. The hermeneutic circle comes into play at this point where the whole of the interview becomes a set of parts but then comes together in another new whole near the end of analysis. The authors caution, "At each stage the analysis does indeed take you further away from the participant and includes more of you… 'the you' is closely involved with the lived experiences of the participant – and

the resulting analysis will be a product of both of your collaborative efforts",
(Smith et al., 2009, p.91-92).

4. *Searching for connections across emergent themes* – This step involves the charting or mapping of how the researcher thinks the themes fit together. This is not meant to be prescriptive process and not all emergent themes will be included. A re-evaluation of the importance of some themes may be involved in this process where the researcher will return to transcripts. This is the point in which all important and most interesting themes that highlight participant's experiences are brought together in clusters.

5. *Moving to the next case* – This stage involves moving to the next participant and repeating the above 4 steps. The authors discuss the importance of viewing the next participant separate from previously analysed participants, however this is an impossible task as the researcher will now be influenced by what was previously found and this would be a task inconsistent with hermeneutic philosophical underpinnings.

6. *Looking for patterns across cases* – This where connections across cases is determined. In looking for patterns the researcher is interested in how a theme from one participant influences or illuminates other participants. The researcher is looking to identify themes that are the most prominent or potent. Sometimes this requires that themes are reconfigured or relabelled. At this stage the researcher may find that some participants represent unique idiosyncrasies but also have shared higher order qualities.

**Methods for Ensuring Trustworthiness**

The goal of hermeneutics is to provide the reader with proof that what is presented is credible, believable and recognizable (Moules et al., 2015). Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research can be compared to the reliability and validity of findings in quantitative research. Trustworthiness involves four key concepts common to all qualitative methodological approaches: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These concepts and provisions of how they can be addressed using Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics will follow.

**Credibility.** Hermeneutic phenomenology embraces the many interpretations and the diversity in, "the perspective from which the interpreter approaches the text, or how the text is questioned; and the embodied linguistic, cultural, historic and sociopolitical pre-understandings each interpreter brings to the text, or how the text is listened to" (Geanellos, 1998a, p. 158). Furthermore, the same researcher interpreting the data again at a later date may have a different understanding; therefore, there is much diversity and no finality in the way a phenomenon can be interpreted. Validation of interpretations is not recommended by way of member checking and is inconsistent with hermeneutic inquiry (Geanellos, 1998a; Moules et al., 2015). The expectation of hermeneutic inquiry is that the researcher's interpretation is handed over and does not simply rest in the hands of the researcher, this type of work does not seek consensus of others or absolute agreement, "When interpretations go out of our hands and into the hands of others, they situate themselves exactly where they are supposed to be – in movement and play and we cannot even save the work from our own re-interpretations. This is the curse and gift of this kind of work" (Moules et al., 2015, p.136). The participants are not the topic of a

hermeneutic inquiry, they are chosen for their ability to shed light and bring knowledge to the topic and expand understanding of the phenomenon that is the central focus of the conversation (Moules et al., 2015), in this case flourishing.

A way of accomplishing this is to provide participant excerpts that allow the reader to decide if the researcher's interpretations reflect the text (Geanellos, 1998b). Making explicit the previous research and pre-understanding that have influenced my interpretations, providing thick descriptions of flourishing excerpts from participants and debriefing with my thesis supervisor and committee members are ways of ensuring credibility. An understanding of the university context and participant demographics would deem the research to be more credible. To gain understanding of the MRU context I have consulted with MRU committee members, met with a MRU Health Promotion Specialist, spent time immersed in the university environment observing the student population, reviewed MRU reports on Mental Health and consulted the MRU website to understand student mental health programs and services offered on campus. Prior to engaging in semi-structured interviews a demographic sheet (appendix D) was given to participants to account for some of these factors. Reflective notes were maintained throughout the study. Reflections were discussed and linked to academic theory as a way of ensuring credibility. Regular meetings with my thesis supervisor and ongoing communication and meetings with committee members was another way of ensuring credibility.

**Transferability.** The degree to which the research can be transferred to other contexts (settings, times, situations and people) is referred to as transferability in which details of the findings and methods are compared to similar situations (Smith et al.,

2009). In hermeneutic inquiry generalizability and transferability are not where truth lies, rather truth lies in the extent to which the research raises more questions and extends understanding (Moules et al., 2015). Furthermore, no two universities are alike, they may have different approaches to promoting student mental health, different demographic factors and utilize different models or frameworks. "Ultimately, the results of a qualitative study must be understood within the context of the particular characteristics of the organization....and …geographical area…in which the fieldwork was carried out. In order to assess the extent to which findings may be true of people in other settings, similar projects employing the same method but conducted in different environments could well be of great value" (Shenton, 2004, p.71).

**Dependability.** Another standard for judging the trustworthiness of qualitative studies refers to the dependability, or the consistency of the inquiry process over time. The reader will be looking to see if the researcher has been diligent, avoiding careless mistakes in the data collection, data analysis and reporting of the research. The more consistency employed during the process, the more dependable the results will likely be (Creswell, 2013). As mentioned a reflective journal and field notes have been maintained throughout the study along with regular meetings with my thesis supervisor and committee members.

**Confirmability.** Hermeneutics does not aim to confirm findings, nor are findings ever complete and absolute truths (Moules et al., 2015). Audit trails are often used as a method for reducing bias in a study more consistent with descriptive phenomenology. Admission of the researcher's beliefs and assumptions, recognizing the shortcomings of the study methods and potential effects and a detailed in-depth methodological

description to allow for scrutiny of the research are provisions that can be made to ensure confirmability of the data collected (Moules et al., 2015; Shenton, 2004; Creswell, 2013).

## Ethical Considerations

Research that is conducted in an ethical manner in both research practices and relationships contribute to the quality and trustworthiness of a study (Rule & John, 2011). This study was ethically reviewed and approved by Dalhousie Research Ethics Board (Dalhousie University, 2017) and Mount Royal University Research Ethics Board (Mount Royal University, 2017c). Funding was awarded by the Dalhousie University Nursing Research and Development Fund to cover the costs associated with this study.

Participation in the study involved obtaining written voluntary informed consent (appendix H). Students who were interested and met the study inclusion criteria were given an overview of the study and provided a copy of the written consent form to review. Students were encouraged to contact the lead researcher with questions or clarification about the consent form in advance of scheduling an interview. Once an interview was scheduled, and prior to any further involvement, potential participants were given an honorarium in the form of a $20.00 gift card up front. The consent form was then verbally reviewed with the participant by the lead researcher. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study; however, once the interview was complete it was explained to participants that it would not be possible to remove participant data given that data analysis involved combining all data together and occurred simultaneously with data collection. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point during the interview and immediately at the end of an interview without negative repercussions or negative impact on academics. Once the participant

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had an opportunity to clarify, ask questions and raise concerns and in agreement to proceed, the participant and lead researcher signed two copies of the consent form, one copy was given to the participant and the second retained by the lead researcher. Participants were within the age of consent (18 years in Alberta); therefore, written consent from a parent or guardian was not required.

The associated risks for participation were minimal due to the positive nature of the study (involving participants who perceive themselves as flourishing). As with any study, all potential risks must be considered. In the event that a participant disclosed a threat of harming self or others or reported any circumstance of abuse involving a child or adult, participants were informed that I would be required by law to report this to the appropriate authorities prior signing consent.

This study was voluntary; therefore, participants were informed that they could decline answering questions of a sensitive nature that may cause emotional distress. The MRU Wellness Center operates during day time hours from 8:00am - 5:00pm with daily openings for crisis appointments. Interviews were scheduled during day time hours when Wellness Services was operating in the unlikely event that a participant would need to access these services. There were no circumstances involving any type of psychological emergency situation during the course of data collection. All participants were provided a list of on and off campus resources and supports (appendix J) at the end of the interview. None of the participants interviewed for this study made the decision to withdraw for any reason at any point during or immediately after the interview. Pseudonyms were chosen by participants and used to protect anonymity for the duration of the study and in future.

**Conclusion**

This study's aim was to explore *the experiences of flourishing among university students making the transition directly from high school to university.* Chapter one concluded with an understanding of the necessary background information introducing and highlighting the need for a study of this nature. Chapter 2 began with a literature review on developmental and academic transitions and the evolution in the understanding of mental health and the concept of flourishing which highlighted the critical need to advance our knowledge of flourishing through qualitative means. In line with the research questions, my preunderstandings and worldview, chapter three articulated the rationale for a plan of, and approach to, inquiry using the philosophical underpinnings, concepts and guiding principles of Gadamer's hermeneutic phenomenology. Next, understandings that arose from participants sharing their lived experiences of flourishing amidst this transition to university are shared in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 takes the reader to a deeper level of interpretation towards an emergent understanding of flourishing within this context followed by a discussion of the implications for practice, policy and research.

## Chapter 4:  Understandings

**Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to (a) explore the experiences of flourishing and how flourishing is defined among students making the transition directly from high school to university, and (b) understand the factors that contribute to student flourishing in the first year of university amidst a developmental and academic transition. The philosophical underpinnings for this study are rooted in interpretive phenomenology; an approach that is consistent with the nature of the research question and my own worldview.

To reiterate, hermeneutic analysis is aimed at the process of *co-construction* between the researcher and participant, by engaging in a *hermeneutic circle* - an expanding circle of ideas that is created by using a back and forth process with study participants, which helps the researcher to discover true meaning in the experiences (Gadamer, 2013, p. 302; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). This process was immersed in the data collection, analysis and writing phases of this study. Central to any hermeneutic study is the notion that neither the whole, nor the individual parts, can be viewed separately and must be understood in reference to one another (Laverty, 2003; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As a result, multiple realities and pre-understandings are brought to light amidst a dialectical movement among the parts and the whole, whereby the context in which the text and language are immersed are brought forth in the interpretation of meaning. This interpretation arises from this fusion of horizons of both participant and researcher (Laverty, 2003).

*Play*, according to Gadamer, "…is another example of the movement of interpretation, of its vitality and contrast to prescribed formulae…To be caught up in the play of possible meanings demands more than merely forming a subjective opinion…" (Moules et al., 2015, p.42-43). The realization of the importance of play to hermeneutic inquiry became clear in the process of arriving at themes, sitting with these data and recognizing the possibilities of being *in play* with the data is always open, never complete, and not about arriving at a destination. Only new understandings open one to ongoing interpretations. Although creative *play* for the purposes of this study will come to an end, conceived by Gadamer as the *transformation into structure* - writing a finished version of hermeneutic research- it is only for the moment as you, the reader, will bring your own *prejudices, histories* and *horizons* from the past and present that will open the door for new possibilities and ways of understanding the concept of flourishing within this context and developmental period.

The step by step process for interpretive phenomenological analysis, outlined by Smith and colleagues (2009, p.82-103), was followed to arrive at the thematic understanding presented in this chapter. Moules et al.'s interpretation of Gadamer's philosophical worldview, described in Chapter 3, was used as the overarching framework for the emergent understandings that unfold in the following chapters. These understandings will initially appear to the reader as more descriptive in nature than interpretive and are aimed at answering the research question, introduced in Chapter 1: *What factors promote student flourishing during this development and academic transition*? This approach to analysis is consistent with the development of themes accompanied by transcript excerpts, suggested by Moules and colleagues (2015), as a

helpful process to organize the data and unearth the differences and similarities that exist

among participants. Later in this chapter, *what it means to flourish* will be explored from

the perspectives of the participants accompanied by an overview of the indicators within

the four operational definitions of flourishing (Butler and Kern, 2016; Diener et al., 2010;

Huppert and So, 2013; Keyes, 2007a) that resonated with participants.

The arrival of themes is never where a hermeneutic study ends, nor do endings

exist. Therein lies the challenge of hermeneutics. A study underpinned by Gadamer's

philosophy poses difficulties if the researcher ends with thematic reductionism as it runs

the risk of "creating a fixed standpoint and a solitary horizon" (McManus & Holroyd,

2007, p. 7), very different from the humanistic approach – an approach that is open to

possibilities that exist within the human consciousness (McManus & Holroyd, 2007). It is

therefore important to note that this study's journey of analysis will not end here.

In keeping with Gadamer's ambivalence towards method, Chapter 5 takes the

reader beyond emergent themes towards a new understanding of the phenomenon of

flourishing, within this developmental and academic transition by way of "…opening up

associations that strengthen understanding of the topic rather than focus in on a single

governing theme" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 117). Therefore, the extension of

understanding at a deeper level will follow in chapter 5 and address the second research

question: *How do first-year university students define and experience flourishing while*

*transitioning directly from high school?*

Chapter 6 will conclude this study with a discussion of the implications for

practice, policy and research, creating a space for further interpretations, revisiting the

concepts of *Universality and finitude* – the notion that understanding happens in language

and is never final or complete (Gadamer, 2013; Moules et al., 2015, p.35). This final

chapter will return to what we already know and shed light on new possibilities within

these domains and will address the strengths and limitations of this study. Lastly, as all

participants have expressed interest in receiving a copy of the final thesis, it is my hope

that they will reflect further and gain a new understanding of the self.

**Thematic Understandings**

I will begin this chapter with shedding light on the thematic understandings, that

arose from the data collection and analysis phases of this study, reflected in participants'

accounts of their experiences of flourishing represented by three timeframes: *Pre-

transition Period, Flourishing Amidst the Transition, and Flourishing Beyond First Year.*

The experience of flourishing was not without its challenges. Dialectic relationships

emerged that unearthed experiences of support and challenges within parental and family

relationships, positive and challenging aspects of high school, university and living

environments, and positive and trying aspects within the individual and for those

participants experiencing personal health challenges. Narratives of flourishing - inherent

to the individual, the family, the context, and community - evolved into themes situated

within these timeframes.

My preunderstandings of transitions, developmental theories and flourishing - in

terms of their multidimensional nature and movement through time - influenced my

questioning while in conversation with participants. I would be naive to believe that these

preunderstandings, or what Gadamer refers to as *prejudices*, did not influence the

conversation that ensued with participants. This involved purposely asking them about

three distinct time periods: a) what it was like before coming to campus, b) what it was

like during their transition, and c) where they saw themselves in the near and distant future. It became clear that all participants viewed their movement from high school to university in this way. For example, some students linked a portion of their perceived ability to flourish in first year to the pre-transition challenges they faced, demonstrating the inter-relatedness between these timeframes. In other instances, when participants were asked about their long term goals, it once again took them outside of the transition to share their short and long term aspirations.

The nine participants interviewed for this study showed tremendous courage and vulnerability as they shared intimate details about their experiences of flourishing. The themes presented next will explore the similarities and differences among participants and, to enhance understanding, I will highlight the contextual factors that speak to the uniqueness and complexity of each participant and the interconnectedness among each time period and theme.

### Pre-transition Period

"Understanding has a temporal dimension…there has to be something already there to interpret – then good interpretation attends to the history of the topic…we are in the flux of history, under the multifarious influences of our time and place. We can conscientiously do our best to clarify our understanding from within this flux, but what we cannot do is step out of history into a view from nowhere" (Moules et al., 2015, p.37-38). Like understanding, transitions take place over the course of time, as did flourishing from the perspectives of students amidst this developmental and academic transition. While this study included students transitioning directly from high school, the pre-

transition period was defined differently among participants and involved experiences preceding high school in many cases.

The *Pre-Transition Period* that many participants similarly shared, yet in unique ways, included five different kinds of experiences: *1. personal strengths and areas of personal challenges; 2. positive and trying aspects of personal health challenges; 3. family/parental support and challenges; 4. positive and challenging aspects of the high school environment; and 5. positive aspects of community involvement.* These themes will be explored next and linked with what is already known as well as unearthing new insights into the complexities and nuances of flourishing within this dual transition.

***Theme 1: personal strengths and areas of personal challenge.*** Many participants described areas of personal strength that they believed were either innate, or learned, prior to entering university. These personal strengths contributed to their ability to flourish, as well as withstand and overcome the challenges of making this dual transition, thus contributing to their thinking, feeling, or behaving in a particular way. In this excerpt Rose describes herself as a stubborn, determined, obsessed, and hardworking individual before entering her first year.

> "…*I am determined and when I set my heart on something then it's going to… I think I get so obsessed with an idea that I can't stop thinking about it and I will work my hardest to get there. I never really had a goal that hasn't been met fully. I've had goals change but I set goals pretty early on because I'm so stubborn I don't want to give them up so I find alternatives if it doesn't end up working out but so far getting to Mount Royal in high school was my biggest, so I use that to stay determined and get my grades up and really focus on my work and get that average…because the education program is an 85% average to get in and I got an 89 which is cutting it a little close but you know I really worked hard and I made sure I was balancing stuff at home so that helped me and just kind of brought that to university and that kind of helped me keep my goals on track…"*
> (Rose, Int. 1, 481-498)

These personal strengths can also be perceived as personal challenges or a condition required for personal growth. In this sense the use of the word stubborn struck me in terms of its positive and challenging characteristics. According to Collins English Dictionary (2018) to behave in a stubborn way means a person is, "…determined to do what they want and is very unwilling to change their mind". In this quote Rose demonstrates being stubborn in terms of her drive to achieve her goals of getting high marks and acceptance into university; therefore, stubbornness can be seen as a personal strength important for achieving goals.

Gabby and her experiences, having immigrated to Canada before the age of 10, taught her about what it takes to develop perseverance and emotional resilience, as well as the recognition that these qualities are personal strengths that can be developed over time. Not only did Gabby watch her parents struggle with immigrating to a new country, learning a new language and starting from scratch to build a better life, but Gabby also describes additional challenges that she encountered involving parental discord and her father's struggles with alcohol, all of which she chose to learn and grow from.

> *"...Because… like my family has gone through so much stuff going through all the changes and there has been so much stuff during my childhood too so umm…I don't like talk about it a lot but it's fine. So my dad he ended up…he used to work in [name of city] so when he'd be there he would be fine, but when he would come home he would end up drinking a lot so my family kind of had to go through that and my mom and I would always try to help him out and try to get it under control but um…unless like you want to change, you're not going to change, there was like that factor um…so that was a lot of my childhood and just being able to kind of push through that and just kind of continue to go to school and do everything I think that factor kind of helped me build the emotional resilience and kind of stability…"* (Gabby, Int. 6, lines 1099-1111)

The impact of challenging experiences on positive outcomes in Gabby's case cannot be underestimated. Making an intentional decision to push through challenging

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experiences, whether individual or family/parental, have been described as contributing to personal growth and flourishing in the pre-transition period and in the first year of university. Contrary to being a passive process, this personal growth involves the practice of self-reflection, making decisions about addressing challenges and having the courage to intentionally act to solve problems – resulting in flourishing. This process of flourishing also notes that parents have a role in both building and hindering the development of personal strengths needed to flourish in first year.

Many of the participants were able to identify areas of personal challenge experienced prior to first year. At the same time, these areas of personal challenge provided opportunities for growth in university, personal characteristics that participants wanted, or needed, to change to be successful with the higher level of expectations in university. Pam described her struggles with time management and attention, a skill that she attested to never being good at and having to make herself improve.

> *"…But time management I've always been terrible at…I probably always will be terrible at unless I can make myself do it. I don't have a big attention span and never have and not a lot of people…like my older brother does not at all, I'm kind of like him so I think it's just a matter of your self-discipline and like you have this that needs to get done and you have this amount of time and then you can do whatever else you need to do…"* (Pam, Int. 3, lines 257-264)

Pam was self-aware in the sense that she knew she needed to make a conscious effort to force herself to address this area of challenge. Academic success and flourishing in first year sometimes requires insight into what needs to change, making adjustments and taking action.

***Theme 2: positive and trying aspects of personal health challenges.*** Positive and trying aspects of *personal health challenges* were uniquely experienced by three participants in the pre-transition period. Personal health challenges before entering

university, both physical and mental, were characterized by participants as having both positive and trying aspects. Josephine left the familiarity and comfort of her family home and hometown and moved to campus residence, a new academic environment, and much larger city. Josephine's pre-transition struggles in high school with mental health and academics were influential in her developing positive coping strategies prior to entering first year.

> *"...I think that the struggles that I've been through with my mental health and things like stress and anxiety and difficulties in school have kind of formed these coping mechanisms which have turned into very healthy coping mechanisms, which is something that I'm very fortunate, many people don't face that situation..."* (Josephine, Int. 5, lines 554-559)

Being fortunate brings to mind that in some way Josephine feels lucky for the way things turned and acknowledges the importance of one's gratitude for a positive outcome, or positive turn of events. The idea of being 'fortunate' has connotations of passivity or inaction or can be likened to 'feeling lucky' or experiencing something positive 'by chance'. My impression of the word 'fortunate' translated into 'courage'. That 'fortunate' came from a deeper place of having experienced challenge and the personal growth that arose from being vulnerable. This in turn taught Josephine what it was like, not only to feel vulnerable but to acknowledge it and take action to overcome it experiencing positive outcomes as a result of being vulnerable – and having developed healthy coping mechanisms. It takes desire, intentional effort and practice to emerge from a place of challenge.

It became clear to me, when Penny shared her story with me, that flourishing is a unique experience for every individual and how one perceives oneself as flourishing is different for everyone. Prior to our interview, Penny cautioned me that her experiences of

flourishing may look different than those of the average healthy person. Penny's personal

health challenges have been present since birth as a premature triplet. Living with the

unpredictability of exacerbating symptoms, searching for treatments to alleviate

symptoms, struggles with the health care system and accessing the much needed supports

within the school system were significant hurdles that she had to overcome in the pre-

transition period. The following passage highlights how the absence of support for her

personal health challenges in high school influenced her seeking out Accommodation

Services in university.

> *"…One thing, is that I've never had accommodations in high school because nobody told me that I could. See that's the invisible chronic condition right? So my sister, she's in a wheel chair and she got accommodations just like that…but they don't see that for me. So I was like… I was like kind of worried right because I didn't get any IPP [Individualized Program Plan] in high school…I didn't have one and I was worried because a lot times you can carry that along to university. I didn't have that, I just kind of suffered through high school..."* (Penny, Int. 7, 1072-1095)

At several points in our conversation Penny mentioned "invisible" when referring

to how she felt in relation to others. This feeling of invisibility was thought-provoking not

only for the number of times the word was mentioned but for the significance and

emotion attributed to it during our conversation. Although Penny was successful in

seeking out and receiving support from Accommodation Services in first year, her

perception of invisibility was a result of having an invisible health condition and not

being acknowledged in high school which followed her into university making it more

challenging for her to flourish in the first year.

Having personal health challenges doesn't always falter towards difficulty. It was

evident from Penny's commitment since the age of 12 - to various counsels and

committees and her desire to give back in order to create change within the healthcare

system for others with disabilities - that she was finding a way to turn her challenges into making a contribution and positive change for others with similar experiences. Penny describes her challenging experiences within the health care system as the catalyst for this change which, in turn, influenced her career choice to enroll in the Bachelor of Nursing Program at MRU.

> *"...I used every single bad moment and good moment with doctors and health care professionals to promote change in the healthcare system and that's why I'm going into nursing. I thought there is a huge limit to what I can do outside of the healthcare system. I need to be in the system to help other people and really promote change..."* (Penny, Int. 7, 950-955)

Carlos discussed his pre-transition experiences in terms of his involvement in group therapy sessions before entering university. He shared that it gave him a wider perspective of the mental health challenges that others face. This changed his perspective about his own personal struggles with mental health before coming to university, in addition to gaining a new understanding of those experiencing similar challenges.

> *"...It gave me a wider perspective because...people tend to... bloat up their problems. They take a small problem and make it larger than it really is and then they use that as a justification to run away from it. But when you see people who are dealing with legitimate issues that are as big as they sound then it puts it into perspective just how small those problems that you are complaining about truly are. Then you can deal with them better. It also gives you a wide perspective that what people show on the outside isn't close to what they really feel. The person who's smiling that attends all the classes they may be in a situation where they may be breaking inside and we would never know..."* (Carlos, Int. 8, lines 1049-1060)

In conversation with Carlos, his description of others' tendency to *"bloat up their problems"* paralleled his own tendencies to do the same. In the pre-transition period, Carlos gained perspective on what it meant to him in terms of keeping things inside until they exploded which nudged him to take action to seek out on campus counselling as a preventive measure to avoid the *bloat* and potential blow-up associated with the stress of

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keeping things inside and hindering his success and ability to flourish in first year. The personal growth that emerged from Carlos experiencing personal challenges in the pre-transition period that resulted in him having the courage to make healthy choices and act in an intentional way. In addition to having learned from his own personal health challenges, he willingly shared lessons learned from his mother's mental health struggles growing up.

> "…*Because there's a lot of stigma about talking to a psychiatrist because when you talk to a psychiatrist it would feel as if you are acknowledging that there is something in fact wrong. But mainly because my mom often spoke to a psychiatrist this type of stereotype didn't fit with me. I went there because there are some questions that I can't approach with my family and friends, stuff personal that I want locked away but I still want to talk about...*" (Carlos, Int. 8, lines 1006-1013)

Carlos's courage to be vulnerable, both in our conversation and pushing himself outside of his comfort zone, highlights the internal struggle of wanting to lock away his uncomfortable personal experiences but then his willingness to be vulnerable and the personal strengths that were drawn upon to face his personal challenges head on. Carlos's pre-transition experiences associated with his mother's ability to seek out mental health support broke down the stereotypes and stigma associated with seeking out mental health support for himself. This example further illustrates the nuanced supportive role that family have in role modeling their own personal strengths influencing the actions of their children in promoting their own mental health.

*Theme 3: family/parental support and challenges.* All participants described family/parental support in the pre-transition period as a significant element that contributed to their ability to flourish in the first year of university. This included support for participants' decisions leading up to university, for the university and program of

choice, to parents having trust in their child's ability to make good decisions. Josephine described her upbringing as playing an important role in her personal growth from her mom having raised her in a very holistic way – contributing to her success in first year.

> *"...I think that the way that I was raised in a very health centered home. My mother raised us in a super holistic way and that has shaped the way I choose to cope with things and so the point that I'm at now, which is the point where I'm entering into adulthood is one that I have all these coping skills that work for me right now, so that's made me really successful I think..."* (Josephine, Int. 5, lines 560-566)

When I think of "holistic" on a professional and a personal level, this brings to mind all the aspects of development to include - social, cultural, spiritual, physical and mental well-being - and how nurturing these domains contributed to Josephine developing as a whole individual. This, in turn, helped her develop a variety of positive coping strategies to support her overall well-being in the pre-transition period and build upon these strategies in her transition to first year. *Entering into adulthood* – Josephine's description of the life stage in which she felt situated, is interesting to me in terms of not yet feeling like an adult and feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, supporting Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; 2004). The positive role of parents in fostering their child's developmental transition and supporting well-being in the pre- transition period was a factor contributing to Josephine's success and ability to flourish in university.

Alternatively, Alex talked about finding ways to push through and sometimes avoid, or resist, challenges related to her mom's high expectations and pressure to choose an academic pathway other than what she desired.

> *"...so my mom's a nurse and she's done her masters and she wants to do her PhD...she's just a very high achiever...she has high expectations of me. She also wanted me to be a nurse but I had very little interest in doing that so. My*

*dad...he was like whatever you want to do, like it's your kind of life. Like I said before my mom's kind of controlling…she was pushing me to do that but once I told her how excited I was about the program and like the avenues that would open up for me and that it was my interest as well, she was more kind of lenient, she was like ok this is cool…"* (Alex, Int. 9, lines 640-656)

During my conversation with Alex, she openly discussed the ongoing struggle with her mom's tendency to be overly involved or "control" her decisions which at times caused conflict in their relationship - both in the pre-transition and transition periods. Parents who are controlling tend to have a more authoritarian parenting style, wanting to govern, or manage, the decisions of their children (Marsiglia, Walczyk, Buboltz, & Griffith-Ross, 2007). Despite these challenges Alex found the courage to communicate her reasons for wanting to pursue her program of choice and gaining her mother's acceptance in choosing another program of study.

Charlotte, like many participants, spoke of the independence and autonomy that her parents afforded her in the pre-transition period, specifically in terms trusting her to do well which influenced her experiencing academic success in high school.

> *"…At home they would never ask me how I am doing at school because they had that sense of trust in me that I will do well on my own without them having to bother me and check in on me every so often which I really appreciate…"* (Charlotte, Int. 2, lines 150-153)

Authoritative parents, or autonomy supportive parents, default to an approach of explaining the reasoning behind rules and allowing children to learn from their mistakes. Children of this type of parenting tend to do well socially and academically, have fewer behavioral and mental health struggles, demonstrate leadership qualities, experience positive self-esteem - especially for women of authoritative parenting (Marsiglia et al., 2007; Schiffrin, Liss, Miles-McLean, Geary, Erchull, & Tashner, 2014). Charlotte's parents trusted that she was doing well in school and in fact this autonomy was a

contributing factor that allowed Charlotte to go on to be successful and meet the competitive pre-requisites required to get into the program of her choice. Most participants' parents had some form of post-secondary education. Josephine describes how this influenced her decision to attend university and how this was particularly important for her in terms of her female identity.

> *"...both my parents have received an education and my father has a master's degree and my mom received a bachelor degree and I've always been motivated to get an education especially as a female student..."* (Josephine, Int. 5, lines 230-234)

Alternatively, a few participants indicated that their parents received a high school education which was the driving force for them wanting to pursue a post-secondary education. Several participants in the pre-transition period identified family/parental challenges. The majority of these challenges were perceived as resulting in personal growth, and in some cases, having fueled participants' desire to succeed academically and flourish in first year. Family cultural values in the pre-transition period were identified by Mimi as a struggle as her parents had their own vision of what they thought was best for Mimi in terms of type of program and post-secondary institution that she would attend – in favor of university over college.

> *"...So like from an Asian household they're pretty strict and they have pretty limited occupations in their own mind so like um they're like oh doctor, lawyer, or like just high paying jobs basically and I like wanted to go into nursing and nursing is known in our household as a very tiring and very demanding job. Which they're not wrong about but there was a lot of pressure to go to a university rather than a college just because they feel like the longer you're at school the easier your life would be afterwards. That's their perspective on it..."* (Mimi, Int. 4, lines 645-653)

Other students experienced positive aspects of their family's ethnic heritage in terms of financial opportunities that they could apply for and receive. Gaining financial

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support because of her ethnic background gave Josephine a sense of freedom to be able to focus on her studies without having to worry about the added pressure of working to pay for tuition, residence fees and other associated expenses of living away from home. Having this support allowed Josephine to focus on activities that promoted her ability to flourish while making the transition to university.

> *"...So because I'm a Metis student obviously it's opened up huge scholarship opportunities for me and that's been huge in terms of all aspects of health, having adequate financial situation to buy proper food and afford books. I don't have any financial stress and that's a huge weight off my shoulders. I know many students face that stress and it can be a big challenge..."* (Josephine, Int. 5, lines 523-528)

In the pre-transition period, Pam experienced the death of a sibling prior to beginning her first year of university. Pam shared her experiences with, and the importance of, family support in both helping her make decisions about whether to attend, or postpone, university to allow her time to grieve the loss of her sibling. Having family support made Pam's decision to attend university easier knowing that she could move in with her sister in her first year and finding comfort in being able to support each other's grieving. Because Pam's sister had already made the transition from high school to university it also was an opportunity for Pam to learn from her sister's experiences to ease her own transition to first year.

> *"...recently one of my older brothers passed away last year, he was living with her...at the time they were roommates so when he passed she was living alone and I just couldn't not allow myself to not live with her especially when I had that option because she just lost one of her best friends as did I and we were both...we needed each other...* (Pam, Int. 3, lines 379-384)

This spoke to her resiliency or ability to bounce back from challenging times. This quote also speaks to the importance of having family support (her sister) in terms of supporting and needing each other. Without elaborating, Pam further shared that having

negative childhood experiences of her dad made her eager to leave her small town and do

bigger and better things with her life. In addition, her father had not gone to university

which became another reason for her wanting to pursue university. These combined

experiences contributed to her developing a sense of mental and physical stability in the

pre-transition period.

     ***Theme 4: Positive and challenging aspects of high school environment.*** Most

participants described themselves as excelling academically in high school and being

involved in various activities such as sports, clubs and committees within the high school

environment.  These activities provided opportunities to develop life skills that would

eventually contribute to their ability to flourish in first year university. There were many

positive aspects about the high school environment that participants identified had

prepared them for university including, the relationships they had with teachers, their

involvement in high school sports and committees, and enrolment in more academically

challenging high school programs which prepared them well for university. Josephine

discusses several positive aspects of her high school environment that helped her

flourishing in first year.

> *"…So when I went to high school I actually wasn't very happy at my high school*
> *so I ended up switching to a small town high school in my last year and I moved*
> *from a demographic of about 200 kids in my grade to about 80. So it was a lot*
> *different but it just meant that I had 20 kids in each class so immediately I*
> *established very close relationships with my teachers and there I was asking for*
> *references for my scholarships and asking for advice and they knew that I wanted*
> *to go to university, they were always pushing me, because of that experience they*
> *were always showing me how important and helpful good relationships with your*
> *professors and teachers can be. So immediately after I graduated I was receiving*
> *gifts from teachers and it was like hugging each other goodbye. That's how close*
> *the relationships were. I just knew that when I went to university I wanted to carry*
> *over some of those experiences because it made my experiences so much fuller so*
> *I kind of… I expected that it would be different from high school. I knew that I*
> *wasn't going to have the same close relationships but I knew that I wanted to form*

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*them so I asked my dad a couple of questions about how to start good*
*relationships with profs. He said send them emails, sit at the front of the*
*classrooms, so that's what I did..."* (Josephine, Int. 5, lines 315-335)

This quote highlights several important characteristics of the high school environment. In addition, it also takes into account Josephine's openness in taking advantage of opportunities that contributed to her academic success and in her relationships with her teachers. These close relationships with teachers taught her both the necessary skills and the importance of establishing these types of relationships in university. This quote also highlights the significance of Josephine's relationship with her dad in terms of asking him for advice on how to start good relationships in advance of heading into first year emphasizing the important role of family, that the skill of establishing relationships can be developed, and that preparation prior to entering university helps ease the first year transition. Additionally, Josephine's decision to switch intentionally from a larger to a smaller high school enabled her to form the relationships that would open the doors for opportunities that would allow her to flourish in her first year.

The level of difficulty of the high school program, prepared Gabby for the academic challenge of transitioning to university. Gabby shared that it was her decision, not her parents, to enroll in a high school that was more academically challenging in preparation for the higher level of academic expectations that she anticipated making the transition to university.

*"...so for me personally what I found extremely helpful is that in high school I*
*actually took IB, International Baccalaureate program, but it's actually like AP*
*[advanced placement] but more an international level program and there they*
*had really high expectations for us..."* (Gabby, Int. 6, lines 173-177)

Other participants believed that high school had not prepared them for the higher level of expectations in university. For example, many participants shared that

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their high school could have done a better job in terms of preparing them for making

the transition to university, in particular, writing papers. In addition, Mimi shared that

the leniency of high school, for example, allowing test rewrites, reinforced that there

were second chances which she thought did not do her any favors when having to

adjust to the higher academic expectations in first year. Mimi shared her lack of

passion for some courses in high school.

> *"...For my personal experiences, I was more excited than scared to go into university just because in high school they do require you to take all the 5 courses and I'm not too passionate about the social or like English..."* (Mimi, Int. 4, lines 9-12)

Mimi wasn't passionate about the high school curriculum which made her

more excited, than scared, to make the transition to university, highlighting the

importance of *academic engagement* in promoting flourishing in the first year of

university. Participants had a choice about whether they wanted to enroll in a program

and to choose a program they were interested in. Another challenging aspect of the

high school was related to the pressure of meeting the prerequisites to be accepted into

university and their program of choice to the point where it negatively affected their

mental health as Charlotte describes.

> *"...In high school I was super absorbed in my studies. I was always aiming for high marks and when I didn't get those high marks I would become super depressed or just feel like very negative emotions and that wasn't very good for me..."* (Charlotte, Int. 2, lines189-192)

Carlos's high school experience was unique compared to that of other

participants. He described himself as an underachiever, someone who passively listened

and was disengaged in subjects that held no significance or interest to him, resulting in

him applying just enough effort to get by.

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*"...maybe it was just I got tired because when you're an underachiever you're doing the bare minimum to get through the day. Every day is the same day. I can't even remember anything that happened in high school it was all the same one day to the next. So I think the main thing is going through those 3 years of high school with that same attitude, the same day over and over again was its own personal hell because you got so bored. There's still more I can do in university to get outside of my shell and develop but the point is at least I'm making an effort and doing something, anything so that it's not the same day over and over and over again..."* (Carlos, Int. 8, lines 816-826)

Carlos described the attitude he had in high school as his own "personal hell". Late night crunch studying, procrastination and poor time management skills dominated his high school days. Coming from a place of challenge in high school in the moment is grueling. The experience of drudging by day-to-day in high school propelled him to become more engaged in university because he was interested in the course work and program of study. He also knew that this wasn't enough to be successful in his first year and needed to make a change.

***Theme 5: positive aspects of community involvement.*** Several participants were involved in activities outside of high school environment. These activities included community involvement in the form of volunteer, or paid, work and sometimes both. These pre-transition contexts equipped participants with necessary life skills associated with making new friends, communicating with others, managing time, learning to push through, and learning the impact of making a social contribution. Alex applied the life skills she attained from her community involvement in the pre-transition period contributing to her success in first year.

*"...So I knew that I needed extracurricular activities somewhat to get into law school or something like that, if I wanted to do it, so I started early on so that's somewhat prepared me in like managing my time, communicating, letting people know that this is what's happening, so they know they're on the same page as you. So like communication is a big one that I've learned. Time management like I said. Organization definitely through my work at the [name*

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*of organization]. That really helped me gain perspective as well and like*
*prepared me for kind of like taking life not for granted…stuff like that…"*
(Alex, Int. 9, lines 270-280)

Alex describes having a purpose for engaging in pre-transition extracurricular

activities (work and volunteer activities) in terms of developing better time managing,

organization and communication skills. Gaining perspective in terms of not taking

anything for granted is a way of feeling grateful and appreciative of your own life and

having empathy for others who are less fortunate. Learning to be responsible and

communicating with others and making a social contribution were important areas of

personal growth. Gabby's involvement in summer employment was a context in the pre-

transition period that provided her the opportunity to develop life skills that were similar,

yet different, from those of Alex.

*"… [Name of organization] … that job kind of helped me to juggle things and*
*to kind of learn that I can push through things. So in my first two years I ended*
*up…standing outside in like the super hot sun for 4 hours at a time and it*
*sounds really bad… but if you're strong enough to push through it teaches you*
*that you can really do it and with nursing…that first shift work I'll be able to*
*do that. I've already had that experience where it's been so demanding*
*physically I thought that I would give up and just quit and leave but I pushed*
*through it and kind of was able to work my way up. And with [name of job] I*
*kind of have to deal with a lot of people who are frustrated with things or just*
*aren't clear about other things so that also helps me build that communication*
*piece and with that job I really like it but it's hard. But it also made me that*
*friend group that I kind of had for the four years that I worked there..."*
(Gabby, Int. 6, lines 591-605)

Working in the pre-transition period provided an opportunity to practice and test

out life skills before going to university. Building the necessary confidence in terms of

knowing you can do it and the gift of accomplishment at the end of knowing what

pushing through and hard work can do. Community involvement in the pre-transition

period resulted in many positive opportunities and outcomes for Penny as well in terms of

the social support network that she established from the age of 12 and what it had taught

her in terms of learning self-advocacy skills related to her personal health challenges.

This community involvement was described by Penny as a safe place where she felt

comfortable sharing her unique struggles and successes.  In addition, the pre-transition

committee involvement facilitated her being able to advocate for academic support in

order to minimize the added stress and unpredictability associated with her health

challenges.

> *"… In high school, I was already emailing my professors to say hi my name is [name of participant]. I'll be in your class starting in September.  I've had these conditions, if I leave the room please keep in mind that I might be taking care of blah, blah, blah, blah. Like I was already proactive because I learned all this stuff early on and so you know getting registered with accessibility services it was like awesome, cool. I never had that resource before but I also knew exactly what to do with it because I had been doing it on my own throughout high school and so I think going through those things really helped me with these changes. One because I was always in a group of people who supported me no matter what…who knew my background and knew the challenges I was going through. Most people in my counsel heard my healthcare story. So they know me intimately because of the challenges I had. That hurdle is done, they know me, I can go straight to what I'm worried about and they're also… a lot of them are in university now too so I can look to these people for their advice about university and I guess also with these different things with the transition to university. I've already done a lot of the committee work, kind of prepared me to talk to people who have a higher status..."* (Penny, Int. 7, lines 1033-1054)

Her ability to plan ahead and make responsible decisions about what she needed

to do set her up to be successful. The committees that Penny had been actively involved

in during the pre-transition period allowed her to develop the support network that she

needed and carried with her to ease her transition and promote her academic success in

first year.

The pre-transition period is linked to Gadamer's concept of *historically affected*

*consciousness* meaning that the horizon of the present is always affected by the past

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(Gadamer, 2006; McManus Holroyd, 2007). The pre-transition period explored some of the factors within this time period - leading up to making the transition to university - that influenced participants' perceived flourishing amidst the transition. These included, individual and family level factors in addition to high school and community level factors, and, for a few participants, factors related to personal health challenges. In the next time period *Flourishing Amidst the Transition,* similar themes emerged with the exception of contextual differences (university and the living environment). Although the pre-transition period was not the focus of this study, it influenced participants' ability to flourish while making the transition to first year university. Given that the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of flourishing *amidst* the transition, a more extensive exploration of this time period will follow.

### Flourishing Amidst the Transition

Participants in this study perceived themselves as flourishing while making the transition directly from high school to university. Factors contributing to their ability to flourish in first year were interpreted as being uniquely experienced and contextually and culturally driven. Participants were interviewed close to completion of their first year of university. For this reason, they were able to share many rich narratives of their experiences of flourishing over the course of their first year. Alternatively, if participants had been interviewed at the beginning of first year they would have had fewer rich in-depth experiences. Furthermore, participants may not have perceived themselves as flourishing due to the added stress of their only having begun to adjust to a new environment.

*Flourishing Amidst the Transition* involved the following themes related to: *1. personal strengths and areas of personal challenges, 2. positive and trying aspects of personal health challenges, 3. family/parental support and challenges, 4. positive and challenging aspects of the living environment, 5. positive and challenging aspects of the university environment, 6. positive and challenging aspects of community involvement.*

**Theme 1: personal strengths and areas of personal challenge.** All participants identified many personal strengths that contributed to their ability to flourish in first year, some of which involved personal coping and self-care strategies. Many of these strengths were similar to the personal strengths identified in the pre-transition period. University provided a context for which participants could enhance and build upon personal strengths and improve in areas of personal challenge. Rose talks about some of the coping strategies she used to reduce stress and promote her physical health and mental health during the transition to university.

> "…I make sure I sleep. I don't lose sleep over an assignment so that helps me stay focused and I work on my assignments. I start them usually about 3 weeks before they're due just in case anything happens and then I can focus on whatever just happened in particular my grandma…I finished all of my assignments before she was even diagnosed and that was 3 weeks before exams were supposed to start and I'd already finished everything except for education. You know I'd get people to help me with looking over my work and making sure that it's reasonable to hand in and I talk to my professors if I need to and instead of going home and napping between classes I come to the library because I know I'm more productive here so I work on some stuff… so I think it's just how I manage my time is more effective than some university students so I know how to stay on top of things and not let some things slide under the radar until it's too late..." (Rose, Int. 1, lines 234-249)

Rose identifies that getting enough sleep was an important aspect that allowed her to be successful in first year. Planning ahead, managing time and getting assignments done in advance are life skills that gave her the freedom to deal with any unexpected challenges

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that might interfere with her academic success, for instance, the unexpected death of her grandmother. Rose's courage to be vulnerable and ask for help was a personal strength that she shared in this example and her openness during our conversation confirmed this courage to be vulnerable. Similarly, Charlotte described the stress associated with the higher demands and expectations of university and the self-care strategies she used to strike a balance between feeling overwhelmed with schoolwork.

> *"...For mental health I find that if I become super overwhelmed with schoolwork it really takes a toll on my mental health so I really make sure I take the time to do self-care. What I like to do is watch movies, hang out with friends, my friends from [name of university], making sure I have enough time to spend with them. Reading books as well just to take my mind away from the study material..."* (Charlotte, Int. 2, lines 376-382)

The link between mental health and academics is evident in Charlotte's excerpt and ways of balancing the two with meaningful self-care activities as well as ensuring that she fits this into her busy schedule contributed to Charlotte flourishing in first year.

It was common for many participants to share their personal challenge of being able to ask for help. For many it was problematic in the sense that it was perceived as a personal weakness, and in Alex's case, it was not something she had the confidence to do in first semester. Linking her pre-transition experience with asking for help – feeling judged and the stigma that she experienced when asking for help in high school - made it more difficult for her to ask for help while making the transition.

> *"...just knowing when to ask for help. I think that would be one that is hard to do sometimes... Because before in high school you could ask, it's not like you couldn't ask, it's just that there was this stigma like you ask like...What are you saying? That's a dumb question? What are you saying? Stuff like that. But I feel like now it's important to ask the questions because that's like... what are you going to need to go on... First semester I definitely didn't do that, no confidence at all. I think it was because it was a new place and not that many friends..."* (Alex, Int. 9, lines 287-303)

Why is it so difficulty to ask for help? The act of having to relinquish some of your control leaves one wide open for judgement by others for what you do not know is tough. The alternative to not asking for help is feeling overwhelmed, burnt out and frustrated. This involves a change in mindset or the way one thinks about challenges. I wonder also if Alex's lack of confidence in first semester could be related to her mom's inability to trust in her decision making abilities and allow her to be independent in this process? Learning to ask for help was a critically important factor for several participants in promoting flourishing in first year. Josephine illustrates the benefits of being able to ask for help during her first week after arriving on campus as ones that connected her to the campus environment and located resources that were helpful to ease her transition to university.

> *"...the first four days that I moved here I didn't have any classes yet. They kind of have you move in a little bit earlier so I kind of found the gym and I kind of walked around campus and did a little tour and figured out where everything was. When I first came here, kind of the first thing I wanted to do was get a sense of where everything was and kind of after that I wanted to get my textbooks. So I actually, I planned to get all my books used because I wanted to save money so I asked a bunch of people at the new student orientation, "Do you know where this is, do you know where this is?"...and I think it was two girls that I met that were in Nursing, second year, and they told me to go on this Facebook page so I went on the Facebook page and I immediately went on and I found MRU buy and sell textbooks and from there there was a whole bunch of links to like nursing groups and student help groups. There was a whole page about the library, so it was kind of like a spider web of all these connections I got hit with the first week so I took that time to get a really good sense of what resources I had around and then from there I had a really solid foundation when I started my classes a week later..."* (Josephine, Int. 5, lines 57-76)

Asking for help was clearly a skill that Josephine had confidence in using before coming to university. Being open to, and taking advantage of, the opportunities and people in her environment allowed her to develop what she called "a spider web" of connections. The analogy that she gave described perfectly what, in fact, had happened to

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her. It was clear that Josephine had many strengths coming into first year that she had developed in the pre-transition period. Josephine had the ability to self-reflect, identify areas of challenge and take action to deal with challenges head on.

There were many on campus opportunities and activities available to participants. However, getting involved on campus was not experienced by participants as a passive process and involved seeking out opportunities and intentional action to become involved in opportunities of interest, which in many cases required participants to be vulnerable and push themselves outside of their comfort zones. Additionally, many supports were available on campus to support students' academic success. In order to take advantage of these supports participants described the need to be open and willing to ask for and accept help – in other words - to allow themselves to be vulnerable. Gabby shares that asking for help was one of the biggest skills she had to learn transitioning to first year.

> *"…I think one of the biggest skills that I got was that ability to kind of ask for help if I need it. I used to not really do that in high school, I would be like oh it doesn't matter, I can figure it out. But here I realized that that time that you spend trying to figure it out by yourself if you just ask somebody you're gonna save so much time that you're going to put towards something else…Yeah, I think that the biggest one was being able to ask for help..."* (Gabby, Int. 6, lines 864-878)

Like Alex and Josephine, Gabby had to learn how to ask for help when she needed it. Alex came to this realization after first semester, while Josephine knew this was important coming into university. Gabby similarly identified this as a personal strength and a factor contributing to her ability to flourish in first year. The ability to push herself was another one of Gabby's strengths as she shares in this excerpt.

> *"…I think the biggest thing for me is the ability to push myself to do so much school and I don't know if my balance was necessarily a good balance but I felt good about it for myself and I guess that's the most important thing when you think about it so with every individual it's going to be different…the thing I tell*

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*myself, your marks…that's what you can do right now and that's what kind of lasts into the future. So if you can kind of work hard right now and get those good marks why not do it…I know not everything is about marks but I know it's kind of nice to be kind of sitting at that great big cushion of 4.0 and not have to worry about kind of stressing later on...*" (Gabby, Int. 6, lines 687-709)

Admittedly, after reflecting on this personal strength, she revealed that it likely was not a good balance in the moment but felt that the positive outcome of pushing herself outweighed the impact that it had on her in the moment. The personal strength of pushing hard, persevering during tough times didn't come from nowhere. Gabby's childhood experiences showed her what is was like to push through - her family immigrating to Canada at an early age and parental discord were challenges that Gabby chose to use as opportunities to grow from. She was taught early on, before coming to university, what is was like to get through tough times and know you were going to be ok once they were over.

In conversation with Carlos he describes the "hurt" associated with pushing himself outside of his comfort zone – meaning that it was very difficult and he had to force himself to do this. At the beginning of our conversation, I sensed some hesitancy in Carlos to allow himself to be vulnerable. I sensed that it was difficult having only met me that moment to open up and talk about his experiences with making the transition. Understanding that being vulnerable is hard for him leads to me understanding why Carlos begins our conversation by sharing that his transition was relatively smooth.

*"…There definitely wasn't bumps [transitioning to first year]. Ah…one is…the most obvious one was being the scale up in difficulty. University courses are tougher but personally me, I have a tendency to take all the difficulty and all the hardship onto myself. I don't like sharing that. So that's one of the reasons why I don't approach people, I just don't trust them with their work and the moments I do I've had so many cases where…because I've trusted them but I don't really…if they would uphold their end of the bargain, do their share of the work and even letting me check it...it's just been easier for me to take on everything by myself. It's got its pros and it's got its cons. Overall in the long term it's got its cons*

*because in the workforce you gotta be working with other individuals, it's not just about you..."* (Carlos, Int. 8, lines 33-44)

As our conversation progressed, I thought that Carlos allowed himself to be more open in talking about his experiences of flourishing - moving from a place of fearing vulnerability to recognizing that he was sitting with me for a reason. He openly shared his areas of personal challenge related to difficulties trusting others that resulted in him keeping many things inside and understanding that this was something he needed to change. As we progressed through our conversation Carlos gave many examples of progress in this area and of pushing himself outside of his comfort zone, one of many driving forces behind his ability to flourish in first year. Pam talked about needing to make herself manage her time better, another way of saying she needed to push herself to do, something she found personally challenging.

> *"...So it makes it easier for me to write a paper because my brain is more developed and it actually knows what it's trying to say now. But time management I've always been terrible at...I probably always will be terrible at unless I can make myself do it. I don't have a big attention span and never have and not a lot of people...like my older brother does not at all, I'm kind of like him so I think it's just a matter of your self-discipline and like you have this that needs to get done and you have this amount of time and then you can do whatever else you need to do..."* (Pam, Int. 3, lines 255-264)

Aside from pushing herself, interestingly Pam spoke of the cognitive development that she was experiencing that contributed to her ability to improve at writing papers. In this excerpt Pam's description of her brain being "more developed" and her comment regarding "…it's just a matter of your self-discipline…", can be interpreted to mean that practicing new skills encourages brain development and that it requires one to take action to improve skills that are more personally challenging.

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Mimi shared that resiliency was a personal quality that she felt was important in order to flourish while making the transition.

> *"…resiliency, because I would say not many people think about it as an important quality but I feel like once you're down the only way to get back up is…you have to like find it within yourself rather than just focus on like an object or anything like that. I would personally say that [resiliency] is something that's within but not like many people think about it in that way. But I think that once you touch into it you can learn to be more resilient as you go…"* (Mimi, Int. 4, lines 828-840)

Although most participants didn't explicitly use the word 'resiliency' in sharing their experiences of making the transition to university, participants spoke of the courage it took to bounce back from challenges not only within the university context but also in terms of areas of personal challenge that had the potential to interfere with their ability to be successful in first year. Resiliency, for Mimi is innate, "something that's within", but in order for one to access resiliency or tap into it, she described it as something that can be learned through practice over time. In the pre-transition period, I shared Gabby's excerpt of how she described developing emotional resiliency as a result of the challenges she experienced growing up that contributed to her ability to flourish in first year. Similarly, Mimi and Gabby describe resiliency as having a temporal nature - an active process that takes place over time.

***Theme 2: positive and trying aspects of personal health challenges.*** Personal health challenges related to physical and mental health during the transition to university were shared by four participants. Three of the four participants shared experiencing these personal challenges in pre-transition period. These challenges posed varying degrees of difficulty, however many positive insights and new personal understandings arose from a place of challenge in terms of learning how to ask for help, breaking down barriers

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associated with the stigma of having a personal health challenge and, learning better coping and self-care strategies. Rose describes developing depression following the death of her grandmother in first semester and how she coped with this sudden loss.

> *"…With mental health there have been some bumps…like when my grandma died I developed depression but I made sure to get it in check and I went to my doctor as soon as I started experiencing symptoms and we figured out how we could tackle it with and without medications…so I have a nightly routine where I turn off the lights and I put on my fairy lights and I read or listen to an audiobook and I moisturize my arms and my legs and my feet and I braid my hair if I've just showered and I spend 15 or 20 minutes just by myself…not on social media…just kind on relaxing in bed and preparing myself to go to bed…"* (Rose, Int. 1 lines 267-277)

Although we did not talk extensively about her depression I interpret Rose's comment "I made sure to get it in check" to mean that she had recognized these symptoms from the possibility of having had some previous experience with depression in the past. She knew exactly what she needed to do to take care of herself by going to her doctor and developing a plan to "tackle it" and explore her options. Someone experiencing depression for the first time may not be so in tune with what it felt like to be depressed. Having shared that she experienced anxiety before coming to university may have contributed to this realization as often depression and anxiety exist concurrently. Rose described her experience with opening up to family members about her mental health challenges and shared that not all family members were supportive.

> *"…It brought me closer to my family because there's a little bit of a stigma in my family about mental health so I don't usually share with people because also I have anxiety as well and I don't tell people because I get judged. So I told the people that I knew would support me and I got an overwhelming amount of support from a lot of my family. So my mom also had depression so they understood what I was going through and didn't judge me because she had it so that really helped and made me feel more accepted from my family too and that I didn't have to hide my true self from them…"* (Rose, Int. 1, line 319-328)

Opening up about her challenges about mental health required that Rose renegotiate the terms of her relationships with family members and surround herself with family that were willing to support her. She describes this process of coming out as bringing her closer to her family. Rose's willingness to be vulnerable, by asking for help and confiding in family members, contributed greatly to her experience of flourishing in her first year.

Carlos's pre-transition experiences and awareness of his tendency to conceal his problems from others influenced his decision to take a proactive approach during his transition to university to seek out mental health support. He saw this as a preventative measure to avoid the consequences of his problems "bubbling inside".

> *"…When I approached the wellness center it wasn't because I actually had a problem. It's just because talking to a therapist has better results than just talking the same problems over and over to myself. So really I went to the wellness center because it's a guaranteed service that I'd have someone to listen and give me feedback. I don't have to feel alone or that I have to keep my problems within myself because no one else is willing to listen. So then I can deal with problems that otherwise would have kept bubbling inside of me…It's mainly just to make sure your mental health is up…"* (Carlos, Int. 8, lines 1128-1142)

Dealing with things head on and facing issues that may be uncomfortable means stepping outside of one's comfort zone and being vulnerable in terms of facing one's fears. Carlos describes vulnerability as a necessary and critical component of growing and learning things about himself that may be uncomfortable or that he may have to change. Carlos highlights the critical role of on campus counselling services, not only when intervening when mental health problems arise but of the equally important role of preventing and promoting student mental health. Carlos shares the awkwardness of accessing mental health services on campus as an important first step, with the real work

beginning from a place of vulnerability and openness, in order to experience personal growth.

> *"…I still feel awkward about it. Because going to a therapist or a psychiatrist you have to be willing to become vulnerable. Usually going to a psychiatrist or therapist they break you down in stages but eventually that is the requirement you have to be willing to be open and vulnerable if you want to learn anything..."*
> (Carlos, Int. 8, lines 1027-1032)

Pam's experience with grieving the loss of her brother accompanied the guilt of being the last child to leave the family home in particular at a time when she felt her mom needed her the most. She admitted that making the transition soon after her siblings' death forced her to delay her grieving process in order to focus on what she needed to do to be successful in first year.

> *"…I would honestly say that I didn't do the best with accessing the things that I needed to. I would say that I'm absolutely still grieving the loss of a family member and I would say I let school get in the way of that…"* (Pam, Int. 3, lines 587-590)

In conversation with Pam, she was very insightful in terms of realizing that she would have to address her brother's loss in the near future and expressed an openness to exploring the on-campus resources to support her through this in the coming months.

Penny's day-to-day experiences with personal health challenges were at the center of her ability to feel good and function well during her first year, *"…with the academics that was really closely tied to my body and my medical condition…"* (Penny, Int. 7, lines 85-86). Because of the chronic nature of her conditions being so much a part of her everyday life, both on campus and off campus, I came to understand that her personal health challenges permeated all aspects of our conversation. And while she rose above these challenges within *health-focused* activites in other settings, her ability to form friendships and engage in on-campus activities that were *not health-focused* were new challenges in

which she felt were hindered by her fear of being vulnerable and judged by others, in particular her peers. At several points during our conversation the words 'invisible' and 'invisibility' resurfaced as it related to her perception of how others view her.

> *"…There's a lot of like expectations with my conditions. They're chronic, they're invisible right so I'm not disabled…I'm able-bodied… but I'm not really acknowledged by healthy people because I can't participate in everything…a lot of my friends work and that's how they connect and I'd love to do that but my body just isn't' up to that. And then a lot of people, if they are actually accessibility service they have a learning disability and they…I get to join their class to do tests because I get to write in an isolation room…And people just don't understand that they always question me they always think I'm like…it's often people with disabilities who question like why are you with accommodations, like you do not have diabetes, you don't have this, you don't have that. So it feels like I'm invisible to both able bodied people and disabled people."* (Penny, Int. 7, lines 894-914)

This invisibility comes from a place of yearning to be acknowledged and accepted. Going deeper, my sense is that since so much of Penny's identity revolves around her personal health struggles she, in turn, feels like she is being devalued even by other students who experience personal health challenges and are receiving accommodation in university. This feeling of not being accepted among both her "able bodied" and "disabled peers" has limited her ability to experience a sense of belonging to her program of choice challenging her ability to flourish in first year. By the end of our conversation, Penny moved from defining herself as feeling good and functioning well amidst the transition, to courageously admitting to "feeling ok" and "functioning ok" amidst the transition. Although Penny experienced many challenges that were mainly connected to her physical health conditions, it was evident that her ability to flourish off campus through her strong support network, through her committee work, and her reliable and unwavering parental support, contributed to her experiencing academic success in her first year.

***Theme 3: family/parental support and challenges.*** Similar to the pre-transition period all participants described family/parental support and challenges as a significant element associated with their ability to flourish while making the transition to the university. Support included financial, emotional and aspects of their spiritual and cultural health and experienced either from a distance for those living outside of the parental home and through daily interactions for participants residing in the family/parental home.

Mimi lives with her parents and siblings and shared how her parents supported her emotional well-being during a particularly academically challenging time which helped her gain perspective that life wasn't only about university and academics.

> *"...There's like this one specific day in last semester where I thought I was doing well like...it just came upon me like...there were marks coming back from every class that day and they weren't super good. Like one was fine, two was fine and like three and four and they were all just mediocre...they were pretty bad marks I would say. And that was when I was just not motivated to do my school work on that specific day... I could see that I wasn't very happy and I know that I wasn't pleased with that specific day but when my parents got home and I told them like I realized that it's not that big of a deal because there are more things in life than just worrying about some grades and like it made me realize that if I just work harder than I can achieve things that hard work puts into..."* (Mimi, Int. 4, lines 608-636)

Like Mimi, Pam benefited similarly in terms of the emotional support she received living with family. Pam was the last sibling to move away from her small town and family home to attend MRU. As mentioned, before coming to university, she had experienced a particularly difficult time - losing a sibling - which made her question whether university was the right decision for her in the short term. Pam describes how living with her sister - who had already made the transition to university - provided her with the much needed support to help her flourish in the first year in more than one way.

> *"...She kind of didn't have the best transition so I kind of knew what not to do based on her experiences and it did help to move in with her because I moved in*

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*with someone familiar. She's 3 years almost 4 years older than me so she's been living here long enough, she knows her way around, she knows where to go if you need to do this or this. It helped to have someone who was experienced and knew kind of what she was doing. She had her own experience and I was like, well I don't want this to be like you because her educational transition was not good at all. I would say her moving out was ok but she just, she's in kind of a strange place with her degree and she's not sure what she wants to do and I think that her experiences with that have helped me and kind of decide where I need to be…"*
(Pam, Int. 3, lines 46-59)

Support, in the form of financial support for accommodations, tuition and food, was described by all participants as significant as it reduced stress during the transition. Parents not only provided support for monetary needs but in the sense that they provided a stable and dependable support that participants could count on during the transition.

*"…my parents…they had supported me through so much without them I don't think I would be able to make all of these transitions by myself. So just having them there to provide me with physical support and economic support and anything that I could ever need. Even though I do fight with my parents sometimes and sometimes I think what if I did have a second set of parents. But I think everybody gets to that point in their life and just being able to see that. My parents are the only parents that I'd want to have. They've provided me with so much I can't imagine what it would be like without them…"* (Gabby, Int. 6, lines 831-841)

Josephine described her upbringing as playing an important role in her personal growth including her mom having raised her in a very holistic way, and being able to have open conversations with her dad. The nature of these conversations was geared not towards solving her problems for her, but to assist her in gaining perspective and coming to her own conclusions about how she might handle her challenges. Despite having this close supportive relationship with her parents she described her perceived strain of always having "to be giving so much" which fostered an appreciation for her relationship with her grandfather.

*"…I have a grandparent who is Metis that I speak to on the phone all the time and he has not had the same education opportunities that I've had so I know that I*

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*make him really proud. So that's a huge motivator for me knowing that I have opportunities and experience that he didn't have and it pushes me to work harder and be successful. It's kind of a different dynamic than with my parents because my relationship with him is not one that I always feel like I have to be giving so much. It's just a casual, I'm super proud of you and that's awesome..."*
(Josephine, Int. 5, lines 529-538)

Josephine's relationship with her grandfather inspired her to take advantage of the opportunities available to her being of Metis decent and pushed her to work hard in first year to honor that relationship and not take for granted the opportunities that she was afforded based on cultural heritage. Family cultural aspects were also highlighted when Alex described the many benefits of fasting - a cultural practice she engaged in both in the pre-transition period and while making the transition to university.

*"...currently I'm fasting so that's definitely a well-being kind of thing cause not only is it good for you...like mentally kind of counting your blessing and understanding that there are less fortunate people in the world. I feel like aside from that fasting is good for your health as well because it gets rid of the toxins...I feel like I value that very much because there are lots of good benefits to doing that. Plus, our values and our beliefs. Just being like a good human in general and being kind and just those basic factors of like being human. I feel like that comes from my culture quite a bit and my parents have instilled that in me... I've definitely gained that patience to let things settle because with fasting you need to have a lot of patience for like waiting for the time to pass and like pacing yourself when you're eating also and tell yourself that you're doing this for a better cause like when you fast I feel like you've got this understanding that this is what people go through and we're like so blessed so I think just gaining that insight and that feeling..."* (Alex, Int. 9, lines 718-776)

Fasting for Alex was an important element of feeling good and functioning well, both physically and mentally. The values and beliefs associated with her culture facilitated her development of personal strengths such as empathy, and understanding for others, and patience. Family culture, described by Charlotte, was experienced differently in terms of having both positive and challenging aspects that influenced her flourishing in first year. She describes her feelings of bitterness towards her brother for *"not doing*

*anything"* and the associated stress of family cultural expectations and pressure associated with caring for her parents in their senior years.

> *"...I do have an older brother he's currently not really doing anything. He's not going to uni. [university] he's kind of at home...Because my parents are kind of disappointed in my brother because he doesn't really want to do anything, he doesn't really have the desire to go out and pursue anything right and because of that they have a higher expectation of me to succeed right and in a way in my culture we do prize our elders. So like in a way when I become a nurse and I lead a hopefully successful career in a way it's expected of me to take care of them. So if my brother doesn't do anything he can't really take care of them...I'm very stressed and a little bit bitter in a way because here I am working really hard and my brother he's not really doing anything. My parents wouldn't really have the heart to kick him out as I see with other cultures. I know a girl whose parents kicked her out right as she turned 18 and she has to like live on her own and stuff and like she's fine, she got by just fine...yeah. My brother couldn't do that..."*
> (Charlotte, Int. 2, lines 456- 486)

The values and beliefs associated with Charlotte's culture and pressure of needing to be successful enough to care for her aging parents affect her emotional well-being (feeling stressed). She further admits to feeling bitter towards her brother for not sharing in this responsibility. These cultural challenges are a contributing factor in Charlotte's first year success. This illustrates the nuanced nature of flourishing and contributes to our understanding of how context influences the experience of flourishing in first year.

Penny moved from her family home to live with her grandmother to be closer to university. Her grandmother experiences personal health challenges of her own and does not speak English. In sharing the complexities of her day to day life, living with her grandmother, she shares both the supportive and challenging aspects of living with an extended family member.

> *"...there is one thing with my grandmother...if I actually want to help her...I have to go through my aunt... I can't do anything because it's infringing on the system they've had for years and I don't like that when I'm just trying to help...I'm just trying to understand what's going on. So that's been really difficult...But on the other side with my dad's family a lot of them have*

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*[personal health challenges] as well… But they're a kind of support network and if they're visiting I feel pretty comfortable to jump in right away and have a conversation with them…I think it has helped me in some ways though just because of the wide range of [personal health challenges] in our family. On a health basis my grandma does care. She's always like…don't go to bed with your hair wet or there's snow outside or there's someone who I know cares about me. Like when I get home at 11 the porch light is on right. It's the small things like that where they care and that makes me feel better…"* (Penny, Int. 7, lines 1520-1554)

A dialectic relationship is described by Penny in terms of how her family's personal health challenges have helped and also have been challenging for her in trying to advocate for her grandmother. In the end, Penny describes the comfort in knowing that her grandmother cared and provided her with stable and dependable support at the end of the day amidst the common challenges experienced during the transition and on top of experiencing personal health challenges of her own. This dialectic relationship (family support and challenges) is further described by Alex's in relationship with her parents. Alex decided to continue living at home with her parents and younger sister during her first year. In the pre-transition period she shared her experiences related to her mother's controlling traits – a parenting style that continued in her first year.

*"…It's [meals prepared, laundry] like already done… So that's also a big support. Whatever they need help…they let me know and I do do it, but it's like 2 polar opposites. Sometimes they expect me to be independent and sometimes it's controlling, it's like do this, do that it just becomes too much because my mom's like very temperamental I guess, like she's very controlling. She wants things like her way or no way so…yeah. It's like opposites sometimes…"* (Alex, Int. 9, lines 429-437)

In one sense, Alex appreciates the support that she receives in terms of the day to day things being taken care of and offering her support to her parents when they need it. The challenge lies with her inability to be fully independent while at home and

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her wanting to be independent -  important to her growing and exploring her identity. (Arnett, 2000; 2004)

    ***Theme 4: positive and challenging aspects of living environment.*** In the first year of university participants living arrangements varied. In the pre-transition period participants made intentional and thoughtful decisions about where they wanted to live in terms of how it would contribute to their academic success and well-being. For a few participants there was no change in their living environment transitioning from high school to university as they remained in their family home. However, some participants moved from their family home to live closer to the university despite their parents living in the same city (either with extended family or in a family owned condo). A few participants came from smaller cities in Alberta and one student moved from another province to live in residence. The living environment was experienced by all participants as having some positive and challenging aspects contributing to their ability to flourish amidst the transition to university.

    Two of the nine participants lived on campus in residence during their transition. Living in residence afforded participants an opportunity to become more independent, learn new skills and establish social support networks. Rose describes her roommate as a strong source of peer support for her mental well-being in her first year. This was especially important given that she had developed depression in first semester after her grandmother's death.

> *"...my roommate really helped me… if I needed a mental health day we'd go…she took me to the zoo and we just went and got away from school and away from campus because I feel that when you live on campus you feel stuck sometime and I don't have a car either so I can't go very far...* (Rose, Int. 1, lines 292-302)

The dialect between challenge and the positive aspects of the living environment arises in Rose's example of challenging times in first semester of not getting along with her roommates. As a result of this difficult relationship she learned how to communicate more effectively to resolve issues with others. She describes her residence advisor as a significant support in helping she and her roommates resolve issues which facilitated them resolving future conflicts independently.

> *"...My roommate and I didn't know each other before we moved in. We got really really close over the past 7 months and we do everything together, so, she is the best personal connection I've made in Calgary and like we're best friends now...I was really nervous because I lived with 3 other girls that I don't know, so I was scared being the odd man out because I thought they knew each other, so that was terrifying, I was worried about making a good first impression um, things were different because two of them didn't really get along with me but our residence advisor really really helped us solve the problems and helped us work through them. I thought that I would be more on top of my cleanliness and doing the dishes and stuff and I thought that I would be a really good roommate [laughter] ...and didn't clean as much as I wanted to so that's very different than what I expected..."* (Rose, Int. 1, lines 30-60)

Living independently is an important part of identity development, finding out who you are, becoming more independent from parents, building confidence and learning necessary social and emotional skills to be successful after university – in both professional relationships encountered in the work force and in personal relationships in the future. Rose shares that living independently in residence was a context for personal growth and development in the areas of becoming more responsible and less reliant on her dad and sister for help.

> *"...I've definitely grown up because I'm living on my own and I'm responsible for feeding myself and going to the dentist by myself and all that stuff...it's really made me my own person and I realized that I don't have to rely on my dad for everything...I can figure things out for myself...I was really anxious about taking the bus across town so I would have like my sister there to help me look up bus routes and help me figure out how to do things and now I know I can do these things on my own... so I've definitely learned how to be less uptight and anxious*

*about things… I'm definitely more easy going now…"* (Rose, Int. 1, lines 508-522)

Similar to Rose's initial feelings about moving into residence, Josephine shared feeling nervous and what it was like for her to make that adjustment moving from her family home to the uncertainties of not knowing who she'd be living with during her transition.

> *"…so I was very nervous about living in residence with roommates. I'm a pretty introverted person when it comes to studying and having time on my own. It's kind of an energy source for me after a long day, so I really tried hard to get a two-person unit instead of a 4-person unit…So first semester I moved in with a roommate. She was pretty quiet she spent a lot of time in her room. We would get groceries together every once in a while, but it was a very roommate situation, we weren't super close but did interact. And then the next semester she finished school and when I came back I didn't have a roommate…I had the whole house… which meant like more kitchen space um more freedom to do things like putting music on or do yoga in the kitchen, literally anything so that was awesome…It was a huge, me space, and that was like imperative to my success this semester I think."* (Josephine, Int. 5, lines 82-103)

Josephine describes herself as an introvert and shares that having one roommate in first semester and living alone in second semester as being imperative to her first year success which highlighted the importance of physical environment in promoting well-being during the transition to university. This alone time allowed her to engage in self-care and enabled her to study at home. Like Rose, Josephine also shared that she learned to be more independent in both household chores and in terms of not relying so much on her parents for emotional support. Because Josephine had an awareness of aspects of her personality (introverted) that have both positive and challenging aspects, she was able to make a good decision about the type of living environment she needed to promote her mental health and make an intentional effort to influence and shape this in advocating for a 2-person unit.

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Some participants' living arrangements had not changed from their pre-transition living arrangements which contributed to easing the transition for most in terms of lessening the worry about who you might be living with and having the added level of responsibility that goes with living independently. Most participants believed that this was a positive aspect of their living environment as this facilitated receiving continued support from parents and siblings. Mimi shares how living at home with her parents and siblings contributed to her ability to flourishing within the university context.

> *"...I would definitely say that living with my parents is a benefit to me...they know when I'm stressed, when I need a break and they let me know. They also take really good care of me. Like they feed me of course...they work around my schedule as well which sometimes I feel bad about because I do have a younger sister and an older sister and I'm the only sister that can drive so like sometimes like my parents have to take days off of work to drive them around because I have an exam...but they're really supportive...yeah...They do support me financially too but like I've turned 18 for a while now and I pay my own phone bills and I have a job so. But they wouldn't hesitate to like provide me with finances if I needed it...and having my siblings as well because I always talk to them...yeah so like my older sister is actually at Mount Royal for science, she's in 3<sup>rd</sup> year. So we get the community here, we're part of it, so if I need to talk to her about anything that is happening here then I can definitely talk to her about it..."* (Mimi, Int. 4, lines 406-435)

Penny moved from her family home to live with her grandmother to ease the transition by shortening the commute to MRU. Not only did this lessen her commute but she had the support of an extended family member and the support of her sibling, as did Mimi, who was also making the transition to university at the same time. The positive aspects of sharing chores and cooking together and having the opportunity to have a conversation at the end of the day about how their day went was the type of support that Penny lost after her sister moved out of her grandmothers' house in second semester. She describers some of the challenges of the physical environment.

*"…my sister goes to [name of university] she's currently in [name of country] for a different type of schooling so she was also there in the first semester… it kind of it helped our relationship but it was also a strain because we were both going through that transition…My grandmother's house is constantly flooded… now it's just cement, so now it's a house full of dust and full of things that we normally…we would be sure to get rid of at our old house…"* (Penny, Int. 7, lines 23-36)

Gabby chose to live alone in her parents' apartment to be in close proximity to university. Her parents live in the same city however, Gabby decided that living close to the university would ease her transition by reducing her commute that would have been longer if living with her parents. Gabby describes how she became more independent as a result while still benefiting from the support of her parents who were located in the same city.

*"…I try to convince my mom to come over and help me but I spend a lot of time at the university because if I go home I don't end up studying because I go home on my couch and end up watching TV…but I've kind of been able to keep washing my dishes and washing my clothes that's the hardest part…when I was living at home with my parents I noticed that I didn't really do any of those things. I guess I would help with the dishwasher sometimes but I never had to cook or really clean. I would have to vacuum my room and vacuum the living room but my parents would never really make me do chores that much… so now having to do those tasks is a lot different…"* (Gabby, Int. 6, lines 777-799)

The freedom and independence of being away from the parental home allowed Gabby to discover things about herself that interfere with her academic success such as the distractions in her environment. This recognition required her to find alternatives such as going to the library to study. The living environment was a context for personal growth, finding independence, and for some, receiving day to day family and parental support contributing to participants' ability to flourish in their first year of university. As with other themes presented thus far, the dialect of positive and challenging aspects exist within this context.

***Theme 5: positive and challenging aspects of university environment.*** The

university environment in terms of its impact on a students' ability to flourish in first year

held significant meaning for participants. University is not only about academics but a

context that encourages personal growth. All participants reported that the physical

environment (small class sizes and small university) made a difference in terms of them

feeling a sense of belonging to university.

> *"So I still feel like I belong…the school size really makes a difference here because your class sizes…I know everyone's name; I know everyone in my classes. I know like the people that I'm in the class with are most of the same people and I think that's what's kind of helped me. If I were in a bigger university, I would be lost like mentally, physically like I wouldn't really know what to do. The small size I think really makes a huge difference on this because you're welcomed and each and every single one of you is welcomed…"* (Pam, Int. 3, lines 1024-1032)

Another aspect of the physical environment that contributed to participants' ability to

flourishing in first year was the on campus library. The library was a distraction free

physical space for many participants, while offering many formal and informal

programs to support academic success and mental well-being of the entire student

population during times of high academic stress. Mimi shares how stress relief week, an

event run by students for students, provided a variety of fun and engaging activities to

reduce stress during exam time.

> *"…So last week in the library there was a stress relief week so there was like different events happening in these group rooms and some of them…you just go into this room and watch a movie and you just leave and go into the next room where there's knitting happening and just a bunch of activities that were happening in the group rooms and it's all student organized as well…I went to the one where you just sit back and read a book and eat some jello [laughing]. I went to that one…yeah…it's been awhile since you get time to read a book where it's not like school related…"* (Mimi, Int. 4, lines 52-65)

Several students shared that high school had not prepared them for the level of writing expected in university and enrolled in the library programs to improve in this area.

> *"…the library courses they offered…plus like you could go in for help as well and I found that really helpful… I took APA paraphrasing not plagiarizing, that was like a big one for me because like transitioning into that piece was a little bit hard too. I also took grammar and how to like do a research paper…"*
> (Alex, Int. 9, lines 93-108)

In addition to the library resources, many participants took advantage of other formal and informal programs offered on campus aimed at promoting their academic success and well-being. These programs not only served a purpose for which they were intended but provided a forum for meeting new people and expanding social supports - both within their program and campus wide. There were many on campus activities for participants to become involved in that instilled a sense of belonging to the university environment, some within their specific degree programs and others that were part of the campus environment. Some students seized opportunities to be involved in the various on campus events aimed at promoting their academic success. Josephine shares her positive experience with becoming involved on campus as a peer mentor and how it has contributed to her ability to flourish in first year.

> *"…So I volunteer as a peer learning… I'm like tutoring for an hour or two hours… every week so that not only reinforces what I'm learning for me, I belong here, I volunteer here…I joined a [name of on campus club] at Mount Royal which is totally out of my comfort zone which is something I would never do but I was convinced by one of my friends to come and I ended up loving it - so I do that 2 hours a week…* (Josephine, Int. 4, lines 288-296)

The peer learning program was mentioned by several participants both as a volunteer tutoring and coaching opportunity to help their peers who were struggling in a subject area or a support service that students could access when struggling academically. Penny

describes her experience with accessing the Peer Learning Program. She shares aspects of what was helpful about receiving academic support and coaching from a fellow student - in her year of study and in same degree program and same class - who had mastered the subject, while at the same time learning with another peer - in her year of study, same degree program and same class - who similarly was struggling academically.

> *"...So what really helped was having different levels of knowledge in the room that was what made the biggest difference and also no pressure, if I didn't really understand it that was why I was there... So being with someone that knew a little bit less than I did and had very specific questions...then having someone who just had a really good overall knowledge of the topic on a whole was really great and so we met once a week...that's also how I felt like I got my community, my social support because in that room I didn't have to put up a front just because I was between those two different people...And so when we saw each other in class and it was a topic that we covered...I'd raise my hand and I'd be like, ok, yeah, I know this one and like the tutor would be like...she was in the same class as me actually and so it was unique because my tutor was taking the class concurrently...all three of us were in the same class... It was small moments like being able to give them thumbs up and we were like.... yeah [showing thumbs up] ..."* (Penny, Int. 7, lines 551- 580)

This excerpt highlights the importance of on campus programs and peer-to-peer learning to support a students' academic success as well as foster a sense of community and social support. The Peer Learning Program and the peer tutor provided a safe learning environment where Penny could be open, where she did not have to fear being vulnerable and felt safe to ask questions in an environment in which she would not be judged by others. It further provided her with the opportunity to make social connections within her program and find support among her peers in the classroom.

Interestingly, many participants described a turning point at the end of first semester. A time of reflecting on the initial challenges of navigating a new environment, making new friends and adjusting to higher academic expectations. This self-reflection

resulted in adjusting to a new way of being in this environment which involved making changes in terms of branching out to expand social networks and participate in more on campus opportunities. Academics remained important, however having a healthy balance, not so heavily focused on getting good grades, was of equal importance to many participants.

> *"...So I did play rugby and field hockey in high school so I've...recently started playing that again because I was more comfortable with the studies so I kind of allowed me that time to play and have fun... I grew in that sense too because I allowed myself to have that balance..."* (Alex, Int. 9, lines 205-209)

University is a context for social growth, navigating social networks, making connections and developing meaningful friendships. The positive and challenging social aspects of the university environment were experienced by all participants. Many participants described off campus friendships, those they had formed in the pre-transition period, as more meaningful to them while other participants described distancing themselves from relationships that no longer supported their academic and personal goals. Many participants thought that they had grown away from old friendships that held them back from achieving their goals as Charlotte shares in this excerpt.

> *"...In a way...the people that I hung out with initially they weren't really...they didn't really have the same desires as me. Academically they would procrastinate a lot and I wouldn't really have anyone to... I guess like study with, who were, who really cared. So that kind of made me branch out and that helped me adapt and then made me have a very good experience..."* (Charlotte, Int. 2, lines 504-510)

Charlotte made an intentional decision to make new social connections to support her academic success and had the confidence take a risk in order to flourish in first year. Mimi thought it was important to maintain the social connections that she had established before coming to university and to develop new friends on campus to support her

academic success as a way of supporting her mental well-being during the transition to university. She explains,

> *"…trying to keep my social network still there because I know in university there is a higher course load so then you tend to loose contact with your friends. But having a support system that's not just school really helps the transition so when you're stressed about school you don't need to talk to someone who just talks about school basically."* (Mimi, Int. 4, lines 143-149)

Many participants shared having different friends for different reasons. Friends off campus were an escape from the university environment, a way of reducing stress, as Mimi shared. The challenge of a demanding course load makes it easier to lose touch with off campus friends, finding that balance between school and socializing was challenging for many, in particular in first semester.

Faculty played a significant role in promoting most participants' well-being and first year success. Many participants shared that the small class sizes enabled them to have accessible and meaningful relationships with faculty. Most notable were the qualities that faculty members possessed when it came to supporting participants' academic success and mental well-being. Faculty who were supportive, in terms of their approachability and willingness to help, made participants feel like they were more than just a number which positively influenced their sense of belonging and acceptance.

> *"…They've all been really good so far, I've liked every single prof I've had, they all um focus on the student as a whole instead of like another number like that comes up a lot like that is one of the prides of Mount Royal, like kind of being the faculty that kind of like makes that one-on-one connection and it's nice to know that they actually know your name and if you need any help or anything you can just come in and talk to them, it's not intimidating or anything like that…"* (Gabby, Int. 6, lines 81-88)

More challenging relationships with faculty provided an opportunity to grow and learn to be more accepting and open with faculty with whom they may not have made a

connection. Pam describes her experience in first semester that illustrates the upside of

challenging relationships with professors. In this excerpt she shares what she has learned

in this relationship. This is Pam's response to my question when I asked her how faculty

promoted her well-being while making the transition to first year.

> *"…I think some of them absolutely have and some of them in other ways. I had*
> *one professor last semester and I did not like her… and ended up failing the*
> *class and I think that absolutely played a part in my success in that class… I*
> *think it was maybe a personality clash and I think I kind of learned from that…*
> *I think that you also have to find the good in every teacher because there's*
> *gonna be some teachers that you really don't like but you gotta find that one*
> *thing to focus on…* (Pam, Int. 3, lines 835-851)

I hesitate to label any challenging experience as negative. All participants shared

their experiences from a place of personal growth, as an opportunity to learn and make

adjustments and apply this knowledge to future situations. The self-reflective process that

Pam engaged in from her positive and challenging experiences with faculty helped her to

become self-aware of what she needed to do to change and improve. Part of this involved

focusing on the positive aspects of faculty instead of focusing on what she perceived as

negative characteristics.

Working on group projects was described by most participants as uncomfortable

and challenging. Some participants compared their group work experiences in high

school in terms of having a choice and preference of who you wanted to work with.

Whereas in university, group work was more forced in the sense that you were required

to work with peers you did not know, or who had a different work ethic and or a different

personality. Carlos described himself as an introvert with a distaste for working in

groups. As the year progressed he described the personal growth that resulted in being

forced to work with peers with whom he likely would not have chosen to work.

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*"…Surprisingly you would think that there would be a very strong connection between someone's quality of work and their personality…But like for one of my classes in first semester… I was placed into a group of three extroverted rap fans. The way they came off to me was, the stereotype wouldn't have been top quality grades or top quality marks, but that course I left with an A+ and a lot of this was due to their input and the way that they worked together. So working in groups and seeing all these personalities disproves some of the stereotypes I had of what makes someone effective…you can't just assume that because someone's extroverted, peppy or talks as if they know what they're doing, that they actually know what the heck they're doing…"* (Carlos, Int. 8, lines 129-145)

There were many surprises for Carlos when he was pushed in his courses during his transition to university - from breaking down stereotypes that he had of others, to being able to push himself outside of his comfort zone to experience personal growth. All participants who shared their experiences of working in groups, whether it was an informal study group or a formal group project, identified this as a valuable medium for personal and social growth. Participants were forced to use their communication skills and learn to work together in pursuit of a goal. Although sometimes succeeding and sometimes stumbling, participants felt that this opportunity was a valuable part of their first year experience.

***Theme 6: positive aspects and challenging aspects of off campus involvement.*** Off campus involvement was experienced by many participants as contributing to their ability to flourish in first year. Involvement included attending church, volunteering, paid employment and socializing with off campus friends. Some participants described off campus friendships in terms of being more meaningful and providing them with the much needed break from more academically focused social networks established amidst the first year of the university learning environment. Josephine notes that church provided a context that supported all aspects of her health during the transition to university.

*"...another one that for me, that encompass all aspects of health is going to
church which is kind of surprising. The church that I go to is it's like young
adults maybe 18-30, so it's very similar demographic to where I am right now.
So that's been interesting. So it's like this group of people that just wants to
feed themselves spiritually and just take a break once a week. Sometimes we'll
have meals together after church. At first everyone was just kind of strangers
and now it's just kind of my friends away from school and it's been awesome
it's been refreshing and yeah I think it's really, it's uplifted me so that's been
awesome..."* (Josephine, Int. 5, lines 538-548)

For Josephine, church was an important context for supporting her overall well-being,

particularly her spiritual and emotional well-being. While spirituality is not identified as

an indicator within the four operational definitions of flourishing, Josephine eludes to the

church group as providing a sense of belonging as she is able to connect with other

individuals who are her developmental age. Clearly, for some participants, contexts

outside of the university environment promote flourishing while making the transition to

university, thus highlighting the multitude of contexts and many ways in which first year

students can flourish.

While attending university Gabby worked as a receptionist in an off campus

environment. She describes how this work was beneficial in teaching her how to

communicate with others and develop a social support network that she could draw upon

during her transition to university.

*"...And with [name of job] I kind of have to deal with a lot of people who are
frustrated with things or just aren't clear about other things so that also helps
me build that communication piece and with that job I really like it but it's
hard. But it also made me that friend group that I kind of had for the four years
that I worked there..."* (Gabby, Int. 6, lines 600-605)

Penny describes her transition to university in terms of making social connections

as a more challenging experience. Volunteering off campus from the age of 12 has

allowed her to develop meaningful and trusting relationships with individuals who share

similar experiences with personal health challenges. This support network off campus has

been imperative to her making a successful transition in first year.

> *"...For me the hard part was that my social networks, my social supports are from those counsels [off campus] ...so that also it makes it very difficult to balance academics and volunteerism because none of them are paid positions and all of them are very time consuming and yet most of my closest friends and mentors are in those counsels..."* (Penny, Int. 7, lines 337-343)

Penny further describes the challenges of having her support networks being off

campus and in the community, therefore making connecting with them very time

consuming creating a challenge for balancing her off campus commitment hours with

the demands of academics. However, since Penny's main source of social support is off

campus it would significantly affect her well-being if she were to limit her involvement

in these activities. In contrast, Alex finds her community volunteer work teaching young

children religious studies as a way of striking a positive balance in terms of the positive

energy she receives from her volunteer work with children and the stress of university.

Calling her community involvement, her "happy place" is where Alex gets a sense of

emotional well-being and positive energy.

> *"...Just being around that energy because they're all around 5 year olds and 6 year olds so they're like super happy and carefree and whatever. So definitely being around them it's kind of like letting my child out too. I feel at ease and I'm teaching stuff that I'm quite passionate about too and I remember going to the same classes when I was younger and that used to be so much fun and just coming back to that and having that balance...yeah. It's like my happy place..."* (Alex, Int. 9, lines 701-708)

Themes within the *pre-transition period* (horizons of the past) and *Flourishing*

*Amidst the Transition* (horizon of the present) spoke to the concept of *historically*

*affected consciousness*. The themes represented within these timeframes suggest that the

participants' experience of flourishing within this developmental and academic transition

are emerging as: individual, contextual, inter-connected, multi-dimensional and consist of aspects of positive and challenging characteristics, in which the challenging aspects are seen largely as contributing to participants' ability to flourish amidst the transition from high school to university.

### *Flourishing Beyond First Year*

Participants' experiences of flourishing during the transition extended beyond the first year. The time period *Flourishing Beyond the Transition* arose from asking participants about their thoughts in terms of *future aspirations, long-term goals and hopes and dreams* of where they wanted to be in the coming months and years. Since the focus of this study was understanding the experiences of flourishing amidst the transition to university, asking participants about their long term goals was asked at the end of the interview; therefore, participants didn't elaborate as extensively as they had when describing their experiences of flourishing while making the transition. Therefore, participant quotes will be shared instead of thematic understandings.

This time period involved narratives of engaging in activities that would promote continued personal growth and support their emotional, psychological and social well-being. All participants recognized that although they had experienced significant personal growth while making the transition to university their journey hadn't ended after first year and there was more that they were looking forward to learning about themselves in the remaining years of their degree programs. The coping strategies, self-care strategies, and personal strengths and challenges, that they identified and built upon in both the pre-transition and transition periods, did not end with the successful completion of their first year. Indeed, the university context had more to offer in the following years by providing

participants with future opportunities to engage in activities to support personal growth.

As Carlos shares. *"…There's still more I can do in university to get outside of my shell and develop…"* (Carlos, Int. 8, lines 823-824). Although Carlos perceived himself as flourishing amidst the transition from high school to university, it is clear that the experience of flourishing within this context is only one aspect of a person's life. Individuals continue to experience personal growth in other life domains as well.  In fact, they may be flourishing in university based on their ability to tap into these other personal strengths and resources and the meaning associated with these contexts.

Finding meaningful employment, getting a job in their field, and being financially self-sufficient were shared by many participants as important goals that would contribute to their ability to flourish in the years to come.

> *"…Long term wise I really want to be able to get a job in the field that I'm studying… I want to be able to get married, have a house, have a dog, have a car, stay in contact with my friends and maintain that social network. Being in good relations with my parents and my family members and then as for short term…achieving high marks and do well in my studies..."* (Charlotte, Int. 2, lines 442-447)

The social aspects of flourishing within the university context were undoubtedly important to flourishing amidst the transition to university and deemed by participants as important aspects of flourishing *beyond* the transition. Maintaining social networks was an important long term goal that Charlotte identified and was an important short term and long term goal for many participants in this study.

Although most participants changed their belief that good grades were the *only* important goal in university, good grades were still at the top of their list for various reasons. Maintaining good grades would assist many in pursuing long term goals of

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getting into graduate programs. Carlos shared his thoughts about his long term goals of

pursuing further education and how he plans on taking action to achieve these goals.

> *"…Well the long term goals to get into law school once I'm finished at Mount Royal, in Queens. The average GPA requirement is about a 3.7, so my goal is to maintain higher than that. So that's pretty much my immediate goal when it comes to my classes. Because that's the only thing I'm concerned with. Afterwards I need to take the CPA program but that's not a big concern for me right now because it's so in the future and it's just another program that I'll take and I'll deal with it when I get there. The Coop program… there's still much I have to learn and I'm focusing on my spring semester now so it's not like I could get a work term if I tried. So I'm not concerned about that either. So my current goals, really I'm just trying to keep my current goals to right now. Just trying to get through this semester with grades that I can be proud of…"* (Carlos, Int. 8, lines 1230-1243)

Josephine admits that the possibility of getting bad marks is something that she

continues to struggle with in the pre-transition and transition period and therefore

something on which she would like to take action and change about herself in the future.

> *"… another personal goal that I have is just to be ok with bad marks. That's soooo hard. I kind of say that I am…like that's fine but I really beat myself up over bad marks before and I've lived with that stress and even just a B to me is bad so that's kind of hard. So I think that I'd really like to take a step back and assess my own self-worth and assess that that's not actually in terms of grades so… I'm going to work on that over the summer and do some pep talks to myself..."* (Josephine, Int. 5, lines 755-762)

The significance of this worry stresses the link between academics and mental

health and while one can recognize that getting poor grades should not affect how you

feel about yourself, it is clear that it can continue to the point of questioning your own

self-worth and who you are as a person. After asking Josephine how she might tackle

this challenging aspect of herself this is what she shared.

> *"… I'm kind of scared. I think I might talk to a counsellor. I think it's just important to like get it out in the open that grades are something that I struggle with, like bad grades and the thing that's so crazy is that I don't really have a reason to. I usually pick it up at the end of semester again. It's not the end of the*

*world, nobody's going to be super disappointed in me it's just a self-disappointment thing..."* (Josephine, Int. 5, lines 766-772)

Some participants talked about not yet feeling like an adult and still being amidst a period of exploring their identity. This is once again consistent with Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood and components of his theory in which identity exploration and the feeling of being in-between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2000; 2004). Rose and Alex shared their thoughts when asked whether they felt like an adult yet.

> *"...I think once I have my own house, apartment or whatever and once I'm supporting myself with work and doing what I love and paying taxes or paying bills I think that that's when I will fully feel like an adult...Maybe when I buy my first car [laughter]..."* (Rose, Int. 1, lines 741-748)

> *"...So I'm definitely not sure who I am at this point, like my identity and stuff but I think definitely continuing my volunteering I'm sure that I'll find that. Plus, continue my attitude again, I feel like if I'm just more open minded and I feel like I did get that the second semester of university, just getting more open minded about stuff like that and people in general yeah I think that's...for sure... (Alex, Int. 9, lines 814-820)*

Finding one's identity is an important developmental aspect that participants in this study are experiencing for which the university provides a suitable context. Rose and Alex's experiences reflected those of many participants in which they continued to be dependent on their parents for financial and emotional support while making the transition. Although many participants felt that they had not fully made the transition to adulthood, they shared experiences that were indicative of moving in this direction. Some areas which facilitated this identity development involved the contexts that they explored - relating to the individual, family, university, living and community -   in which they engaged in opportunities that encouraged personal growth and identity exploration.

Maintaining, or improving upon, several life domains, or aspects, of health were goals expressed by several participants; however, the most striking example of this point

involved Penny's experiences regarding her personal health challenges and how they permeated her everydayness from a very early age. It is, therefore, no surprise that her long term goals - or what Penny described as her "perfect time" in the future - centered around improvements in her physical health and how this would improve other aspects of her life.

> *"…I think my [personal health challenges] is in control… and that I've got a routine with my conditions…so that I can actually have time to do other things in my life… I would be at a place where my school classes are every other day so that on the days where I don't have classes I'm free to one participate in any counsels and two I'm able to have that as my appointment day so that I don't have to miss school or worry about getting to school on time …I would also be able to go to church every Sunday and also attending community group so that I can learn from that sermon but then also get to know other women or other people who are also on that journey to see them on a weekly basis and gain that community. I'd also see myself having enough time to cook without feeling pressured and to try new foods and not have to worry about having enough money to try new foods and do that and ideally have a job. I miss working so much. I miss having a pay check and have a job where I feel like I'm making a difference…feeling like I'm doing something and am seeing that productivity right away….And also have the weekend where my family could eat dinner together all 6 of us and actually sit through the whole thing and have time to have a late night conversation with my sister…and have a little time for myself once in a while just to read a book and not feel guilty about it and have it not relate to school… I would love to continue to have enough money to continue to pursue alternative medicine because I found that the rapport that I have with private health care givers, health care providers and the advice they give me makes me feel so much more human than any [type of specialist] has ever made me feel. So I want to have enough money and enough time to see them…so they can take care of my body as a whole not just one organ. I'd also like to see a place where I can pursue maybe a therapist or someone who I can talk to professionally on a regular basis so that I stop keeping things inside all the time…I want to have someone to talk to about how my week is gone and from a holistic perspective…I didn't mention academics that much but I feel like if that was in place I would be able to actually have…be physically able to focus for an hour…the time that I was at school be able to focus on my peers, be able to focus on my content in front of me and not think about getting to an appointment later or which medicine I forgot to take… so that would be my perfect time…"* (Penny, Int. 7, lines 1672-1725)

This excerpt is important as Penny shares how her personal health challenges have profoundly affected her ability to flourish in a way that is meaningful to her while making the transition to university. Penny's identity and perception of what it might be like, or the 'ideal scenario' of flourishing, in the future revolves around whether her chronic health conditions are under control. In our conversation I thought that Penny believed that all of these future hopes were possible for her to achieve despite her lengthy history and continued struggles with her personal health.

Emotional well-being was an important aspect of flourishing and identified by many participants as a contributing factor in the pre-transition and transition periods as well as in the future. What constitutes happiness is highly individual among participants. Gabby shares, *"…I really don't make that many long term goals, I just kinda like to have one big one and then everything else just happens. I want to be happy…"* (Gabby, Int. 6, lines 747-749). Flourishing, both in the pre-transition period and while making the transition to university, required participants to push past vulnerabilities and open up. Josephine's self-awareness and ability to assess and take action to improve upon areas of personal challenge were clear strengths. She shared her thoughts and understanding of the need to push past her fear of emotional vulnerability in relationships – a goal that she would like to work on in the future.

> *"…I would really like to see myself put myself more emotionally into relationships and like friendships. I feel like a lot of the time I just have friendships for school related, even like I said back in high school I was like fun. I find it really easy to be vulnerable with my family members and myself but people who are not in that little circle I often do not tell anything that's going on with me personally. I don't open up to them emotionally or tell them what's going on in my personal life, but I've had a way richer experience because my friends have done that to me. I've been able to help them and I felt super accomplished because of that and I felt like I've grown closer in my relationships with them and I kind of haven't done that in*

*return so that's a goal that I have. Just being a little bit more vulnerable..."*
(Josephine, Int. 5, lines 742-755)

As Josephine shared, putting herself more emotionally into relationships and allowing herself to be vulnerable, encourages more meaningful relationships that lead to an expansion of her social support networks. Observing and experiencing her friend's ability to be vulnerable taught Josephine what it was like to be on the receiving end of her friend's vulnerability and her response. Experiencing this process allowed her to consider what it might be like for her to be emotionally vulnerable with others. Alex is aware that becoming more involved in her second year of university provides an opportunity to make friends. Having better relationships with others was Alex's goal in her second year. Relationships included expanding her on campus friendships by becoming more involved in the university environment and in her relationship with her mother.  The relationship with her mom has been a big challenge for Alex in the pre-transition and transition period.

> *"...Less kind of thinking about myself and more other people as well, that's a big goal for me because I know that's caused problems with my mom as well, not like taking her out of the blame but like definitely if I'm kind of...if I'm more open to her point of view then I think I would be less conflicting. So definitely working on myself..."* (Alex, Int. 9, lines 1046-1052)

Alex's insight into how she can improve the relationship with her mother is carried out first through recognizing the role that she has in making the relationship better. She identified that being open to other's point of view, in particular her mother's perspective, will be helpful in reducing the conflict when controlling and temperamental aspects of her mother's personality arise.

**What It Means to Flourish**

The aim of this study was to understand how university students define and experience flourishing while making the transition from high school. Leaving this question - *"What does it mean to flourish while making the transition from high school to university?"* until the end of the interview was intentional to give participants an opportunity to reflect on the experiences that they had shared in hopes of providing a more in-depth understanding of what it means to them to flourish amidst this dual transition. What it means to flourish while making the transition to university was less about feeling good (hedonic) and more about the functioning well (eudaimonic) components of flourishing. Participants shared their thoughts about what it means to flourish and for all participants the essence of their experiences of flourishing was, in the end, more about the personal growth than academic growth that had occurred as a result of pushing through and being resilient in times of challenge. As Alex states, flourishing amidst the transition to university means to *"…definitely grow on your skills or gain new skills. Learning not only about academics but about yourself as well, yeah…"* (Alex, Int. 9, lines 994-995).

The meaning of flourishing for all participants was talked about in different ways by different participants. Gabby shares her thoughts on what it means to flourish in the university environment that involves taking advantages of the opportunities within this context to grow and gain confidence.

> *"…For me I think like the whole idea of flourishing means that you set yourself up for the rest of your university life and try to get as many of those experiences in as you can. So it kind of builds a lot more confidence to say that you are flourishing because you know that the stuff you are doing is right and even if it's not your kind of start making paths on how to fix it…"* (Gabby, Int. 6, lines 967-975)

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Rose extends her understanding of what it means to flourish by pushing yourself outside of your comfort zone just enough, and finding balance within the social and academic domains and learning who you are.

> *"…I think to flourish is to have a good balance in your life and to know your limits and not push too far outside of your comfort zone which I've definitely done since coming to university but you wanna know when too far is too far…and you wanna really own up to your actions and who you are as a person in university. So once you think you realize that you can do well with your classes and with your social life and that would help you become who you are and that's what flourishing is all about…learning who you are…what you wanna do and where you wanna be..."* (Rose, Int. 1, lines 644-653)

Being happy wasn't at the heart of flourishing nor was it a precursor to functioning well during this transition. Happiness was characterized as a *result* of functioning well and stepping outside of your comfort zone and growing as a person.

> *"…For me flourish would be stepping back, taking account, like acknowledging that you're scared. That university itself is terrifying to a high schooler so then you want to hide, you'll feel inclined to hide within yourself, do only what's required and just run. But the next step is after you've acknowledged it stepping outside of that boundary because now you know where the line is, you know what you're afraid of and then if you explore something that you're not used to then you can grow as a person and if you grow as a person then there's… you become more well-rounded and passionate. If you become more well-rounded and passionate then well, long-term you'll be happier..."* (Carlos, Int. 8, lines 1304-1314)

Aspects of their personalities, for example being open and flexible, allowed participants to explore the many opportunities *on campus* and *off campus* which made their university experience much richer in terms of developing relationships with their peers and building the confidence to put themselves out there more and become involved in the university environment which increased feelings of belonging to the university environment.

> *"…I would say to flourish in the first year would be to be able to adapt to any changes. To be resilient in the changes and to be able to put yourself out there because to be closed up in the first year of university it's really hard to make the connections and it's hard to feel like you belong unless you open yourself*

*up and put yourself out there. So I would definitely say that being able to be flexible because not everything is going to go your way so being able to adapt too, that is really important to make the transition..."* (Mimi, Int. 4, lines 882-893)

Good grades resurfaced as not being the most important aspect of what it means to flourish while making this transition as Charlotte shares, *"...I think a lot of people would see it as someone who is doing really well academically, but I also see it as someone...who is physically, mentally and spiritually as well..."* (Charlotte, Int. 2, 543-546). Josephine shares that, at the end of the day, flourishing can only be defined by you as it is about your perception of how you feel you did and having a sense of pride in what you've accomplished. Flourishing means to venture outside of your comfort zone, develop new skills, and experience personal growth as a result. Josephine describes this as a process of self-discovery and self-acknowledgement.

> *"...I think it comes down to how you feel you did at the end. My parents can say as much as they want to me about how proud they are and my friends can say the same but I think it comes down to how I did when I was just talking about the skills that I developed, I never said those out loud and I never would have even thought of that. I'm proud of myself, I did a lot this year and I think I flourished because I've come out of my comfort zone and I've discovered parts of me that I didn't even know existed. I think that self-acknowledgement is flourishing..."*
> (Josephine, Int. 5, lines 785-793)

Like Josephine, Pam shares that flourishing is largely an individual phenomenon and includes components of feeling good and functioning well physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and academically.

> *"...I think it's a matter of being happy and functioning properly in the way that you want to I guess. When you're put in a kind of unfamiliar setting and you were to say flourish, you're doing well, you're in a good state of mind, your body is in a good place and its more about your mind than your body. I think it's just a matter of being happy and still being able to do the things that you normally do and those day to day things are still happening on top of everything else and just that function. Because you can lose a lot of that functionality when you're put into a new setting and I think that when you're*

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*flourishing you're still functioning like you were before. Whether it be from high school to university you're still doing all those fun things on top of everything else or you're getting good grades, you're getting the grades that you want or finding those good relationships. You're kind of achieving your goals, I guess that would be my descriptions...."* (Pam, Int. 3, lines 1415-1430)

Penny's understanding of what it means to flourish is routed in her journey of finding meaning and coming to terms with having chronic health conditions - you have to settle with feeling ok and functioning ok. The ups and downs linked to her personal health challenges made the process of flourishing in first year difficult; yet, amidst the hard times there was no doubt that Penny felt a sense of accomplishment for her academic success despite the multiple challenges she experienced.

*"...So I was feeling okay and functioning okay and with though you have to be okay with okay. I don't think there's ever going to be a good...unless they find a cure...it's a chronic condition so it's hard to see that... I would say that I was functioning ok which is pretty awesome. After a while I found my grove. I found a routine that worked kinda well...So I was feeling like in the moment I was learning all of this new stuff, this is awesome, I love knowing more, I love learning, I love getting to talk to people who have PhD's because they are so passionate about the subject. I was feeling great in those classroom moments...I think it reflected in my grades how much I enjoyed the learning and how well I did. However, it was hard to feel ok [after receiving a specific treatment] ...I felt like I didn't know my body as well as I did or my mind as well as I did so. But I think...I was feeling ok and functioning ok as well..."* (Penny, Int. 7, lines 1753-1776)

The connection between physical health and mental health is transparent in this excerpt. The meaning of flourishing amidst this transition was unique for Penny and highlights again the importance of context for what it means to flourish. Penny was flourishing in her off campus involvement in terms of the many meaningful relationships and social supports that she had established in her community volunteer work. As seen in the pre-transition period Penny developed a fear of being vulnerable which continued during her transition to university, making it difficult to trust others

and affecting her ability to establish social connections, in particular in her program of study. This was further complicated by the exacerbation of symptoms of her physical health challenges and feelings of being invisible and judged by others. This brings to mind the question of challenge as a necessary component for personal growth. It appears that excessive challenge may result in a tipping point to which flourishing is hindered.

**The Indicators that Resonated with Participants**

Thematic understandings presented earlier in this chapter highlight that although there are similar contributing factors associated with each participants' ability to flourish amidst this transition, flourishing is a uniquely experienced phenomenon, temporal and contextual in nature and there are underlying pre-transition experiences that participants bring to their first year encounter that contribute to, and challenge, their experience of flourishing.

To examine this phenomenon, the individual indicators across the 4 operational definitions of flourishing (Butler and Kern, 2016; Diener et al., 2010; Huppert and So, 2013; Keyes, 2007a) were explored in terms of how they resonated with participants. At the end of the interview individual participants were given *Four Operational Definitions of Flourishing* (Butler and Kern, 2016; Diener et al., 2010; Huppert and So, 2013; Keyes, 2007a) - *Table 2.1,* chapter 2 and asked to review, and check off, the indicators that resonated personally with them across the four operational definitions in terms of their importance in defining what it means to flourish. Interestingly, there was a notable inconsistency between what participants' shared in their individual experiences of flourishing and the indicators they chose. Consideration for this discrepancy may be a

result of participants' uncertainty of how the indicator was defined within the operational

definition. Alternatively, participants could have understood what each indicator meant

but purposely did not choose the indicator as they did not find it to be relevant to how

they experienced, or defined, flourishing.

Table 4.1 highlights which participant and the number of participants who chose

the corresponding indicator. For example, eight out of nine participants chose positive

relationships as being an important indicator for flourishing. Overall, participants did not

agree 100% on the indicators across the 4 operational definitions, or 100% on one

particular indictor within the four definitions of flourishing, or 100% on the indicators

that make up one of the operational definitions. This is a good indication that flourishing

is undoubtedly an individual phenomenon experienced in different ways by different

people.

*Table 4.1 Indicators Chosen by Participants from the Four Operational Definitions of Flourishing*

| Interview # | Amount of participants | Keyes | Huppert & So | Diener et al. | Seligman |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,9 | 8/9 | Positive Relationships | Positive Relationships | Positive Relationships | Positive Relationships |
| 2,3,4,6,7,8,9 | 7/9 | Positive Affect (Interested) | Engagement | Engagement | Engagement |
| 1,2,4,5,6,7,9 | 7/9 | Purpose in Life | Meaning | Purpose and Meaning | Meaning and Purpose |
| 2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9 | 8/9 | Self-acceptance | Self-esteem | Self-acceptance and self-esteem | - |
| 3,5,6,9 | 4/9 | Positive affect (happy) | Positive Emotion | - | Positive Emotion |
| 3,4,5,6,7,8 | 6/9 | - | Competence | Competence | Accomplishment/ Competence |
| 1,2,6,7,9 | 5/9 | - | Optimism | Optimism | - |

| Interview # | Amount of participants | Keyes | Huppert & So | Diener et al. | Seligman |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2,4,6,7,9 | 5/9 | Social Contribution | - | Social Contribution | - |
| 9 | 1/9 | Social Integration | - | - | - |
| 2,3,4,8,9 | 5/9 | Social Growth | - | - | - |
| 6,9 | 2/9 | Social Acceptance | - | - | |
| 3,9 | 2/9 | Social Coherence | - | - | - |
| 7,9 | 2/9 | Environmental Mastery | - | - | - |
| 1,2,3,4,5,7,8,9 | 8/9 | Personal Growth | - | - | - |
| 2,5,6,7,8,9 | 6/9 | Autonomy | - | - | - |
| 2,3,4,5,7,9 | 6/9 | Life Satisfaction | - | - | - |
| 2,3,4,6,9 | 5/9 | - | Emotional Stability | - | - |
| 9 | 1/9 | - | Vitality | - | - |
| 2,3,4,5,6,8,9 | 7/9 | - | Resilience | - | - |

*Note. Adapted from Measuring flourishing: The impact of operational definitions on the prevalence of high levels of wellbeing by Hone, Jarden, Schofield & Duncan, 2014. Retrieved from http://aut.researchgateway.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10292/9331/Lucy.pdf?* sequence=2&isAllowed=y

For the purposes of this study I will provide a few examples of how the indicators resonated with participants and offer some insight into the similarities and differences. I will make connections among the indicators chosen by participants, the thematic understandings and how participants defined what flourishing means to them.

***Indicators Chosen by a Few Participants.*** Between 1 and 3 participants chose: *1) social integration 2) social acceptance 3) social coherence 4) environmental mastery and 5) vitality* as important indicators for flourishing. These social indicators of flourishing are largely associated with Keyes operational definition. It is important to note that in conversation with participants these social aspects were important factors contributing to

participants' experience of flourishing within this academic and developmental transition.

For example, social integration (experiencing a sense of belonging, comfort and support

from a community) resonated with Alex in this study (Keyes, 1998). This contrasted with

what most participants shared in their interviews, that they felt a sense of belonging

because of MRU's small student population and class size across all programs. Rose

shares her experience with feeling a sense of belonging despite not having chosen this as

an indicator that resonated with her.

> *"…There's nothing really else besides the school environment that makes me feel like I belong but I think it's the people too, the students here, everyone is just happy to be here from what I've seen. You know they chose to be here, it's not like they're being forced to be here, the university, the school here is smaller so you know you get kids at U of C going because their parents want them to..."* (Rose, Int. 1, 605-612)

A consideration for Rose not choosing this indicator could be that "sense of belonging" is

embedded within the definition of social integration. Two of the nine participants chose

social acceptance (trust and believe that others are capable of kindness). Those who

accept the good and bad aspects of their personality are likely to be more socially

accepting of others and their differences (Keyes, 1998). When faced with adversity

individuals who have *social coherence* seek to maintain it when faced with life

challenges (Keyes, 1998). Although identified as an indicator that least resonated with

participants, this indicator appeared to be particularly important to participants enrolled in

the nursing program.

> *"…In terms of that girl that I was talking about during the academic advising session…her and I always study together during nursing and always bounce ideas off each other so she is definitely my number 1 go to in terms of studying. But then everybody else I like to talk to them and kind of complain about nursing but at the same time as you're complaining you'd be like, wow I can't believe we're getting through this guys, this is so awesome and just having those people that are in the same boat with you it's so much different…"* (Gabby, Int. 6, 271-279)

Environmental mastery only resonated with two of nine participants in this study. This indicator refers to an individuals' ability to exercise, select, manage and mold personal environments to suit needs through both physical and mental activities to advance in the world. Environmental mastery requires individuals to take advantage of opportunities in their environment (Ryff, 1989). Surprisingly, although mastering the university environment was identified as a challenging task for participants in first semester, navigating the physical environment, getting used to academic routines, making new friends and exploring and taking advantage of on campus opportunities became much easier in second semester. All participants felt more comfortable and had in fact showed signs of mastering the university environment identifying that they were branching out and making more friends.

> *"…In my first semester I was kind of sticking with the people that I know because you know…transitioning…you don't really know what to really expect you kind of hang on to people who you are familiar with. But then in the second semester I found myself kind of branching out and making new friends…it was a pretty good experience…I feel that in the first semester it was very study based. But then in the second semester I had like nursing lab, bio lab and then to really succeed I found that working with other people really helped me a lot…* (Charlotte, Int.2, lines 61-75)

*Vitality* is when one feels energetic in life, uniquely related to Huppert & So's definition (Huppert & So, 2013) and chosen by one participant in this study, in contrast to several participants describing the on and off campus activities and opportunities that made them feel energetic and excited while making the transition to university. Josephine shared the energy she received from having down time and living alone in residence, while Alex spoke of the energy she received from her community involvement working with children.

*"…Just being around that energy because they're all around 5 year olds and 6 1year olds so they're like super happy and care free and whatever. So definitely being around them it's kind of like letting my child out too. I feel at ease and I'm teaching stuff that I'm quite passionate about too and I remember going to the same classes when I was younger and that used to be so much fun and just coming back to that and having that balance…yeah. It's like my happy place…"* (Alex, Int. 9, lines 701-708)

***Indicators Chosen by a Moderate Number of Participants.*** Between 4 and 6 participants chose: *1) feeling happy or experiencing positive emotions 2) competency and accomplishment 3) optimism 4) social contribution 5) social growth 6) autonomy 7) life satisfaction and 8) emotional stability* as being more important in defining flourishing among participants than the previously mentioned indicators.

Feeling happy, or experiencing positive emotions, feeling regularly cheerful, interested in life, and in good spirits most of the time, in which all operational definitions agree, is an important aspect of flourishing. Although all participants shared experiences of feeling happy amidst the transition to university there were several examples shared of feeling stressed academically, depression as a result of a sudden family death, grief after the loss of a sibling, and stress associated with personal health challenges experienced during the transition. Feeling happy most of the time was not common for participants making the transition to university. In fact, a wide range of emotions were expressed by many participants and these emotions were highly dependent on the situation. This indicates that flourishing is not solely dependent on hedonic well-being, but must include indicators associated with functioning well most of the time while making the transition.

*"…I'd say my residence friends know me the best and like my roommate probably knows me as well as my sister does because we live together and she has seen every part of me including the emotional, the angry, the happy…like whatever emotion I'm feeling that day she sees because we see each other every day…we're attached at the hip so she knows everything about me…"* (Rose, Int. 1, lines 543-549)

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Defined earlier in Chapter 2, *Accomplishment* is a highly individual and subjective indicator of flourishing and rooted in the literature on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci and Ryan, 2008). It involves working towards and reaching goals, mastery, and self-efficacy involving completing tasks (Butler & Kern, 2016). *Competence* is defined as being capable of thinking clearly, concentrating and making decisions (Huppert & So, 2013). Six out of nine participants chose accomplishment and competence as important indicators to flourish; however, all participants shared that they felt a sense of accomplishment, whether it was small successes along the way or the success of having completed their first year. Interestingly, Alex hadn't chosen this indicator and shared with me *"…it's not a skill to flourish, it's like a feeling I guess…"* (Alex, Int. 9, lines 1110-1111) when referring to the competence indicator within Seligman's operational definition. I agree that flourishing is not a skill within itself; however, the pathways leading to flourishing require a variety of personal strengths and skills learned and developed both in the pre-transition and amidst the transition to university.

Social networks and connections, both on and off campus, were identified by all participants as important flourishing indicators. Mentally healthy people are more hopeful about the future direction of society, can benefit from social growth and have the belief that society has the ability to control its own destiny (Keyes, 1998). While only present in Keyes operational definition, social growth was important to five participants in this study. *Social contribution* refers to individuals seeing themselves as contributing members of society, believing that daily activities are useful to, and valued by, society and others (Keyes, 1998). Those who are interested in society care about the kind of

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world they live in and feel they can understand what is happening around them. Social

contribution identified in Keyes operational definition resonated with 5 participants.

Some participants were involved in activities, on or off campus, that allowed them to

contribute to the greater good and make a difference in these respective environments.

Pam's purpose for becoming more involved on campus was a desire to make a difference

in the campus environment which connected to her feeling a sense of belonging and

being a part of the university. Notably, Pam had not chosen the social contribution

indicator.

> *"…I volunteered for the new Student Association and I'm trying to do things like that, like volunteering through the school rather than just attending the events. I'm trying to participate in them and make a difference and help out rather than just be there. So I think that's more the way I'm doing things rather than attending events. I'm trying to be a part of the university by giving them my time kind of thing..."* (Pam, Int. 3, lines 822-829)

> *Optimism,* unique only to Huppert and So (2013) and Diener et al. (2010), is

defined by feeling hopeful about the future which is different from having positive

emotion - cheerful, contented and happy most of the time. While 5 out of 9 participant

chose this indicator as important, in conversation, all participants felt hopeful about their

future academic goals and the path they needed to take to achieve their goals. *Autonomy*

was chosen by 6 out of 9 participants. This indicator involves having qualities of self-

determination, independence, and self-regulation. Self-actualization is closely related to

autonomy as individuals who are flourishing are those who have, "an internal locus of

control of evaluation, whereby one does not look to others for approval, but evaluates

oneself by personal standards" (Ryff, 1989, p.1071). An autonomous person doesn't

subscribe to the beliefs, fears and laws of the majority and experiences a sense of

freedom from social norms (Ryff, 1989).

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*Emotional stability* is defined as having a balanced emotional response and feeling calm and relaxed and emotionally stable or even tempered (Hone et al, 2014; Huppert & So, 2013). This is an important indicator as it relates to social and emotional developmental – the life skills important for flourishing amidst an academic transition. Participants experienced over the course of the year that they had developed coping and self-care strategies to deal with stress associated with the transition, feeling less overwhelmed and striking a balance with having to juggle the challenges associated with transitioning to university.

  ***Indicators Chosen by the Majority Participants.*** The indicators resonating with participants as being the most important indictors in defining flourishing included: *1) positive affect (interested)/engagement, 2) positive relationships, 3) purpose and meaning, 4) self-acceptance/self-esteem, 5) personal growth, and 6) resilience*. To reiterate, there is strong agreement among all operational definitions that flourishing is a combination of a set of hedonic and eudaimonic indicators, with an overlap of indicators: *positive relationships, positive affect (interested) and engagement and meaning and purpose* (Hone et al., 2014; table 2.1). Notably, 7-9 participants chose these indicators as important to how they define flourishing amidst the transition.

  *Engagement* requires that one has an interest and enjoyment in most activities, paralleling Keyes positive affect (interested) indicator and is present across all 4 definitions of flourishing (Hone et al., 2013; Keyes, 2007a). It was identified as an important indicator among 7/9 participants. *Engagement* as it pertains to student engagement involves, "…psychological, behavioral, cognitive and academic domains", (Butler & Kern, 2016). Many participants expressed that having the autonomy to choose

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the degree program and courses in the university influenced their being more interested

and engaged in their studies in first year. In addition, engagement in on-campus activities

and opportunities provided a sense of belonging to the university environment.

*Positive relationships*, common to all definitions - requires that relationships with

others hold meaning. Relationships are defined as having social support and includes the

number of persons in one's social sphere, the number and quality of social ties, objective

and subjective perspective of resources, how satisfied one is with the support they have,

and the ability to give support to others (Butler & Kern, 2016). It is not surprising that 8/9

participants chose this indicator as there were many rich descriptions of positive

relationships, both on and off campus. Meaningful relationships included relationships

with family members and long-time friends that they had met in the pre-transition period.

Fewer meaningful relationships had been established on campus. On campus peer

relationships were for the purposes of supporting each other academically which

facilitated participants in reaching their academic goals. For Pam, working on campus

provided an opportunity to develop meaningful relationships and shares her experience in

this excerpt.

> *"...they [on campus coworkers] are amazing they're like a family away from home and most people dread working while they're in school and the job itself is not that great...I just like file things pretty much all day but they...just the people...they're all different personality types and again it's just so cool that you can have a connection with someone who is completely different from this other person you have a connection with. They've really...especially in the last couple of months since they have gotten more comfortable with me and I've gotten more comfortable with them the job is so boring but being in there with those people that I'm so comfortable with is so relieving just knowing that I can walk in there even if I don't want to work. I could walk in there and just sit and talk to one of them if I needed to and they completely recognize...they know a lot about me in a short couple of months and that's another thing, they're willing to get to know me. They want to get to know me. They allow me to be myself and they're all exceptionally older than me. Like the majority of them are over 50 but it's just so*

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*nice just to have that comfort zone and just be able to be myself…"* (Pam, Int. 3, lines 724-744)

*Meaning* is defined by having a sense of purpose in life, feelings of worth and worthwhileness common to all definitions (Hone et al., 2013). Purpose and meaning resonated with 7 of 9 participants despite all participants sharing their intentions and direction to achieve academic and personal goals (Ryff, 1989).

> *"…I'm here for a reason. I didn't get accepted for no reason kind of thing and I think it's just…you just gotta keep that bigger picture in mind and like think about it in 5 years and you're graduating and just starting, things are so exciting and that one failed class that you had its not a big deal…you gotta fail at something right? Like not everyone can be good at everything and that just happened to be my one thing that I wasn't good at and I think it's just important to recognize that I'm gonna make mistakes and that's ok…"* (Pam, Int. 3, lines 910-918)

Alex described what meaning meant to her specifically *"…if you have meaning then you have more of a reason to flourish…"* (Alex, Int. 9, lines 1099-1100).

*Personal growth* refers to the ability of one to seek out challenges, having insight into one's own potential and the drive to continuously develop and grow as a person and a key characteristic of a fully functioning person (Ryff, 1989). The opposite of personal growth would involve having a fixed mindset whereby one would perceive that all problems would be solved (Ryff, 1989), with growth and development viewed by the individual as a static process (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). All participants shared many experiences of personal growth while making the transition to first year, reflecting on the many experiences and opportunities in the university environment, community and living environments and personal growth in the relationships with peers, faculty, friends and family members. Off campus involvement contributed to personal growth in working with others, learning life skills, being more responsible and living independently.

Personal growth experienced in the pre-transition period was carried over into participants' transition to first year. Likewise, the personal growth experienced in first year will be carried into participants remaining years of university, built upon and taken into the workforce and personal lives after graduation.

*Self-acceptance* requires that individuals hold a positive attitude and acceptance of oneself and past life. This dimension is a central component of optimal mental health, a characteristic of self-actualization and an indicator of maturity (Ryff, 1989). *Self-esteem* represents feelings of worth and self-confidence resonating with 8 participants. University was a context for developing self-esteem as Josephine shares,

> *"…So just knowing or getting a sense of how you're doing from like a verbal standpoint is like a really good enforcer of like your personal success. So like even hearing your prof say I really enjoy your comment about this, you kind of leave and feel like you've got a gold star or something. So I think that's really important like self esteem too…"* (Josephine, Int. 5, lines 373-378)

Uniquely related to Huppert and So's (2013) definition is the *resilience* indicator that refers to emotional resilience – the ability to manage anxiety and worry- and linked to the emotional stability indicator. Resilience resonated with 8 out of 9 participants as an important indicator to flourishing while making the transition from high school to university. This is really important in terms of building resiliency and pushing through tough times and bouncing back from challenges.

> *"…my family has gone through so much stuff going through all the changes and there has been so much stuff during my childhood…just being able to kind of push through that and just kind of continue to go to school and do everything I think that factor kind of helped me build the emotional resilience and kind of stability later on in life because now I don't really like let things affect me as much and I think that's really important…"* (Gabby, Int. 6, lines 1099-1113)

Gabby described this emotional resilience as something she had developed over time from her family struggles in the pre-transition period that influenced her ability to

flourish in first year. This speaks to the temporal nature of flourishing, that flourishing takes time and arises in many cases from a place of challenge.

## Conclusion

This chapter ends with shedding light on the thematic understandings, that arose from the data collection and analysis phases of this study, reflected in participants' accounts of their experiences of flourishing, represented by three timeframes: *Pre-transition Period, Flourishing Amidst the Transition, and Flourishing Beyond First Year.* Within these timeframes experiences of flourishing emerged, relating to: *1) personal strengths and challenges, 2) positive and trying aspects of personal health challenges, 3) family/parental support and challenges, 4) positive and challenging aspects of the high school, university, and living environments and 5) positive and challenging aspects of community involvement.* This chapter concluded with participants' perspective on what it means to flourish amidst this transition and an exploration of the indicators across the four operational definitions of flourishing that resonated with them. This, in turn, opened a dialog for further interpretation, towards an emergent understanding of flourishing within this context shared next in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 5   Emergent Understandings

"Phenomena are fluid, ever changing in time, as are we. Thus, we can never fully understand, and our awareness of this needs to show in our writing." (Moules et al., 2015, p. 130). The courage to step outside of Chapter 4 to explore unfamiliar territory, to move from thematic reductionism as the end state or goal of analysis involves being courageous and vulnerable as writing hermeneutically is difficult for the novice research. Writing in this way takes practice, to which I've devoted much writing and rewriting to arrive at these beginning interpretations.

In Chapter 4 the data were deconstructed into emergent themes and now the interpretive possibilities of these themes will be explored through curiosity and questioning of the data. In true hermeneutic tradition one must go beyond the data, by engaging in conversation *with* the data and to think *with* the data (Moules et al., 2015). What does all of this mean? What have I really learned from these participants about the experience of flourishing? What do I really want to say? What can I add to the larger conversation that might help us see, think about, and act differently toward flourishing? Arising from this more in-depth level of interpretation there need not be an urgency to revert to an already recognized concept or dimension (Moules et al., 2015).

Returning to Gadamer's concepts, *Erlebnis* refers to an intense or remarkable experience that stands or lingers in one's memory through reflection and contemplation (Gadamer, 2013, p. 58-64). When the raw experience takes one to a deeper understanding through networks of meaning that are already present, when the singular experience is brought into a form of developmental life, through reflection, association, and dialogue – the experience takes on the character of Erfahrung (Moules et al., 2015, p.44-45). Further

reflection of the themes presented in Chapter 4 and moving back and forth with the words, phrases and transcripts helped transform this deeper understanding.

**The Essence of the Experience of Flourishing**

To arrive at an emergent understanding of the essence of the participants' experience of flourishing, the following questions were frequently revisited: What is the heart of participants' experience of flourishing? How was it captured by participants? What is the concentrated experience of flourishing for participants making this transition from high school to university? The multidimensional, complex and inter related nature of the experiences of flourishing makes it difficult to reduce flourishing to one particular concentrated form. When I think of *essence* it makes me think about the soul or the character of the experience of flourishing explored next.

***The personal.*** It is not my position nor the aim of this study to determine whether participants were flourishing or not, however it is clear that participants in this study did not experience flourishing amidst the transition in the same way. Furthermore, there is no set combination of elements, indicators or secret recipe that constitutes how or when someone will experience flourishing. Flourishing involves some combination of, and interplay with the individual and the contexts in which they are immersed in. There is no right or wrong formula for the experience of flourishing while making the transition to university as the experience of flourishing is highly individual and immersed in context that is inter related and ever changing.

At the individual level, themes in the pre-transition period and flourishing amidst the transition related to personal strengths and areas of personal challenge were clearly important aspects of the individual contributing to the experience of flourishing in first

year. This encompassed a mindset in which challenges were perceived from a place of possibility and opportunity which arose from having the courage to be vulnerable. We often think of courage in terms of courageous acts portrayed in the news or in movies. Participants showed courage in many ways that were as equally grand as portrayed in the popular media. From facing fears about moving into residence (shared by Josephine and Rose), having the courage to persevere in the face of academic challenge (all participants) and courage to expand their horizons and take advantage of opportunities within the university environment and the courage to go on with their studies after a painful family loss as did Pam and Rose. Carlos's courage to be vulnerable in seeking out counselling to avoid the "bloat" of keeping things inside. The many acts of courage shared by participants contributed to their ability to flourish in first year.

Penny's experiences with personal health challenges are examples of the importance of physical health for it's profound impact on one's ability to flourish and interrelatedness to overall health (Vanderweel, 2017). Although mentioned by many participants as an important aspect of their well-being, it was not central to their experiences of flourishing, as with Penny. Participants shared their self-care practices (exercise, healthy diet, good sleeping habits) as part of a regime that promoted their physical health, however Penny's personal health challenges were at the core of her being. For example, Penny's experience of what it means to flourish amidst this transition was clearly unique from other participants' experiences of flourishing, impacting her overall health, beginning in the pre-transition period and while making the transition to university, penetrated every domain of her life, impacting her ability to function in first year. At the end of our interview, after reflecting on what she shared, her perception of

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whether she was flourishing in first year had changed. Instead of feeling good and functioning well during the transition, she courageously and honestly admitted that she was feeling ok and functioning ok during this transition. She explains, *...throughout this semester I was feeling ok and functioning ok as well..."* (Penny, Int. 6, lines 1762-1776).

The experience of pushing through challenging times was a common characteristic of all participants, linking challenge to personal strengths. The need to push through indicates there is something there causing resistance. Force is needed to push past this resistance in order to keep moving forward making pushing through a tough task. This pushing through can be likened to having grit (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007), perseverance and resilience. The level of perseverance, determination and passion for achieving long-term goals was a strong characteristic among all participants in this study. Although grit is absent from the four operational definitions of flourishing with a lack of support for it being a higher order structure (Credé, Tynan, & Harms, 2017), it was present in the participants interviewed in this study. The numerous examples of personal strengths that involved pushing through challenges in the short term to pursue their dream of not only being successful in first year but to finish their degree of choice and sharing specific long terms goals and examples of how they would go about achieving these goals, demonstrated the presence of true grit.

Carlos articulates beautifully in the following excerpt of how a keynote speaker in his degree program's student orientation influenced his perception of challenge in terms of having grit as a necessary component for achieving goals.

> *"...there was one thing that stuck with me. I think it was specifically for the business program, the key note speaker. He said that the biggest, the greatest*

*quality that you could develop within yourself, that would be most beneficial within your career, both academically and afterwards would be grit…grit. Even if you hate it, even if you don't want it, understanding in the end, the end goal is what matters. Even if I'm hurting now or for the next few months at the end after everything's passed, once I've climbed that mountain that's what I want. And it's something that's hard to really truly understand. Until we really try and climb that mountain we really don't understand how tough it can get, how much we want to quit and stop just because it hurts. That's still something that I'm trying to get over because I want to quit all the time it's just, I can't let myself. Because if I let myself that goal, because that goal, I'll never reach that goal because the mountain doesn't get any smaller. So that was the biggest thing that stuck with me in orientation. It wasn't really any study skills specifically but the mindset that they recommended you try and take on."* (Carlos, Int. 8, lines 733-751)

Although growth mindset was not an indicator included in any of the four operational definitions it resurfaces not for its frequent mention by participants but as a result of interpretation of meaning of participant's experiences of flourishing. To recall, an individual with a growth mindset believes intelligence can be developed and embraces challenges, persists in the face of setbacks, sees effort as the road towards mastery, learns from criticism and learns from the success of others (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Mindsetworks, 2017). Mimi shares how changing her mindset contributed to her ability to flourish in first year.

*"I feel like I've matured in terms of like my mindset. So in high school like I was the person like if I didn't get a good mark it would be like…it would be on my mind all the time and I would be like why didn't I do it, I would be pretty obsessed with it. But now in university like I feel like my mindset went from a static mindset to a growth mindset, more like if I get a mark that I'm not too proud of I would like talk it through with my prof and understand where I went wrong and try to improve from that rather than just sitting there and thinking about it."* (Mimi, Int. 4, lines 305-313)

All participants, shared experiences that gleaned having a growth mindset over a fixed mindset – one that is static, views effort as fruitless, ignores feedback and feels threatened by other's success (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Mindsetworks, 2017). All

participants demonstrated a tendency to respond or learn to respond positively during times of challenge.

**Flourishing's dialectic nature.** Flourishing is not all rosy, nor are the processes and pathways to a flourishing life. The connotations of the word rose bring to mind many things, for instance, rosy cheeks which may be indicative of good health, or being rosy or optimistic that a situation will turn out successfully. Flourishing is not a compilation of rosy attributes – bright, promising or cheerful or in isolation of any form of the opposite – pasty, pale or pessimistic.

The dialectical nature of flourishing, how it's positive and challenging aspects explored within each theme in Chapter 4, suggest that flourishing amidst this transition cannot exist without some level of challenge. The dialect refers to the debate or discussion between challenge and the positive aspects of flourishing in contrast to the idea that the two constitute opposing or polarizing experiences. The components of a dialectical process consist of: 1) *The principle of appraisal*:  the difficulty of categorizing a phenomenon as either positive or negative, 2) *The principle of complementary:* the notion that experiences involve a blend of positive and negative elements, and 3) *The principle of co-valence:* the idea that a phenomenon depends upon a complex balance and harmonization of the lighter and darker aspects of life (Lomas and Ivtzan, 2016). This seems to be a more relevant way of interpreting the experience of flourishing among participants as this relationship views challenge and flourishing as connected and interdependent - one cannot exist without the other (Lomas and Ivtzan, 2016). These principles are consistent with contemporary views of mental health - for example through Keyes Dual Continuum Model - demonstrating that those who experience a mental illness

can also be flourishing (Keyes, 2010).

In conversation with participants, the essence of the experience of flourishing involves challenge as a universally experienced characteristic of flourishing. All participants in this study perceived themselves as flourishing while making the transition to university. This perception or belief by participants, of how they see things to be or how they experience flourishing, breaks down the barrier of universal truths about the concept of flourishing and what constitutes flourishing within different contextual scenarios. To say that flourishing is a compilation of a set number of positive indicators at a particular point in time provides only a snapshot of that moment.

Challenge was experienced by all participants and interpreted to be a necessary ingredient of flourishing within this context. Overcoming a challenge takes time; therefore, suggestive of the temporal nature of flourishing - popping up when least expected - as Rose experienced with her grandmother and the unpredictable nature of Penny's chronic conditions - and appears within the pursuit of taking on a planned challenge - transitioning from high school to university was a choice all participants made. Emerging from these challenges depended on the individual strengths and supports that they had to overcome their challenges in order to experience personal growth. Of significant importance was the perception of the challenge and the interpretation of adversities that determined whether they would flourish, consistent with what is already known. (as cited in Yeager & Dweck, 2012)

Lomas and Ivtzan (2016), talk about the many dialects of well-being. For lack of a better way to strengthening this emergent understanding of the harmonization of the positive and challenging aspects of flourishing, I will provide an example from their

article. In this example, the authors consider *optimism* (an indicator in Huppert and So and Seligman's operational definitions of flourishing) and *pessimism* (viewed as the opposite of optimism) as being dependent on one another for their very existence and influence on well-being.

> "…in considering the pitfalls of optimism (positive can be negative), we can invert this questioning and consider the value of its counterpart, pessimism (negative can be positive). For instance, …the 'positive power of negative thinking…the connection between pessimism and proactive coping. Here we might usefully differentiate between 'pure' pessimism (a fatalistic assumption of the worst) and strategic pessimism (anticipatory fault-finding and problem solving). One might struggle to find merit in the former; although that said…one could find a form of peace in learning to truly be without hope, in deeply accepting one's fundamental existential hopelessness…" (Lomas and Ivtzan, 2016, p. 1758)

Turning to participants' experiences Carlos shares his thoughts on how his doubtful and quiet nature helped him flourish within the university context.

> *"…A really weird one (strength) is I'm doubtful of a lot of things. I don't have the typical, well I don't hopefully, I try not to be very arrogant about my abilities and I doubt a lot of things that I know and a lot of things I think I can do because usually the reality is it's not the same. I'm not as good as I think I am at something or I'm not as bad as I think I am at something so I doubt a lot of things and that's a good strength so then I can go back and question it and work at it. Another strength I guess, because I'm so quiet I guess then it means I can listen more. I don't have to project everything I'm thinking of. I don't have to prove anything because I'm more interested in what you can teach me than what I can say about what you taught me…"* (Carlos, Int. 8, lines 1204-1215)

Carlos's use of *"a really weird one"* I interpret to be his perception that one might see *"doubtful"* and *"quiet"* as a negative aspect of one's personality instead of a personal strength. This is another example of how the positive and challenging aspects of the individual fall within the principles of appraisal, complementary and co-valence in the dialectic nature of flourishing. (Lomas and Ivtzan, 2016)

Lastly, dialect appears again in the philosophical underpinnings of hermeneutics, whereby multiple realities and pre-understandings are brought to light amidst a dialectical movement within the hermeneutic circle and in conversation with participants which engages and explores and expands understanding.  Interpretation arises from this fusion of horizons of both participant and researcher (Laverty, 2003; Moules et al., 2015) that is immersed in the contexts of both past and present, and in the contexts in which participants in this study are immersed.

**Context matters.** Although, there are no absolute truths in understanding as understanding is never final, I can say with confidence that flourishing is not a "primarily private phenomenon" as put forth by Corey Keyes (Keyes, 1998, p.121). Flourishing can only begin to be understood in terms of its relationship with context or a myriad of contexts (family, living, university and community) as experienced by participants in this study. Flourishing within this transition was clearly an active process involving participants shaping and interacting with family, the university, their living environment, and their community. Participants shared the many accounts of how context contributed to what flourishing meant to them and to the positive and challenging aspects of the context in which they were immersed. With this in mind, chapter 4 explored the indicators that resonated with participants, while this was not an exercise to determine if participant's experiences fit within any of the operational definitions or combination thereof, if anything it did highlight the importance of context and returning to the experiences of flourishing within the contexts of participants' life world while making this transition.

Although participants perceived themselves as flourishing while making the transition to university it didn't equate to experiencing flourishing in every context in which participants were immersed.  For example, participants may have been flourishing in their social relationships off campus but not flourishing in this domain on campus. In Penny's case her involvement in *off-campus* committees provided her with the much needed support for challenges related to her personal health, whereas *on-campus* she struggled with establishing social support and developing meaningful friendships. Many students shared that involvement in their community church was a context contributing to their ability to flourish in first year. Josephine attended community church group on Sundays, Alex's volunteered teaching bible studies to young children at her community church, Mimi attended church with her family on Sundays and Penny had a goal of reconnecting with her community church group more regularly -  religiosity and spirituality have been associated with positive adjustment for emerging adults,

> "…including health attitudes and behaviors and self esteem…academic and personal-emotional adjustment…and lower levels of antisocial behaviors…and substance use…for some individuals having internalized a set of religious beliefs may represent a unique positive path through emerging adulthood…" (as cited in Nelson et al., 2013)

In addition, several participants shared that family culture influenced their ability to flourish in first year. For example, Charlotte spoke of the cultural pressure of having to care for her aging parents, while Josephine shared the benefits of being awarded scholarships because of her family culture.

In terms of the developmental transition that participants experience between the ages of 18-20, university is a context that encourages and influences the movement from adolescence to young adulthood. Although many participants believed that they had not

fully reached adulthood, the university context required that they be active in the process of shaping and taking advantage of opportunities in their environment to build confidence and skills that would help in the subsequent years of their study and in life.

Lastly, the personal strengths, challenging experiences, and opportunities in the pre-transition period influenced how participants flourished amidst the transition – demonstrating that historical awareness is always at work (Gadamer, 2006). The illumination of contexts of the past (the pre-transition period) and the present (flourishing amidst the transition) and participants sharing of their goals and aspirations for the future, speaks to the temporality of flourishing amidst this transition and how we are always in flux with our history (McManus Holroyd, 2007).

***The temporality of flourishing.*** The word "time" appeared in participant transcripts in many forms: as time management, time to do self care, time to spend time with friends, not having enough time, time limits, more time, less time, time wasted, time lines, sometimes, amount of time, taking the time, a really good time, recharge time, time studying, personal time, my time, free time, make time - to name a few. Transitions are processes that take place over time, involve development, flow, or movement from one state to another, include stages or phases and result in changes in identity, roles, relationships, abilities, and patterns of behaviors (Schumacher et al., 1994).

Flourishing in many ways was similarly experienced as a process that took place over time in terms of the personal growth that participants experienced while making the transition and the time it took to arrive at a place where they could perceive themselves as flourishing in their first year; therefore, a process, not an endpoint. Participants experienced many challenges throughout their first year that involved fluctuations in their

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emotional well-being, and challenged their ability to function in the university context, resulting in changes in their relationships, their abilities and patterns of behaviors. Development takes time as several participants expressed not yet feeling like an adult and in essence characterizing the road to adulthood as temporal.

> *"…Sometimes I feel like I'm 12, sometimes I feel like an adult. I think the times that I feel the most like an adult are when I come home on the bus with like a backpack of groceries and I walk inside and I do things like check my email and submit an assignment at 11 and then I lie down and I think yeah, I'm an adult. But sometimes when I have cereal for supper it goes the other way [laughter]…I don't think I'll ever be an adult 100% of the time. I don't think anyone will. I think though adulthood for me is finding my independence, a personal feeling of self success and I think adulthood is self sustainable. I think the moment that you don't keep lapsing back into that need for continual support and kind of a checking in. I think those things are still healthy but I think when those things are not a need anymore that's when you're an adult…"* (Josephine, Int. 4, lines 572-590)

Likewise, the temporal nature of flourishing was influenced by participants' history (themes within the pre-transition period) that influenced flourishing in their first year. "Understanding has a temporal dimension…there has to be something already there to interpret – then good interpretation attends to the history of the topic…we are in the flux of history, under the multifarious influences of our time and place. We can conscientiously do our best to clarify our understanding from within this flux, but what we cannot do is step out of history into a view from nowhere" (Moules et al., 2015, p.37-38).

**Conclusion**

The emergent understandings of flourishing within this context tie into Gadamer's concept of *finitude* whereby, understanding is never complete or finished. There is no beginning point or end point to interpretation. "Understanding-in-language presents a horizon of infinite possibility" (Gadamer, 2013; Moules et al., 2015, p.35-35); therefore,

these emergent understandings are only a beginning understanding from the perspectives of students who have experienced flourishing while making the transition to university directly from high school. In the final chapter, with consideration for thematic and emergent understandings and participant accounts of what it means to flourish, I will begin a discussion highlighting opportunities for practice, policy and research, and explore strengths and limitations of the study.

# Chapter 6   Discussion

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to understand how students define and experience flourishing while making the transition directly from high school to university. Critical to this exploration was identifying key factors that contributed to how students defined and experienced flourishing, as well as the challenges that they had experienced, managed and overcame during the transition. Nine students at the end of their first year met the inclusion criteria and provided consent, were interviewed to develop a beginning understanding of their experiences of flourishing amidst this academic and developmental transition.

Chapter 4 explored the thematic understandings associated with three time periods, participants' insights on what it means to flourish, and the indicators that participants chose from the four operational definitions of flourishing. Chapter 5 moved the data beyond thematic reductionism toward an emergent understanding of the experiences of flourishing amidst this dual transition to arrive at the essence of the experience of flourishing. Chapter 6 will open further dialogue linking preunderstandings from the literature to emergent themes and understandings drawn from this study and offer insights into the implications for practice, policy and recommendations for future research.

> "Because hermeneutics is attuned to the need to deconstruct taken-for-granted assumptions about human experience and practices, researchers in this tradition are cautioned against falling prey to prescriptive and taken-for granted prescriptions of implications for practice. Instead there is constant vigilance for remaining attentive to "what is at stake" in the research and also a recognition that all any research can do is offer advice for better practice; it cannot guarantee it." (Moules et al., 2015, p. 189)

Therefore, I will explore the implications with emergent understandings in mind and touch upon the more obvious implications that strengthen our current understandings.

**Implications for Practice**

Although this study's focus was on the experience of flourishing of first year students making the transition directly from high school to university, participants shared that in the pre-transition period the high school environment had a role in influencing this transition. This speaks to the temporal nature of flourishing and the importance of how context contributes to the process.

**High Schools.** Several participants shared that high school had not prepared them for the skills they needed for academic success. For example, Charlotte noted, *"I felt like high school didn't really prepare me for the writing…"* (Charlotte, Int. 2, lines 13-14). In addition, Mimi found high school much more lenient, allowing rewrites of tests, misaligning with the stricter expectations of university. *"…I wouldn't say they prepared…not really, not quite because like the high school that I went to, it was very lenient."* (Mimi, Int. 4, lines 108-109). Interventions to boost university readiness and bridge this gap involving school boards and universities working together to ensure that high school curricula align with the academic expectations of university could be helpful in easing the transition for many students. While it is recognized that universities have students from numerous school boards, not only from Canada but around the world, an effort to have at least some school boards and universities work in collaboration to find strategies that might assist student preparation for university. This also could have the potential for reducing the time it takes for students to flourish when making the transition.

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Participants taking more rigorous programs and courses in high school - for example, the International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement courses - identified that these programs, although stressful, in fact had prepared them for the more intense academic experience in university. Gabby shared *"…so for me personally what I found extremely helpful is that in high school I actually took IB, International Baccalaureate program… they had really high expectations for us…"* (Gabby, Int. 6, lines 173-177). It may be beneficial for high schools to further explore the strengths of the International Baccalaureate Program and ways that certain aspects of this program could be incorporated into regular high school curricula to better prepare students for making the transition to university.

For the few participants living in smaller communities, they identified the need for more high school resources and supports for students to ease the transition to university. Efforts that involve developing partnerships with high schools and universities to explore resources well in advance of making the transition to first year would be helpful in supporting students' overall well-being. Remote ways of easing this transition could be introduced, for example, anonymous online forums, to which high school students could ask confidential questions have the potential to address student fears and concerns about university. Information about what to expect when making the transition could assist, for example, feeling homesick, the stress associated with having more responsibility and trying to meet higher academic expectations and challenges. Another option could involve posting virtual tours of the campus environment and online videos of interviews of students who have already made the transitions – sharing challenging experiences, how they've overcome them and giving helpful tips for easing the transition.

High schools can bring university students who have already made the transition back to talk about their experiences with students who are about to embark on this transition. To facilitate this connection in rural and remote communities videoconferencing could be arranged.

**Universities**. The academic success of first year students is strongly related to their experience while making the transition to university (Cole, 2017; Komarraju, Ramsey & Rinella, 2013). Although it is important to have a strong academic foundation when entering university, if one views any university website, pre-requisites for program admission hones in on high marks with little focus on other aspects of the individual that may influence student flourishing in the first year. Although, high marks are a predictor of academic success in university (Antaramian, 2015; Howell, 2009; Lennon et al., 2011) they did not predict Carlos's success in first year.

> *"High school I did not care. All my classes I went in I just passively listened. If I found it interesting, maybe I'd take a few notes. I applied the amount of effort only required to both make sure my parents don't grind me but as low amount of effort as possible so that way I'd have as much free time to do, to indulge in my hobbies… I was an underachiever."* (Carlos, Int. 8, lines 372-388)

However, universities are not just about getting good grades and improving the intellect of students, there is an additional responsibility of promoting well-being, building resilience and supporting individual strengths so that students are equipped to deal with the added challenges of transitioning to university. Flourishing amidst this transition is as much dependent on personal strengths and the perception of personal challenges, as is context; however, there is much overlap between the two.  Exploring ways of changing perceptions at all levels, from the individual student level to administrative levels at high school and university, has the most promise for shifting the

perception of challenge as a necessary element of flourishing. Easing the transition for students is not equivalent to eliminating challenge while making the transition to first year. By removing every ounce of challenge within this context negates the benefits of having challenge in one's life - a necessary component of flourishing. Challenge is at the core of developing a growth mindset and students who believe, or are taught, that their abilities can be developed tend to show higher academic achievement across school transitions (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Therefore, fostering students' personal strengths and capabilities (Davidson, Ridgway, Wieland & O'Connell, 2009; Galassi, 2017; Xie, 2013) and normalizing some of the challenges that they experience, both in the high school and university environment, to build resiliency to withstand the challenges is critical to improving their odds of academic success and well-being (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Encouraging independent thinking and problem solving skills are important areas for all university programs to focus on in helping students meet the developmental and academic challenges associated with making the transition to university.

The University of Toronto's recent release of *Flourish, A Strength-based Resilience Approach to Support Students' Transition from Secondary to Post-Secondary Education* (2018), is an Ontario report summarizing a 2-year initiative that developed and evaluated the effectiveness of resilience and well-being interventions for students transitioning from secondary to post-secondary education. Key findings of this report note that in the past 5 years, mental illness has risen 11% among first-year students accessing counselling services and that there has been an 8% decline in the number of students who entered university in a flourishing state. The report also conducted an evaluation of a 10 session intervention (Strength-Based Resilience program) involving

first year university students, high school students and adolescents in an outpatient hospital setting and found the program to be more effective in reducing stress, lowering stigma, while enhancing student well-being, resilience and student engagement compared to intervention as usual (University of Toronto, 2018). The effectiveness of this programming suggests that it may be worthwhile for other universities to explore opportunities to engage in similar programming. Nationally, transition programs that currently exist focus on the academic remediation skills needed for a successful the transition to post-secondary institutions, "…less intentional focus is placed on cultivating skills of resilience and stress management…" (University of Toronto, 2018, p. 20).

Of significance, is the comprehensive list of recommendations targeting mental health service professionals, student service professionals and secondary and post-secondary administrators included in this report (University of Toronto, 2018), with many of the recommendations aligning with this study's findings. For example, cultivating students' character and enhancing resilience speak to the individual level factors that promote flourishing within this dual transition and speak to the personal nature of flourishing. Another recommendation involved implementing programs that anticipate multiple touch points throughout a student's educational journey and build upon existing programming (University of Toronto, 2018). Following students throughout their first year and identifying ways of easing the transition at different points throughout the year may be helpful in addressing the emergent understanding that flourishing is a process that takes time; therefore, requiring consistent and ongoing support. Undoubtedly, these recommendations could serve as a useful tool for a variety of post-secondary contexts to

build upon institutional strengths and practices to promote student flourishing amidst the transition to university and beyond.

**Peer support.** Opportunities for more health promotion initiatives that involve peer support also should be explored in the first year of university. Those participants involved in the *MRU's Peer Learning Program* found it very helpful in either *providing support* to other students (creating opportunities for on campus involvement and promoting their peer's academic success) or *receiving support* (for academics and mental well-being) while making the transition to university. Studies have found peer learning in undergraduate nursing programs to be effective in developing communication and critical thinking skills as well as boosting students' self-confidence, with an added benefit of being a cost effective way of utilizing students to support student learning (Stone, Cooper and Cant, 2013).

Other opportunities for peer led support for first year students could involve students in their 4th year, to share with students in first year, the challenges they faced and how challenges were overcome, or by assigning 1st year students a peer mentor, someone who has gone through the transition, who can assist them in navigating the new environment. Pam shares how peer support via a social media outlet eased her transition first year.

> *"…we have a Facebook page for the nursing faculty and you can post whenever you have a question and almost all the time you will have multiple answers just because everyone wants to help each other out. We're all in the same position and if you're not in the same position you've been there before or you're going to be in that position so it's…we all kind of want to help each other like…I kinda had a bad experience in this class and I want to make sure you don't have that experience so I can give you a little piece of advice or something…that's one thing I love and that's one thing that motivated me to go into nursing as well as to this university. That small…the closeness…just that familiar kind of relative feeling that everyone is always feeling."* (Pam, Int. 3, lines 1068-1080)

The Student Association of Mount Royal University - an association run by students to support students - offered many opportunities for students to become involved, connected and experience a sense of belonging to the university environment. Although, not all participants took advantage of these opportunities, those who chose not to become involved in various on campus events in their first year, expressed interest in future involvement in some capacity, whether as a participant or volunteer.

Several participants shared their experiences of working on projects with peers. They described feeling uncomfortable being in a group with peers who they didn't know, or had a dissimilar work ethic, and with whom they didn't get along. Despite these challenges, participants noted that it was a valuable part of their learning experience and encouraged the development of life skills. Universities are invested in helping prepare students for the work force which includes learning how to work with others and developing the necessary social and emotional skills to make the next transition into the work force. Therefore, in advance of graduation, universities should be collaborating with the workforce, students and key stakeholders in post-secondary settings to understand the unique needs of this population. The Mental Health Commission of Canada is shaping the landscape in this effort and currently seeking input from post-secondary stakeholders across Canada to develop national standards for promoting and protecting the psychological health and safety of post-secondary students as the workforce of tomorrow. Once developed these standards will be useful in assisting post-secondary institutions in preparing students for this transition (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2019)

**Faculty.** Participants shared how faculty contributed significantly to their ability to flourish amidst this transition by supporting both their academic success and in

reducing stress by demonstrating qualities associated with being approachable, open, patient, caring and as someone who wanted to promote their well-being. Faculty can further support students by having an awareness of the common challenges that student's face in their first year and an understanding that there may be other challenges for example, personal health challenges or unexpected life events as experienced by some participants in this study, that may be hindering a student's academic success and well-being.

Faculty have a role to play in acknowledging student differences. Having an awareness of the on-campus supports and resources, and/or taking a bit of extra time to acknowledge and create opportunities for students to feel safe in talking about their concerns, can often guide students in the direction of resolving their own challenges. Acknowledgement, even that university can be a challenging time, was crucial for some participants. While most students felt comfortable approaching and discussing their academic and personal challenges with faculty; however, this was not the case for all participants. Participants were more likely to reach out to faculty who had exhibited non-judgemental qualities and who were open and accepting, demonstrating genuine concern for the challenges that students were facing. All students noted that the small university and class sizes provided more opportunities to get to know their professors and provided an opportunity for faculty to get to know them better. Moreover, this contributed to participants experiencing more meaningful relationships with faculty and peers resulting in feeling a sense of belonging to the university environment and their program of choice.

Lastly, recognition of the nuanced nature of flourishing with Penny's on-going experience of dealing with the added struggles of personal health challenges amidst the

transition to university. It is therefore important to find ways of easing the transition for a wide range of people with disabilities *beyond* accessibility services in order to expand their sphere of social support and students' sense of belonging - both within their programs and the university as a whole.  In addition, it would be critical to engage students with added personal health challenges in creating these processes to ensure that programs and activities aimed at this population are meaningful.

**Parental/family considerations.** The full responsibility of easing the transition does not lie solely with universities. Although having *family and parental support* was a significant resource identified by participants in this study, family challenges were also present. Today's parents are different from those of previous generations. Millennials, the generation of students in this study (born between 1982-2002) have been characterized as being overly dependent on their parents which can translate into overdependence on faculty and administrators (DeBard, 2004), thus providing an added layer of challenge for university faculty, student support services, and administrators (Love and Thomas, 2014).

As Alex shared, parenting styles, that are controlling instead of autonomy supportive, can challenge their child's academic success and developmental growth. Therefore, high schools, and other stakeholder organizations, for example community health centers, that provide support to families, might find ways to create tailored education and supports for parents prior to their children making the transition to post-secondary education. This could involve a parenting workshop aimed at fostering children's strengths and educating parents on how to apply a strength-based parenting approach to deal with everyday challenges, such as the Resilient Parenting Program

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offered by the Toronto District School Board (University of Toronto, 2018). For Alex, this was in the area of improving her relationship with her mother.

> *"The goal, as I mentioned, my attitude. I do want to completely…like open mindedness. Less kind of thinking about myself and more other people as well, that's a big goal for me because I know that's caused problems with my mom as well, not like taking her out of the blame but like definitely if I'm kind of…if I'm more open to her point of view then I think I would be less conflicting. So definitely working on myself."* (Alex, Int. 9, lines 1044-1051)

Penny shared her perspective on the need for children to recognize and understand that the change is real for their parents as well when their children make the transition to university.

> *"You have to be willing to take some of the reigns from your parents and you have to be willing to say you got this. It's a transition for parents as well right, it's a huge huge change for them…"* (Penny, Int. 7, lines 1614-1617).

Education and resources for families that focus specifically on what to expect when their children go to university and identifying ways that families can support their children entering a developmental and academic transition are needed. A full day interactive program orienting students and parents to the university campus experience, such as the *Get Started Program* at the University of Toronto Scarborough Campus, helps students connect with peer coaches and staff members who share their own experiences with students making the transition to university may be helpful in easing the transition to university for students entering first year and help parents gain a better understanding of how they too can support their child's journey (University of Toronto, 2018).

**Developmental considerations.** While this developmental transition is a time of exploration, risk-taking and experimentation with substances, sexual partners and societal rules and norms (Berk, 2007; Kloep et al., 2015; Lenz, 2001), none of the participants shared any experiences of engaging in these behaviors; however, participants were not asked specifically about any risk taking behaviors. Indeed, several participants shared that they did not engage in activities or social events involving alcohol or drugs as Josephine and Gabby explained.

> *"…I don't drink or do drugs or smoke. I have a very healthy diet and I go to the gym every day or every other day and I think that those are really and oh I get 8 hours of sleep…"* (Josephine, Int. 5, 248-251)

> *"…I'm not a huge partier at all. I probably never will be, it's my own personal decision. It's not my scene and maybe it might be in a couple of years but as of right now I'm not a party life, like night life kind of person…"* (Pam, Int. 3, 817-820)

While some level of risk taking behavior is healthy for exploring one's identity (Arnett, 2000), it is suggested that young people who engage excessively in a number of risk taking behaviors (experimentation with drugs and alcohol, video game use, sexual partners and pornography) may be at a higher risk for floundering (Nelson and Padilla-Walker, 2013).

To reiterate, successful adaptation and positive coping strategies while transitioning from adolescence to young adulthood, and directly from high school to university, are largely dependent on the development of skills in the areas of responsible decision making, relationship skills, social awareness, self-awareness and self-management (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2017) prior to,

and during this dual transition. As discussed in Chapter 3, practicing life skills, often referred to as social and emotional learning or emotional intelligence (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2017), prior to entering post-secondary education strengthens the neuronal pathways that help equip students with the necessary abilities to cope and adapt to changes and challenges such as, moving away from home, financial stress, adjusting to higher academic standards, navigating and establishing new social networks and supports (Johnson et al., 2010). These abilities help promote a successful transition to university and positively influence later career success (Savitz-Romer et al., 2015).

Participants shared that university residence was another context for personal growth and practicing life skills. Indeed, as Rose shared, *"…our residence advisor really really helped us solve the problems and helped us work through them"* (Rose, Int. 1, lines 54-55). Having this guidance gave Rose the necessary life skills she needed to work out her differences with her roommates independently.  Learning the life skill of asking for help contributed to many participants' ability to flourish in first year. As Gabby shares,

> *"I think one of the biggest skills that I got was that ability to kind of ask for help if I need it. I used to not really do that in high school, I would be like oh it doesn't matter, I can figure it out. But here I realized that that time that you spend trying to figure it out by yourself if you just ask somebody you're gonna save so much time that you're going to put towards something else…Yeah, I think that the biggest one was being able to ask for help."* (Gabby, Int. 6, lines 864-878)

Universities can encourage this skill by fostering safe environments in which students feel comfortable asking for help to ease their transition, ideally learning this skill in the pre-transition period would better equip students entering their first year.

## Implications for Policy

Frameworks are useful in guiding policies, practices and initiatives within universities. Although, highly unlikely that a study of this nature and small sample size has an impact on policy change, the emergent understandings arising from this study have the ability to shift thinking about the concept of flourishing – the factors that promote flourishing, and what it means to flourish to students making the transition from high school to university. A University's vision, mission statement and mandate that encourages and provides strategies to develop all aspects of students in preparing them for the future workforce and in life would be another helpful way of guiding policy.

The Keyes' Dual Continuum Model of Mental Health with an operational definition of flourishing (Keyes, 2007a) is a framework used in a number of post-secondary settings across Canada to guide mental health promotion efforts to address the mental illness crisis among students (MacKean, 2011; Mount Royal University, 2013; University of Calgary, 2016; University of Toronto, 2017). Within this model, flourishing is defined as, "a state in which an individual feels positive emotion toward life and is functioning well psychologically and socially" (Keyes, 2003, p. 294). What we know about the Dual Continuum Model of Mental Health (Keyes, 2007a) is that it provides a more inclusive view of mental health for whole student populations - challenging traditional views of mental health, reducing the stigma associated with having a mental illness and views individuals who have a mental illness as having the potential to flourish. If there is to be further change in the way mental health is perceived in society and within the post-secondary context, then using this model to conceptualize mental health is recommended.

Efforts that move away from focusing only on the mental health struggles of students and shift the focus to mental health promotion require a change in policy, practice and research involving individuals, the campus environment, community and society to facilitate a school culture shift within these domains (CACUSS & CMHA, 2013; De Somma et al., 2017; Oades et al., 2011; White, 2016). This focus on well-being that includes prevention and treatment aims to address student populations using strategies to enhance protective factors, reduce risk factors and inequities, and the effects that these inequities have on health (Barry, 2009; CAMH, 2014). Universal mental health promotion programmes and upstream approaches aimed at promoting the mental well-being of entire student populations have been incorporated into a number of frameworks: The Campus Population Health Promotion Model (Patterson and Kline, 2008), Ecological Model (ACHA, 2016b), Healthy Minds/Healthy Campuses (CMHA, 2017), and the UK Healthy Universities Model (Healthy Universities, 2017). While these models have the ability to reach larger student populations, they also have the potential to fall short in addressing the *unique* needs of some students.

The Okanagan Charter is a framework to guide the development of health promoting universities and colleges. The first call to action involves: 1) embedding health into all campus policies, 2) creating supportive campus environments, 3) generating thriving campus communities and a culture of well-being, 4) supporting the personal development of students, campus staff and faculty and, 5) creating or reorienting campus services for equitable access and the enhancement of well-being. The second call to action involves: 1) integrating health and well-being and sustainability in multiple disciplines across campus, 2) advancing research, teaching and training for health

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promotion knowledge and action and, 3) building relationships and collaborations on and off campus to develop, harness and mobilize knowledge and action for health promotion (International Conference on Health Promoting Universities and Colleges, 2015, p. 8-9). Approaches of this nature take into account the broader social, cultural, political and economic context in which individuals, communities and societies are immersed that influence mental health at an individual level (Holt & Warne, 2007). Several Canadian universities, including Mount Royal, have adopted this charter as a campus wide commitment to implementing health and well-being in all policies and practices (MRU, 2019).

**Recommendations for Future Research**

As discussed in chapters 1 and 2, the most obvious recommendation would be the need for more qualitative studies to be conducted to broaden our understanding of the concept of flourishing, particularly within this academic and developmental transition. Of significant importance is the need to build greater understanding among minority populations including, but not limited to, students with disabilities, international students, students who identify with sexual/and gender orientations other than female or male, and single and young parents entering their first year directly from high school.

This study included students making the transition into degree programs. As MRU offers a variety of certificate and diploma programs, it also would be interesting to understand the pathways and factors contributing to flourishing among these students. Furthermore, qualitative studies involving post-secondary contexts other than university, for example, colleges and technology institutes have the ability to unearth factors associated with flourishing specific to these contexts and population of students making

the transition to university that could include students other than those transitioning directly from high school. Studies could include, for example, mature students making a career transition, or mature students with no previous post-secondary educational experience.

Qualitative longitudinal studies to explore the experiences of flourishing over time beginning in high school, throughout university, and then following students into the workforce would begin to build understanding of the experiences of flourishing over time, within changing contexts and the influence of dialects (positive and challenging aspects). Studies of this nature are capable of, "…identifying and characterizing trajectories, turning points and interpretive stances that cover short and long periods of time" (Hermanowicz, 2013).

## Implications for Nursing

The concept of flourishing is essentially absent from the nursing literature (Agenor et al., 2017) and, historically, from a nursing education perspective there has been little focus on promotion, prevention and mental health interventions in nursing theory and practice courses at the undergraduate level (Cavanaugh, 2018; Smith & Khanlou, 2013). If nursing is to be considered a discipline that prides itself on viewing individuals holistically, then mental health must be a mandatory component of nursing curriculum to ensure that all aspects of health are implemented in practice. Nurses work in a variety of settings - such as pediatric units in hospitals, community health centers, teen health clinics and educational settings - that intersect with young people who are in the process of considering some form of post-secondary education or have already made the transition. This presents nurses with opportunities to initiate and engage in health

promoting conversations with students about the transition to university and increasing their awareness of the resources available to assist them.

This study unearthed the essence of flourishing as a phenomenon that is an individual, contextually and culturally driven and dialectical and temporal in nature. However, the operational definitions described in Chapter 2 lack context and cultural perspectives of what flourishing means. Nursing has a strong foundation in health promotion and viewing individuals from a holistic perspective, it is noted that the indicators within the four operational definitions of flourishing do not encompass a holistic view of the individual to include all aspects of health. Therefore, it is questionable whether the concept, as currently defined, can adequately guide nursing practice. For this reason, nursing research is needed to create interventions to promote student flourishing (Agenor et al., 2017) that account for the nursing discipline's worldview. In mental health nursing practice, interventions to date have focused on mental health promotion, prevention and intervention; therefore, it may be unclear as to how flourishing differs from the concept of mental health from a nursing perspective. Further confusion may be associated with the concept of *flourishing* being used interchangeably with a *high level of mental health*, *subjective well-being,* and *optimal mental health*.

The findings from this study do offer some critical areas for nurses to include in practice; however, it is important to note that the implications for this study are not limited to one discipline, or role, and can be extended to stakeholders in high schools and other post-secondary institutions that interact directly and indirectly with students considering making the transition to university. Nurses at multiple levels are in a position

to work collaboratively with key stakeholders within secondary and post-secondary settings to challenge stereotypes, reduce the stigmatization of mental illness and advocate for practices, policies and research that promote student flourishing alongside of mental health prevention and treatment efforts.

**Study Limitations**

Revisiting preunderstandings from the literature review, it is noted that there has been an increase in student diversity on Canadian campuses. Factors such as ethnicity, gender identity, socio-economic status, disability status, cultural, and international status, may significantly heighten one's level of stress and psychological difficulties during this dual transition in contrast with the non-minority student population (Michalski et al., 2017). While this study involved a diverse cohort of students, there is always room for improvement. This study included 1 male, 8 females, two students who had immigrated to Canada before the age of 10, and four different degree programs. There was an absence of international students who immigrated directly from high school and their country of origin to study at MRU. Students identifying with gender and or/sex identities other than male and female did not come forward to participate in this study. I believe that there would likely have been some minority status students who would have perceived themselves as feeling good and functioning well while making this transition; therefore, consideration for how to reach these students in future studies needs to be carefully explored as they have the ability to shed light and expand our understanding of flourishing further.

In terms of recruitment, an overrepresentation of Bachelor of Nursing students may have been the result of having a committee member from the Faculty of Nursing

promoting the study within the nursing program. The recruitment poster (appendix F) identified that I was a Master of Nursing student which may have increased interest within this population. It was revealed by a participant during an interview that nursing faculty had sent individual emails to students who they perceived to be flourishing in first year, which may have subsequently influenced this overrepresentation. In hindsight, it may have been a better strategy to have omitted noting my discipline (Master of Nursing student) in recruitment documents (poster, recruitment email) as students may have viewed this more so as a "nursing study" rather than a study pertaining to and benefiting first year students across all degree programs.

   Recruitment emails and posters replaced the term *"flourishing"* with the definition of flourishing *"feeling good and functioning well"* which may have contributed to only 1 male coming forward to participate in this study. It may be that males are less likely than female participants to talk about their experiences of feeling good and functioning well with a female researcher. Furthermore, men have been largely underrepresented and are more difficult to recruit in qualitative health research suggesting that data collection methods are more "women friendly" dissuading men from participating (Affleck, Glass & Macdonald, 2012, p. 156).

**Study Strengths**

   The timing of participant interviews (April-May timeframe) was seen as a strength as participants could reflect back over the course of the entire academic year and provide rich in-depth accounts of their experiences of flourishing. Had this study involved students at the beginning of first year they may have been less likely to have a conversation about the opportunities or resources on campus that promoted their

flourishing, as most participants branched out and became more involved in on-campus opportunities in 2nd semester. The dialectical nature of flourishing may not have been illuminated if participants were interviewed at the beginning of the year in terms of having the time to process and reflect upon the challenges that they experienced and the personal growth as a result of these challenges. Four participants in this study shared experiences of personal health struggles yet perceived themselves as flourishing while making the transition to university in addition to coping and adapting to changes and challenges such as, moving away from home, adjusting to higher academic standards, navigating and establishing new social networks and supports (Johnson et al., 2010). For now, this study has unearthed the character of flourishing – individual, dialectical, temporal and context driven.

The strength of using a hermeneutic approach is to give insight into the nuanced nature of a phenomenon. The "so what" of this work is "…premised on the insight that when we know what we know, we cannot deny that we know and we are ethically obligated to do something about it." (Moules et al., 2015, p. 191). The degree to which the research can be transferred to other contexts (settings, times, situations and people) is referred to as transferability in which details of the findings and methods are compared to similar situations (Smith et al., 2009). While the thematic and emergent understandings may extend to other secondary and post-secondary contexts, generalizability and transferability in a hermeneutic inquiry are not where truth lies. Rather truth lies in the extent to which the research raises more questions and extends understanding (Moules et al., 2015).

**Conclusion**

This study provides a beginning understanding, from the perspectives of nine full time degree students, of the factors that contributed to their ability to flourish while making the transition to university directly from high school, and what it meant to flourish amidst this transition. An interpretive phenomenological approach, underpinned by Gadamer's philosophy, was helpful in exploring the concept of flourishing within this dual transitional period offering new understandings of the concept and "…brings to an end the play of interpretation, at least for the moment and, in doing so, it reconstitutes the topic in ways that bring to the fore new possibilities…" (Moules et al., 2015, p.50). One must keep in mind that understandings are never final or complete; therefore, other post-secondary contexts are encouraged to bring forth their own pre-understandings to develop practices, policies and further research that suit the needs of their unique student population and to look at things differently, bringing out "…the undetermined possibilities of a thing…" (Gadamer, 2013, p.383).

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# Appendix A   Keyes' Indicators of Flourishing

| Dimension | Definition |
|---|---|
| **Positive emotions (i.e., emotional well-being)** | |
| Positive affect | Regularly cheerful, interested in life, in good spirits, happy, calm and peaceful, full of life. |
| Avowed quality of life | Mostly or highly satisfied with life overall or in domains of life. |
| **Positive psychological functioning (i.e., psychological well-being)** | |
| Self-acceptance | Holds positive attitudes toward self, acknowledges, likes most parts of self, personality. |
| Personal growth | Seeks challenge, has insight into own potential, feels a sense of continued development. |
| Purpose in life | Finds own life has a direction and meaning. |
| Environmental mastery | Exercises ability to select, manage, and mold personal environs to suit needs. |
| Autonomy | Is guided by own, socially accepted, internal standards and values. |
| Positive relations with others | Has, or can form, warm, trusting personal relationships |
| **Positive social functioning (i.e., social well-being)** | |
| Social acceptance | Holds positive attitudes toward, acknowledges, and is accepting of human differences. |
| Social actualization | Believes people, groups, and society have potential and can evolve or grow positively. |
| Social contribution | Sees own daily activities as useful to and valued by society and others. |
| Social coherence | Interested in society and social life and finds them meaningful and somewhat intelligible. |
| Social integration | A sense of belonging to, and comfort and support from, a community. |

*Note.* Reprinted from *Promoting and protecting mental health as flourishing: A complementary strategy for improving national mental health* by Corey L. M. Keyes, 2007. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Corey_Keyes/publication/6482455_Promoting_and_Protecting_Mental_Health_as_Flourishing_A_Complementary_Strategy_for_Improving_National_Mental_Health/links/0046352b1a6f9aea9e000000.pdf

# Appendix B   Huppert and So's Components of Flourishing

**Table 1**  Features of flourishing and indicator items from the European Social Survey

| Positive feature | ESS item used as indicator |
|---|---|
| Competence | Most days I feel a sense of accomplishment from what I do |
| Emotional stability | (In the past week) I felt calm and peaceful |
| Engagement | I love learning new things |
| Meaning | I generally feel that what I do in my life is valuable and worthwhile |
| Optimism | I am always optimistic about my future |
| Positive emotion | Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are? |
| Positive relationships | There are people in my life who really care about me |
| Resilience | When things go wrong in my life it generally takes me a long time to get back to normal. (reverse score) |
| Self-esteem | In general, I feel very positive about myself |
| Vitality | (In the past week) I had a lot of energy |

*Note. Reprinted from Flourishing Across Europe: Application of a New Conceptual Framework for Defining Well-Being* by Huppert and So, 2014. Retrieved from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3545194/pdf/11205_2011_Article_9966.pdf

## Appendix C   Diener et al.'s Components of Flourishing

| Component of flourishing | FS indicator item |
|---|---|
| Purpose/meaning | I lead a purposeful and meaningful life |
| Positive relationships | My social relationships are supportive and rewarding |
| Engagement | I am engaged and interested in my daily activities |
| Social contribution | I actively contribute to the happiness and wellbeing of others |
| Competence | I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me |
| Self-respect | I am a good person and live a good life |
| Optimism | I am optimistic about my future |
| Social relationships | People respect me |

*Note.* Reprinted from *Measuring flourishing: The impact of operational definitions on the prevalence of high levels of wellbeing* by Hone, Jarden, Schofield & Duncan, 2014. Retrieved from http://aut.researchgateway.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10292/9331/Lucy.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

# Appendix D   Seligman's Components of Flourishing

| Component of flourishing | PERMA-P indicator item |
| --- | --- |
| **Positive emotion** | In general, how often do you feel joyful? <br> In general, how often do you feel positive? <br> In general, to what extent do you feel contented? |
| **Engagement** | How often do you become absorbed in what you are doing? <br> In general, to what extent do you feel excited and interested in things? <br> How often do you lose track of time while doing something you enjoy? |
| **Positive relationships** | To what extent do you receive help and support from others when you need it? <br> To what extent have you been feeling loved? <br> How satisfied are you with your personal relationships? |
| **Meaning** | In general, to what extent do you lead a purposeful and meaningful life? <br> In general, to what extent do you feel that what you do in your life is valuable and worthwhile? <br> To what extent do you generally feel that you have a sense of direction in your life? |
| **Accomplishment** | How much of the time do you feel you are making progress towards accomplishing your goals? <br> How often do you achieve the important goals you have set for yourself? <br> How often are you able to handle your responsibilities? |
| **General wellbeing** | Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are? |

*Note.* Reprinted from *Measuring flourishing: The impact of operational definitions on the prevalence of high levels of wellbeing* by Hone, Jarden, Schofield & Duncan, 2014. Retrieved from http://aut.researchgateway.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10292/9331/Lucy.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

## Appendix E   Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Thank-you for taking the time to meet with me today and agreeing to participate in this study. My name is Christina Volstad, I am a Master of Nursing student conducting a study about students' experiences of flourishing while making the transition from high school to university. It is understandable that most transitions present both challenges and opportunities. For this study, I'm interested in understanding what the transition experience has been like for students and what helps students overcome challenges and flourish during this transition. The interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes. Do you have any questions before we begin?

### Interview Questions

1. *Making the transition to university can be both exciting and challenging at the same time. What has it been like for you?*

Potential probes:
a. Tell me a bit about what you thought university life was going to be like when you were in high school? How do these thoughts compare with your actual experience since coming to university?

b. How has the transition affected different areas of your life – both on, and off, campus?

c. When things are going well at university, what does that look like for you? What are you thinking and feeling? How do you act?

d. When we think about health we only usually think about our physical health but health includes many other aspects. What university experiences would you say have supported any aspect of your health (mental, physical, social, interpersonal, spiritual, religious) during this transition?

2. *Tell me about some of the challenges that you have faced and good things that have come about (meeting new people, getting involved on campus, developing new skills/knowledge) while making this transition.*

Potential probes:
a. Looking back on these challenges and opportunities what impact have they had on you?

b. What strategies have you used or are you using to help you work through some of the opportunities and challenges?

c. Can you tell me about some of the emotions that are running through your head when faced with challenges and opportunities at university?

d. What goals do you hope university will help you achieve and how do you stay focused on your goals during this transition?

3. *How have you changed or grown since coming to university?*

Potential probes:
a. What experiences have you had that contributed to this change?

b. If you were to compare yourself to the person you were in high school, what things have you noticed to be different about yourself?

c. I'm curious to know what personality/character traits helped you finish high school and get into university? How are these traits helping you now during this transition?

d. What life experiences including those outside of university contributed to where you are today?

e. How might your close friends and family describe you as a person now? Are there any changes from when you were in high school?

4. *What has it been like establishing a social life and making new friends in university? What do you value most about these friendships? How do they differ from your relationships off campus? Do they still exist?*

Potential probes:
a. What has it been like for you to make connections and be engaged in university life? Has it been easy for you? Does this hinder or help with the transition to university? This may include things like campus activities, involvement in sports, clubs or support groups, volunteering time, learning communities, student council, meeting with faculty, cultural events.

b. What experiences help you feel a sense of belonging to the university environment?

c. We're all human and need help at times and need the support of others. What are your experiences with seeking out the support of others in this transition? This could be people, places, things both informal or formal. Examples might include faculty, the wellness center, friends in time of need, support outside of university such as family, friends and community organizations, services or resources etc.

5. *From your perspective what does it mean to flourish while making the transition to university? If you reflect back on the experiences you've shared with me today would you describe yourself as someone who is flourishing? How so?*

6. *Is there any one definition or combination of definitions that best defines flourishing for you? Why? Show the participant a chart comparing Keyes, Seligman, Diener and Huppert and So operational definitions of Flourishing.*

7. *Is there anything else that you would like to share that we haven't covered during the interview? Anything you forgot to mention or questions you forgot to ask before we finish?*

# First Year Students Needed!

Are you in *1ˢᵗ year*?     **Enrolled in a *degree* program?**

Age *18-20*?     A *full-time* student?

Graduate from *high school* last year?

**Think of yourself as someone who is *feeling good and functioning well* most of the time?**

# Who can participate?

MRU Students answering **YES** to all of the above questions!

# What's the study about?

Transitioning from high school to university can be both an exciting and challenging time. This study is about understanding flourishing and the factors that help you flourishing during this transition.

You will receive a **gift card** in the amount of **$20.00** for **Chinook Centre Mall** thanking you for your time and contribution!

**Christina Volstad is a Master of Nursing student at Dalhousie University and the lead researcher for this study. Learn more by contacting her at XXXX@dal.ca or (403) XXX-XXXX**

**Appendix G   Sample Recruitment Email**

Dear Students,

I am a Master of Nursing student from the Faculty of Nursing at Dalhousie University. I live in Calgary while completing my masters by distance. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study titled *"The Experiences of Flourishing Among First Year University Students Transitioning Directly from High School".*

Transitioning to university can be both exciting and challenging. We know a lot about students who are struggling while making this transition yet little is known about students who are doing well. This study is about understanding the factors that help you feel good and function well during this transition. This understanding may shed new light on ways to keep students well and understand ways to help ease the transition for students who may be struggling.

## You are invited to participate in this study if you:

- Age 18-20
- In your first year of university
- Graduated from high school in the last 12-18 months
- Enrolled in a full time degree program
- You see yourself as someone who is feeling good and functioning well most of the time

Your participation will involve a time commitment of 60-90 minutes. This will involve filling out a brief demographic information form and a one-on-one interview in a private place on campus. **You will be given an honorarium in the amount of a $20.00 gift card to Chinook Shopping Center thanking you for your participation.**

If you would like to learn more about this study or if you are interested in participating, please contact the lead researcher Christina Volstad by e-mail at XXXX@dal.ca or by phone or text 403-XXX-XXXX.

Sincerely,

Christina Volstad RN, BN, MN Student

**Appendix H   Consent Form**

**Project title:**  A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Experiences of Flourishing Among University Students Transitioning Directly from High School

**Lead researcher:**
Christina Volstad RN, BN, MN Student
Dalhousie University
XXXX@dal.ca
 (403)-XXX-XXXX

**Other researchers:**
Dr. Jean Hughes, Thesis Supervisor, Dalhousie University, School of Nursing
Dr. Ruth Martin-Misener, Dalhousie University, School of Nursing
Dr. Lois Jackson, Dalhousie University, School of Health and Human Performance
Dr. Sonya Jakubec, Mount Royal University, School of Nursing and Midwifery
Dr. Sonya Flessati, Mount Royal University, Student Wellness Services

**Introduction**
You have been invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Christina Volstad a student at Dalhousie University as part of my Master of Nursing program. I am living in Calgary taking my studies by distance. I would like to thank you for considering to take part in this study and emphasize that choosing whether or not to take part in this research is entirely your choice. There will be no impact on your studies if you decide not to participate. The faculty at Mount Royal University will not know whether or not you have participated in this study. The information below tells you about what is involved in the research, what you will be asked to do and about any benefit, risk, inconvenience or discomfort that you might experience. Please read this form carefully, mark anything you don't understand, or would like explained and ask as many questions as you like. Once you've read through, the lead researcher will review this consent form with you, answer your questions, keep confidential any information that could identify you personally. If you have questions later, please contact Christina Volstad, lead researcher.

**Purpose and Outline of the Research Study**
Transitioning from high school to university can be a challenging and exciting time. My research study involves meeting with university students to explore their experiences of flourishing while making the transition directly from high school. You may be wondering what it means to flourish? Flourishing means that you are feeling good and functioning well most of the time. We know very little about students who flourish while making this transition and more about students who are struggling or having difficulty adapting. This led to my interest in wanting to know what it means to flourish (to feel good and function well most of the time) and the factors that promote flourishing during this transition. If we can better understand flourishing we may be better able to help more students flourish during this transition, graduate and be successful later in life.

**Who Can Take Part in the Research Study**

You are eligible to participate in this study if you meet the following inclusion criteria:

- Age 18-20
- In your first year of university
- Graduated from high school in the last 12-18 months
- Enrolled in a full time degree program
- You see yourself as someone who is feeling good and functioning well most of the time

**What You Will Be Asked to Do**

The lead researcher will be interviewing approximately 6-8 participants for the study. Signed consent is required before participating in this study. Once consent is signed you will be asked if you have any further questions. Prior to the interview you will be asked to fill out a demographic information sheet which will take about 5 minutes to complete. When you have agreed to participate in the study the lead researcher will ask you questions about your experiences of flourishing while making the transition to university. The interview will take place face-to-face and last approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview will be voice recorded and typed into text. The interviews will be read and listened to, to identify whether any patterns, similarities or differences across all participants exist. This helps with getting at the heart or essence of the experience of flourishing among students. Your interview will be confidential and take place in a mutually agreed upon private location and time. The lead researcher will in every way try to accommodate your academic schedule to ensure the interview is at a time that is convenient for you.

**Possible Benefits, Risks and Discomforts**

**Risks/Discomforts:** The risks associated with this study are minimal due to the positive nature of this study (involving students who see themselves as feeling good and functioning well most of the time). As with any study, all potential risks must be considered. This study is voluntary; therefore, you do not have to answer any questions of a sensitive nature that you think may cause you to become emotionally upset. In the unlikely event that you do become emotionally upset during the interview you will be asked if you are ok to continue with the interview or if you would like to withdraw. You will be provided a list of available resources and supports at the end of the interview. It is your choice to access these supports if you wish. If at any point you disclose a threat of harming yourself or others or report any circumstance of abuse involving a child or an adult the lead researcher is required by law to report this to the appropriate authorities.

**Benefits:** Potential benefits for participation in the study is that you may gain insight into the factors that promote your own individual flourishing through the self-reflective process involved in responding to interview questions. Participating in the study might not benefit you, but we might learn things that will benefit others by understanding

flourishing at a deeper more meaningful level. This has the potential to inform Mount Royal University about ways to promote flourishing and support the well-being of students making the transition from high school to university.

**Compensation / Reimbursement**
You will receive a $20.00 gift card to the Chinook Center Mall as a thank you for participating in the study, even if you chose to withdraw from the study. The $20.00 will be given at the beginning of the interview.

**Protection of Information**

**Privacy:** Information that you provide to us will be kept private. When you sign this consent form you give the researchers permission to collect information from you and share information with the people listed on this consent form conducting the study. Only the research team at Dalhousie University and Mount Royal University will have access to this information. The researchers involved in this study will ***not*** access any records (academic records, health care records, counselling records or any other records) for any reason. General demographic information will be collected and we will describe and share our findings in thesis, presentations and journal articles. ***You will not be identified in any way in our reports***. The researchers involved in this study have an obligation to keep all research information private. Interviews will be conducted where others will not see or hear the interview to ensure third parties are not aware of who has been recruited. Participants recruited by email will be sent study communications without an email subject line that discloses study participation. Email addresses, phone numbers and IP addresses identifying computer accounts of participants will only be used for the purposes of responding to students requesting more information about the study and/or for purposes of proceeding with participation in the study (e.g. questions about the study, arrangement of a meeting time and private location where the interview will be conducted). After reading this form, you decide not to participate all electronic correspondence and personal information will be deleted from the lead researcher's computer and phone immediately and no further contact will be made. If you decide to participate in the study and consent to receiving a final report of the study your email will be saved on the lead researchers password protected computer in an encrypted file until such time when the final report. A link to the final report will be send to you. Immediately after the report is sent your email will be permanently deleted from the lead researcher's computer and no further contact will be made.

All measures will be taken so that no one will know who you are, including the researchers involved in this study employed at Mount Royal University. Interviews will be conducted where others will not see or hear the interview to ensure that third parties are not aware that you have been recruited. All measures will be taken so that no one will know who is participating, including the researchers involved in this study employed at Mount Royal University. Anonymity cannot be 100% assured as interviews will be conducted on campus. There is a small chance that you may be seen leaving or entering the interview with the lead researcher by faculty and/or other students or you may wish to share your study involvement with others at your own free will.

**Confidentiality:** All your identifying information will be securely stored in a locked filing cabinet in the lead researchers locked office. The data obtained from this study will be coded and stored in a locked file cabinet and on a password protected computer accessed only by the researchers listed on this form. All electronic records will be kept secure in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer. Records that include your real name will be stored separately (in a locked filing cabinet in the lead researchers locked office) from data containing your pseudonym to ensure information cannot be connected to your real name.

To ensure that you will not be identifiable in reports, presentations, publications and conferences your name will be replaced with a pseudonym. Information collected for this study will be kept for a period of 5 years post publication then destroyed/shredded and deleted from computer devices.

**If You Decide to Stop Participating**
If you decide to stop participating at any point during the interview all of your information will be destroyed/shredded. You can decide during the interview whether you want any of the information that you have contributed up to that point to be removed. Once the interview is complete and you and the lead researcher have parted ways your information cannot be removed or destroyed as it is now part of the whole analysis. Once again, your decision to withdraw from the study ***will not*** affect your grades or academic standing. You will be asked at the end of the interview if you would like to receive a copy of the final study. If yes participants will be notified by email of the public link in which the final report can be accessed electronically.

**Questions**
We are happy to talk with you about any questions or concerns you may have about your participation in this research study. Please contact Christina Volstad (lead researcher) at (403) XXX-XXXX or email at XXXX@dal.ca or Dr. Jean Hughes (supervisor) at (902) XXX-XXXX or email at XXXX@dal.ca at any time with questions, comments, or concerns about the research study (if you are calling long distance, please call collect). We will also tell you if any new information comes up that could affect your decision to participate.

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may also contact Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-1462, or email: ethics@dal.ca (and reference REB file # XXXX) and Human Research Ethics Board, Mount Royal University at (403) 440-8470, or email: herb@mtroyal.ca (and reference HREB file #XXXX).

**Declaration of Financial Interest**
The lead researcher and other researchers involved in this study have no financial interest in completing this study.

**Consent Form Signature Page**

**Project Title:** The Experiences of Flourishing Among University Students Transitioning from High School

**Lead Researcher**:
Christina Volstad RN, BN, MN Student
Dalhousie University
XXXX@dal.ca
(403)-XXX-XXXX

I have read the explanation about this study. I have been given the opportunity to discuss it and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I have been asked to take part in an interview that will occur at a location acceptable to me, and that the interview will be recorded. I understand direct quotes of things I say may be used, but will not identify me by name. I agree to take part in this study. My participation is voluntary and I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time during the interview but once the interview is over I understand that data analysis begins and it will not be possible to remove my information. I understand the nature of the study and I understand the potential risks. I agree to have my words from the interview used in reports, publications, presentations and conferences. I have received a copy of the information and consent form for future reference. I freely agree to participate in this research study.

_____     _____     _____
Name                                                            Signature                                                 Date


I agree that my interview will be audio-recorded
☐Yes  ☐No

I agree that direct quotes from my interview may be used without identifying me
☐Yes ☐No

I would like and agree to be emailed a link to the final report.
☐Yes ☐No

_____     _____     _____
Name                                                            Signature                                                 Date

Email address: _____

I confirm I have completed the interview and agree that direct quotes without my name may be used.

_____     _____     _____
Name                                                            Signature                                                 Date

**Appendix I    Demographic Information**

Year of study: _____

Semester: _____

Program of Study: _____

Number of courses enrolled in: _____

Ethnic background: _____

Canadian Citizen:   Y   or   N        Province: _____

City/Town: _____

International Student:   Y   or   N          Country of Origin: _____

City/Town: _____

Age: _____

Gender and/or sex:  _____

**Living arrangements before entering university:**
- With parents
- Single parent family
- Extended family (grandparents, aunt/uncle, sibling)
- Friends
- Other _____

**Living arrangements now:**
- university residence
- off campus with friends
- off campus alone
- living with parents
- Other_____

**Involvement in High School:**

- Sports: _____Hours/week_____
- Committees: _____Hours/week_____
- Clubs: _____Hours/week_____
- Groups: _____Hours/week_____
- Volunteer: _____Hours/week_____
- School Council: _____Hours/week_____
- Other: _____Hours/week_____

**Involvement in University:**

- Sports: _____Hours/week_____
- Committees: _____Hours/week_____
- Clubs: _____Hours/week_____
- Groups: _____Hours/week_____
- Volunteer: _____Hours/week_____
- Other: _____Hours/week_____

**Paid employment on campus:**
- Full time
- Part time
- Not employed

Type of Employment: _____Hours/week_____

**Paid employment off campus:**
- Full time
- Part Time
- Not employed

Type of Employment: _____Hours/week_____

**Approximate Overall Academic Average** (last year of high school): _____

**Approximate Overall Academic Average Fall Semester** (university): _____

**Parent's Highest Level of Education:**

Parent 1: _____

Parent 2: _____

**Did your parents support your decision to attend university?**
- o  Yes
- o  No
- o  Partially
- o  Not at all

**How would you describe your personality? You can choose more than one:**
- o  Appreciation for a variety of experiences.
- o  Plan ahead rather than being spontaneous.
- o  Sociable, energetic and talkative.
- o  Kind, sympathetic and happy to help.
- o  Inclined to worry or be vulnerable or temperamental.

# Appendix J   On and Off Campus Supports and Resources

**On Campus:**

MRU Student Counselling and Wellness Services (U216) …………...... (403)-440-6362
- Clinic Hours and Emergency Appointments
- Mon-Thurs 8:00am to 5:00pm
- Friday 8:00am to 4:00pm

MRU Health Services.…………………………………………………… (403) 440-6326

MRU Security Services.…………………………………………………. (403) 440-6897

MRU Security Emergency.…………………………………………… (403) 440-5900

Student Association of Mount Royal University (SAMRU).…………… (403) 440-6077

SAMRU Peer Support Centre (Wyckham House) ……………………… (403) 440-8601

Student Advocacy Office Services (Z303) ……………………………… (403) 440-6077

**Off Campus:**

Emergency Dial.……………………………………………………….… 911

Health Link (Advice from a registered nurse or family doctors in your area) ……….. 811

Free multilingual 24-hour information line and referral service Dial.………………… 211

Mental Health Help line...…………………………………………….... 1-877-303-2642

Alpha House (Shelter, Detox, Outreach) ………………………….....(403) 440-8601

AHS Addiction and Mental Health Help Line 24 hours.…………...….....1-866-332-2322

Adult Addiction Services.……………………………………………. (403) 297-3071

YWCA Sheriff King Home (Women's Emergency Shelter) .……………. (403) 266-0707

Booth Centre (Men's Shelter) ………...…………………………….....(403) 262-6188

Sheldon M. Chumir Emergency Health Centre.……………..………….(403) 955-6200

Distress Centre.………………………………………………………….(403) 266-4357

Family Violence Information Line.………………………......…………(403) 310-1818

Connect Family and Sexual Abuse Network.……………………...…….(403) 237-5888

Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse 24-hour line.………………..(403) 237-7888