

## Using Transcendental Phenomenology to Explore the “Ripple Effect” in a Leadership Mentoring Program

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**Abstract:** *Several approaches exist for organizing and analyzing data in a phenomenological qualitative study. Transcendental phenomenology, based on principles identified by Husserl (1931) and translated into a qualitative method by Moustakas (1994), holds promise as a viable procedure for phenomenological research. However, to best understand the approach to transcendental phenomenology, the procedures need to be illustrated by a qualitative study that employs this approach. This article first discusses the procedures for organizing and analyzing data according to Moustakas (1994). Then it illustrates each step in the data analysis procedure of transcendental phenomenology using a study of reinvestment or the “ripple effect” for nine individuals who have participated in a youth leadership mentoring program from the 1970s to the present. Transcendental phenomenology works well for this study as this methodology provides logical, systematic, and coherent design elements that lead to an essential description of the experience.*

**Keywords:** *Moustakas, analysis, methodology, descriptions*

Citation information:

Moerer-Urdahl, T., & Creswell, J. (2004). Using transcendental phenomenology to explore the “ripple effect” in a leadership mentoring program. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3 (2). Article 2. Retrieved DATE from [http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3\\_2/pdf/moerercreswell.pdf](http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3_2/pdf/moerercreswell.pdf)

With several approaches to phenomenology available to the qualitative researcher, the question develops as to what method is best suited to the research problem and to the researcher. All approaches draw on German philosophy, seek to understand the life world or human experience as it is lived (Lavery, 2003), and have similar and complementary end-points in description (Hein & Austin, 2001; Todres & Wheeler, 2001). Two major approaches – hermeneutic phenomenology and transcendental phenomenology – represent philosophical assumptions about experience and ways to organize and analyze phenomenological data. These two approaches differ in their historical advocates (e.g., Heidegger or Husserl), methodological procedures (Lavery, 2003), and their current proponents (van Manen, 1990, for hermeneutic phenomenology and Moustakas, 1994, for transcendental phenomenology). Meaning is the core of transcendental phenomenology of science, a design for acquiring and collecting data that explicates the essences of human experience. Hermeneutics requires reflective interpretation of a text or a study in history to achieve a meaningful understanding (Moustakas, 1994).

Numerous and diverse phenomenological research studies have been published in the social and human sciences. Hermeneutical phenomenology research, for example, has addressed the concept of care in male nurse work (Milligan, 2001) and the changes in women's bodies at menopause (Shin, 2002). Approaches more aligned with transcendental phenomenology include a study of one woman who sustained head injury (Padilla, 2003), an exploration of spirituality among African American women recovering from substance abuse (Wright, 2003), women's experiences of pregnancy (Bondas & Eriksson, 2001), and understanding the essence of physically active women 65 years of age and older (Kluge, 2002).

Although these studies provide some understanding of the procedures that researchers might use to organize and analyze phenomenological data, specific discussions are needed to identify the steps of phenomenological analysis and to use a research study to illustrate these steps. As Moustakas (1994) has indicated the steps in phenomenological analysis using a more structured approach than employed by the hermeneutical writers (van Manen, 1990), the purpose of this present study is to identify the data analysis steps used in transcendental phenomenology and to illustrate those steps with a qualitative study of the sustained effects of a youth leadership mentoring program. By understanding these steps, readers will better understand how transcendental phenomenology proceeds in the analysis phase (Creswell, 1998), and it will encourage qualitative researchers to examine this alternative to hermeneutic phenomenology that has been identified as one of the major traditions in qualitative research.

### **The study**

The study we use as an illustration is a second project in an on-going study of the sustained effects of mentoring in a youth leadership program. Since 1949, the Nebraska Human Resource Research Institute (NHRI) has provided leadership training for college students who serve as mentors to younger children in the elementary, middle, and high schools. These mentors are trained in interpersonal and communication skills and then they invest in a younger mentee for up to four years. The basic approach in NHRI projects is for mentors and mentees to assess their personal strengths, learn how to invest in others, and to later reinvest what they have learned. In our first project, a qualitative thematic analysis, we purposefully selected nine former mentors who had participated in NHRI projects throughout four decades. These individuals were recipients of a prestigious leadership award at the time they participated as mentors in the NHRI

program. Because the mentors are dispersed throughout the United States, we conducted interviews by telephone. We asked them why they became mentors, what was unique about their experiences, how their mentoring had an impact on themselves and their mentees, and what leadership skills they developed while participating in the NHRI program (Moerer-Urdahl, 2003). One important finding from this first study was that mentors had a shared language when describing the culture of this program. They used catch-phrases central to their mentoring experience, such as “dipper and the bucket” (filling another’s bucket is part of a helping relationship that requires commitment, time, and a strong selfless desire to help others grow), “difference makers” (those making a significant difference in the lives of others) and the “ripple effect.” The mentors generally defined the ripple effect as not only the human investment made in helping their mentees, but also the long-term, multiplying investment that they and their mentees would continue to make in others throughout their lives.

The essence of the experiences shared by the mentors in the initial study surrounded the multiplying relationships that culminated into a ripple effect. The second part of the project, outlined in this article, using transcendental phenomenology, builds on the first inquiry. This study sought to understand the meaning of mentors’ experiences with the ripple effect and their experiences of reinvesting in others. We studied the same nine individuals as in the first study: mentors who had participated in the mentoring leadership program while in college. Their program experiences spanned the years 1972-2001 and, as shown in Table 1, their present occupations varied. The two central questions in this study address key questions that Moustakas recommends that phenomenologists ask: What were their experiences with the ripple effect? And in what context or situations did they experience it? They were also asked if they

considered themselves to be mentors today and, if so, to whom, and if they had been mentored in the past, and by whom. Prior to data collection, the approval of the Institutional Review Board was sought and obtained. Detailed telephone interviews were conducted with the same nine participants, and these interviews were audio-taped, lasting for 25 to 50 minutes. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. Transcripts from the interviews were analyzed for codes and themes, and the specific procedures for analysis followed a modification of Stevick (1971), Colaizzi (1973), and Keen (1975), as described by Moustakas (1994). Transcendental phenomenology was chosen as the appropriate methodology for this research as we were searching for an understanding of the meaning of these participants' experiences. Additionally, the systemic procedures and detailed data analysis steps as outlined by Moustakas are ideal for assisting less experienced researchers. The transcendental approach using systemic procedures is consistent with our own philosophical view of balancing both the objective and subjective approaches to knowledge and detailed, rigorous data analysis steps.

**Table 1. The NHRI Collegiate Mentors**

Pseudonyms	Graduation Date	Years in Program	Occupation
Betty	1975	3	Teacher
Kate	1981	4	Elementary School Principal
Kerri	1983	3	Managing Director of a Business
Ashley	1988	3	Corporate Dietician/Adjunct Faculty
Cami	1989	3	Executive V.P., Trust Company
Sam	1989	3	Farmer
Abby	1993	4	Attorney
Mark	1995	4	Junior Loan Officer and Farmer
Gary	2001	4	Medical Student

### **Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology and analysis procedures**

Moustakas (1994) embraces the common features of human science research such as the value of qualitative research, a focus on the wholeness of experience and a search for essences of experiences, and viewing experience and behavior as an integrated and inseparable relationship of subject/object. The transcendental emphasis includes these features, but “launches” (p. 22) a phenomenological study with the researcher setting aside prejudgments as much as possible and using systematic procedures for analyzing the data. Setting aside prejudgments is called “epoche,” a Greek work meaning to refrain from judgment. Thus, the process is called transcendental because the researcher sees the phenomenon “freshly, as for the first time” and is open to its totality (p. 34).

The way of analyzing phenomenological data, according to Moustakas, follows a systematic procedure that is rigorous yet accessible to qualitative researchers. The inquirer describes their own experiences with the phenomenon (epoche), identifies significant statements in the database from participants, clusters these statements into meaning units and themes. Next, the researcher synthesizes the themes into a description of the experiences of the individuals (textual and structural descriptions), and then constructs a composite description of the meanings and the essences of the experience. The illustrative project on the experiences with the ripple effect that follows illustrates this process.

This methodology was selected as its systemic processes complemented our search for exploring and understanding the ripple effect as had been described by the mentors in a previous research effort.

### *Epoche*

*Epoche is the first step of the phenomenological reduction process. It is an approach taken at the beginning of the study by the researcher so that he/she can set aside his/her views of the phenomenon and focus on those views reported by the participants (Moustakas, 1994).*

*Moustakas suggests that “no position whatsoever is taken...nothing is determined in advance;” the researcher remains present and focuses on one’s own consciousness “by returning to whatever is there in...memory, perception, judgment, feeling, whatever is actually there” (p. 84). References to others, their perceptions and judgments must be put aside to achieve epoche and only the researcher’s perceptions are retained as indicators of knowledge, meaning, and truth.*

By clearing my mind through the epoche process, I (the senior researcher) recalled my own personal and professional mentoring experiences throughout the past 30 years, all of which were positive and meaningful. Through this bracketing process, three individuals flashed back from my personal memory as I reflectively meditated, letting the preconceptions and prejudgments enter and leave my mind freely. First, there was a woman whose interest in me guided me down a path I would not have traveled without her direction and support and a man who believed in me at a young and developmental stage, contributing to a significant turning point in my life. In the more recent past, I contemplated the relationship that was built across time with my current mentor who, just as the others, has made a significant contribution to my life, both personally and professionally. Though her positive, professional impact has been apparent in the last 18 months, we have shared a personal relationship for more than 20 years. For the past two years, I have actively participated in a formal mentoring/inspirational women’s program at my alma mater, investing time with different female collegiate mentees each year. I positively reflected on

these experiences from recent times and long ago and set aside any application they might have to this research by disconnecting myself from those memories. This was repeated until I felt a sense of closure. As I moved toward receptiveness, I was able to concentrate fully, to listen and hear the participants' presentations without coloring it with my own habits of thinking, feeling and seeing.

### **Framing the study within the literature on mentoring**

*Moustakas (1994) discusses the use of literature in a phenomenological study as framing the research problem and setting the stage for the inquiry.*

Minimal research has been conducted exploring the “reinvesting in others” as a result of a mentoring experience. The literature tends to focus on what the mentee gains from the experience (Hunt & Michael, 1983; Kram, 1985; Mullen, 1994), and the organizational contexts in which mentorship exists. In the business context, mentoring is necessary for career advancement (Bolton, 1980; Collins & Scott, 1978; Kanter, 1977; Phillip-Jones, 1982; Willbur, 1987). Effective mentoring relationships are mutually beneficial and reciprocal. Mentors and mentees identify promoting reflection, gaining professional benefits, acquiring new behaviors, and developing understandings as key domains (Niles, McLaughlin, Wildman, & Magliaro, 1989). An *other-focused* behavior reported by mentors includes the desire to help others, to pass information along to others, and to build a competent workforce (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997). Mentors benefit from the reflections of the practice of mentoring and are aware of their actions and behaviors due to the association with their protégé (Restine, 1993). Bova and Phillips (1984) designed ten traits inherent in mentoring, for example, mentor-mentee relationships often

grow out of voluntary interaction, and mentors become mentors in order to pass down their accumulation of information to the next generation. This potential for growth and the desire to pass along learning experiences is a characteristic of the ripple effect.

Mentoring evolves beyond guidance and support, and it includes commitment and trust built throughout a significant timeframe. Erikson (1994) has discussed the concept of “generativity,” in which individuals pass on nurturance and guidance to those who succeed them. Research has shown that the mentoring phenomenon is directly linked with maturation of those who wish to help others accomplish their goals (Stevens, 1995). Past research indicates that the majority of participating mentors had been involved in a previous mentoring relationship as a protégé. This finding suggests that reciprocity influences the decision to mentor others (Gouldner, 1960). As the mentees develop, they also become *investors*, bringing about the reoccurring phenomenon of the ripple effect. A need exists to explore how individuals invest and reinvest based on their mentoring experiences.

### *Significant Statements*

*The first step in the analysis is the process of horizontalization, in which specific statements are identified in the transcripts that provide information about the experiences of the participants. These significant statements are simply gleaned from the transcripts and provided in a table so that a reader can identify the range of perspectives about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).*

As shown in Table 2, we identified 52 individual verbatim statements shared by the mentors. These statements represent non-repetitive, non-overlapping significant statements. These

statements also reflected entire sentences and were a subjective extrapolation from the transcripts. No attempt was made to group these statements or to order them in any way. In this phase of analysis, we simply wanted to learn how individuals viewed the term, the ripple effect. Reading through their statements provides details about how individuals experience reinvestment in others. Moustakas (1994, p. 95) describes the horizon as “the grounding or condition of the phenomenon that gives it a distinct character.” As we think about each horizon and its textural qualities, we begin to understand the experience through our own self-awareness and reflection.

**Table 2. Selected Significant Statements**

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- It’s where you start by making a difference in someone’s life and that continues on in their lives through others.
  - The benefits you both receive from that relationship you take into other areas of your life into more relationships. And, as you develop those, they then carry on to other relationships.
  - Whatever good that you build with one individual carries on to many, many more as each of you goes out and form new relationships.
  - It seems like once you have experienced that, it kind of provides a foundation to then further in your life try to have some positive effect or impact through your life’s events.
  - It starts with one person and then it is like a circle going outside of them.
  - You have the one person and everybody they touch would be the next circle, then all of the people that those people touch would be the next circle, so I think that it never ends. It is infinite.
  - The ripple effect would be any influence directed towards anybody that is around you, anybody that you are associated with. That could be a positive influence, a negative influence.
  - The ripple effect is giving back what you have been given and passing it on. (Pause.) Reinvestment. Helping others to experience what you have experienced so they can pass it on.
  - That was very purposeful, the learning. But, at the time I didn’t realize how, what a ripple, what an impact that would have on me for the rest of my life. I wasn’t thinking of that.
  - That has a ripple every single day. Daily, not just once a week. It is every day.
  - The biggest motivator... investing in something that is going to outlive them and, that they are going to pass it on. And, I would say the ripple effect for me...is what keeps my

fire lit.

- My circle of influence.
- In practical terms it is when one invests in another individual and that person grows from that and then they invest in another individual and that person grows from it and then that person invests in another individual and they grow from that.
- It starts with one person understanding their own talents and strengths and abilities and being responsible for those. So if you are very gifted in relationship skills and gifted in mentoring others, then you need to be responsible for those and then invest in others which ripples out and then they ripple out and then it continues. So there is a positive influence that gets multiplied beginning with one person learning about their talents and abilities.
- So it really starts with kind of a one-on-one relationship with somebody who helped you see where your talents are and it begins to ripple then through all of the communities that you work and live in.
- By them accelerating, they begin to influence people positively around them...I see it as a multiplier.
- It is like a circle because over time it just almost seems like there was no beginning and no end. It continues and grows and develops. But it is always a choice. The choice is staying connected and interdependent on those relationships, so that they continue to grow and continue to expand outwardly, to affect more people in a positive way.
- Lifelong process to be mentored and to mentor.
- Where you try to absorb information and things from people and then pass along what you learned to other people to continue that.
- Those things all affected other events because of some of the basics that we learned way back in college.
- It comes to me and I give it away. I give it away, which is kind of that investment/reinvestment. A reinvestment would be synonymous with the ripple effect to me.
- It can be very powerful when you can have a return on that investment in a subjective way and qualitative way but also in a quantitative way, in terms of what I do for a living today.
- No one person develops their talents in a vacuum. It takes a relationship where somebody is investing in you - to help you grow and develop. And, the impact you see in that, you see people accelerate their potentiality.
- As, a mentor, you may be mentoring one person, but you don't know the thousands of people you may be impacting because you have made a positive impact on that individual and they, in return, have made a positive impact on another person. So, you affect many people, thousands of communities of people who are touched by the investment of one person.
- I see this process where I came in as a rather naïve freshman or sophomore student that

had some base knowledge of investing yourself in other people and they invest in you.

- As months went on, another ring would form, and you would see people investing in other people.
- It takes a lot of listening and a lot of interacting before you can move to that next level where you have a relationship with someone that is two-way, ...where you can anticipate where someone's going with a thought or idea. And then that ripples from there.
- In terms of receiving, it is interesting, I think mostly if I look at people...from the standpoint of impacting my values and person, my career, it has started to emerge more and more about my values and beliefs.
- But, unless I have the capacity to be a receiver, then it doesn't begin.
- You talk about the fashionable things, like service leadership, but the interesting thing – there has to be a sender and receiver. And you have to be able to receive in some capacity and actually for most people, it is much easier to give than to receive.
- Well, I think that the people who are able to send – this is the interesting thing – you can't give away what you don't have.
- But it is probably because she was never given that (an investment from another). She is bankrupt. So, it is hard to give it away. She hasn't been invested in as much as others.
- People that are not able to reinvest are bankrupt.
- I mean, the people who grow the most out, NHRI and the ripple effect, are the people who have the most potential to grow which means they have the most relationship aptitude - to extend to others.
- Everybody has relationship capacity, it is just that some people are blessed with more area of giftedness in that area and build incredible relationships and trust with other people. And there are other people that that is not as important of an element in who they are. Neither one is right or wrong, it is just that the people who can impact the most are the ones who have that greatest area of giftedness.
- When she starts with a minimal amount of that capacity, she grows but she doesn't have exponential growth, versus a person who starts there with a huge amount of giftedness, then you help them understand what the ripple effect is and you invest in them and you help them think in that positive approach, they have exponential growth because they are blessed with more aptitude to do that.
- I am certain that her interest in me and our relationship as a teacher and student, certainly planted the seeds for that way back in 6<sup>th</sup> grade.
- She was just a difference maker in my life.
- I think of them as just helping me think through things and helping me out with life and choices.
- I just think that this just gives you a chance to experience what it is like to have someone be interested in what it is you are doing and develop some of those, like empathy and compassion or some enthusiasm for someone else's life or experiences.
- I believe that you really can have impact by understanding the best of who you are and

learning how to best apply that, to have impact on people you directly touch and the people they touch.

- He really cared about me. And, he wouldn't put up with me not being able to do whatever it was that he expected of me. But I also knew that he really cared and he did everything he could to support me and help me deal with things going on my life.
- You have incredible influence on how you can make a difference, because it is not just you, it's the people you touch and the people they touch. So, you are working through other people to make a difference.
- So, the implications of that would be that if you can truly develop your individual strengths and understand how you can best influence others and help them grow and be better, and then you can touch those around you...building from strengths, ...that really helps make a difference in the world or has a positive impact in the world.
- So I think that for something like the ripple effect, certain people who have that are going to grow a lot more from a person who is a mentor and a developer, because that they are really, well, not complacent. They actually have a desire to better themselves.
- He has been a lifetime board member for me in terms of mentoring me.
- Somebody who significantly impacts another person so as they make decisions or choices in their lives, is that the impact you made, makes a difference at how they look at those choices and choosing the right choices for them.
- When you think about your life's board of directors, people who you caucus about a decision in your life, a difference maker would be somebody you would see on your life's board of directors.
- Because he had great lessons of life.
- He has been a big difference maker in my life. He has laid an imprint that says that he has significantly invested in me and those investments have created some of the ways I think about problems and solutions or opportunities.
- It was very eye-opening for me. It really gave me a charge in that it was something that was deep inside that "hey, we can all work together and really make a difference, not only in these kids, these mentors/mentees, but we can make a difference in the groups we are in."
- At that time in college, you know, we can make a difference by treating people differently whatever committees you were in school or whatever projects you had going or whatever part of school you were in, that's where I first saw it take hold for me.

### *Meaning Units or Themes*

*As every significant statement is initially treated as possessing equal value, this next step deletes those statements irrelevant to the topic and others that are repeated or overlapping. The*

*remaining statements are the horizons or textural meanings. The researcher carefully examines the identified significant statements, then clusters the statements into themes or meaning units (Moustakas, 1994). Excerpts from literature review are used here to elucidate the terminology used by the mentors.*

Four themes emerged from this analysis about how participants experienced the ripple effect: investing and reinvesting in others, influencing others positively, giving and receiving, and establishing interconnectedness among relationships (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Themes or Meaning Units and Evidence**

<u>Themes/Meaning Units</u>	<u>Evidence in Mentors' Statements</u>
Investing and Reinvesting in Others	<p>"...an investment is a deposit, something you give to another."</p> <p>"As months went on, another ring would form and you would see people investing in other people."</p> <p>"...multiple levels for one. Investment in time...through learning...through listening...and teaching."</p> <p>"I think that the biggest motivation, what keeps them going every day is knowing that they are investing in something that is going to outlive them...they are passing it on...it keeps my fire lit."</p>
Influencing Others Positively	<p>"So there is a positive influence that get multiplied beginning with one person learning about their talents and abilities."</p> <p>"You have incredible influence on how you can make a difference because it is not just you, it's the people you touch and people they touch. So you are working through other people to make a difference."</p> <p>"At the time, I didn't realize how, what a ripple, what an impact that would have on me for the rest of my life."</p> <p>"...my circle of influence."</p>
Giving and Receiving	<p>"...am certain that her interest in me and our relationship as a teacher and student certainly planted the seeds for that way back in 6<sup>th</sup></p>

grade.”

“...starts with a kind of one-on-one relationship with somebody who helped you see where your talents are and it begins to ripple through all the communities that you work and live in.”

“...gives you a chance to experience what it is like to have someone interested in what you are doing and develop these...like empathy and compassion or some enthusiasm for someone else’s life and experiences.”

“He really cared about me...did everything he could to support and help me deal with things going on in my life.”

Interconnecting within

“Whatever good that you build with one individual Relationship carries on to many, many more as each goes out and forms new relationships.”

“The choice is staying connected and interdependent on those relationships so that they can continue to grow and expand outwardly to affect more people in a positive way.”

“Everybody has relationship capacity. It is just that some people are blessed with more areas of giftedness...and build incredible relationships and trust with other people.”

“How we affect those interconnections are a form of the ripple effect.”

“It takes a lot of listening and...interacting before you can move to that next level where you have a relationship with someone that is two-way...then it ripples from there.”

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### **The Ripple Effect**

#### *The Ripple Effect: Investing and reinvesting in others*

According to Clifton and Nelson (1996), relationship is a process of investing in another person by doing things for the person’s own good without consideration of self-reward and is the sum of our responses to another human being. The fabric of one’s life is woven by all who touch it. As relationships increase, the benefits enlarge; lives become richer, and strengths are expanded through others. All of the mentors talked in detail about the investment made in the mentoring

process. Lasting, significant differences occur when one individual invests time and energy in another. “The mentor relationship is a complex process,” conclude Krueger, Blackwell, & Knight (1992, p. 56). “Many ingredients are needed to make it successful. The testimony of past participants in the mentor relationship suggests that commitment, trust, and the willingness to invest time, energy, and self are critical components.”

According to the mentors’ experiences, those who are the recipients of this individualized *investment* often become investors themselves, leading to the humanistic concept of *reinvestment*. “Investment is a deposit,” shares Kate as she paused, “something you give to another in multiple levels...investment in time...investment through listening, and the relationship piece; investment through learning and teaching.” She recalls the faces of younger elementary and older graduate students with whom she invested her time and energies. Her elementary school is replicating the NHRI program on a smaller scale, where eight second-graders are matched with outstanding students from a private military school in the area. Through her leadership, the program will provide rich mentoring experiences to youth who also possess leadership potential. Sam talks about having ‘it.’ “I have seen people in their oldest of oldest years and they still have *IT*. That spark. That wanting to invest in others.” Betty said that the more that was invested in her, the more she was able to give away throughout her life. Another reflects on reinvesting in others as “powerful.” From an early time in Kerri’s life she was the recipient of a personal investment that has affected her in a humanistic way. Quantitatively, the investment made in her by others has transformed her professionally and enhanced her successful career opportunities in lucrative dimensions. Those who invested in others were commonly referred to as the mentors’ *difference makers*. Difference makers possess

a variety of admirable and respected qualities (Dodge, 1986). According to Dodge, they also share a common trait that is a bonding commitment to the value of people. He described this commitment as altruistic in origin, loving in practice, and rewarding in its accomplishment. As people accept risk to help reveal others' gifts, they, too, become difference makers.

*The Ripple Effect: Influencing others positively*

A primary function of a mentor is to serve as a role model for the protégé, demonstrating achievements that are worthy of emulation (Restine, 1993). The mentors described *influencing* as making a difference to another in a positive way by recognizing their strengths and helping them be the best at who they are. According to Weiner (1992), three ways that mentors influence their protégé are by heightening anticipation, deepening expectations, and helping to motivate creativity. This active influencing process is again passed on as a multiplier, similar to the investment/reinvestment concept. Kate explained, "There is this positive influence that gets multiplied beginning with one person learning about their talents and abilities." Abby, now in her 30s, talked in detail about the influences received from her sixth grade teacher. Her teacher's influence had an impact on her both academically and personally, resulting in achievements that she believes would not have been accomplished without this "special" influence that assisted in her development at a young age.

"He is depressed. You can tell just by the way he walks," explained Kate. She was concerned about the janitor in her building who was experiencing some personal tragedies in his life. She wanted to "fill his spirit and fill his heart," so Kate brought a group of teachers who she mentored, together to brainstorm on how they and their elementary students could potentially

“fill him up so that he can spill over.” They planned a surprise announcement of “We love you, Mr. Jones” when he entered the school cafeteria. Kate’s focus was a duality effort whereby her mentees and their students learned more about contributing positively to another while she also filled Mr. Jones’ “personal bucket.”

A caution that several mentors stated was the fact that influences could be positive or negative and that a negative influence could *ripple* through an individual to another or through groups of people just as positive ones. This may mean the difference between positive growth in mentees or negative stagnation or even a decline in the mentees’ overall well being as a person. Mark shared, “You can be influenced positively by someone and they can make your day, and then they move on and influence another, hopefully in a positive way and it ripples down and reaches a whole lot of people.”

*The Ripple Effect: Ability to give and capacity to receive*

In a sense, this giving/receiving is a binary effort where the mentors suggest that the relationship first begins with the mentor having the potential to *give* to the mentee by taking an interest in the mentee and identifying the individual’s strengths, talents, and abilities. Yakamoto (1988) suggests that mentors see what is not yet there and describes that as *potential actualized*. The role of the mentor is to find and highlight the essence of what makes the protégé special with the meaning of mentorship being to see life grow.

For this effort to be profitable to the mentee, he/she must possess the inner capacity to *receive* the assistance to build on his/her internal strengths. This role is to help another discover,

intensify and clarify her/his needs, objectives, and goals. One NHRI professor described it as “the element of human relations capital” (Dodge, 1986, p. 53). If the mentor’s capital is not equal to nor greater than the mentee’s needs, the relationship can never be a total success. Concern for the welfare of others does not by itself bring about favorable development on the part of the mentor. He stated that “bankrupt” individuals (whether a mentor or mentee) who try to create altruistic relationships may become more negative than positive as a result of this occurrence. Kate explained, “You can’t give away what you don’t have.” The final step in the process is determining the capacity for the mentee to receive. Kate continued by saying that if an individual does not have the capacity or interest or willingness to be the recipient of the mentor’s assistance, the gain is greatly minimized.

Kerri recalled years of trials and tribulation as her mentee, Sandra, struggled with personal demons. Kerri, a college student at the time, was not trained to deal with the level of psychosocial problems that Sandra possessed. No matter how much interest and attention was given by Kerri, it was not enough. She had the ability to give but her mentee’s capacity for receiving was void. Ultimately, Sandra attempted suicide multiple times and was removed from the mentoring program. The role of the mentor is to find and highlight the essence of what makes the protégé special with the meaning of mentorship being to see life grow.

*The Ripple Effect: Interconnectedness within relationships*

This concept surrounds mentors first understanding themselves and then understanding others through a deep awareness of each individual’s potentiality. One mentor referred to interconnectedness as “relationship aptitude.” All people possess some level of this, but those

who have the greatest potential to grow through relationships and then have the ability to extend that to others have the largest aptitude. Trust is a primary reciprocal component in the relationship building process. Several mentors suggest that being interconnected is a choice and one described it as “a circle, because over time, there seems to be no beginning and no ending; it just grows and develops.” And she strongly emphasized, “but, it is always a choice.”

After college graduation, Cami relocated to a southern city and connected with a “high courage” woman who possessed traits that Cami admired and emulated. The woman was described as motivating, inspirational, creative, and Cami gave her credit for championing her to be successful and positioning her for a career with a high profile company. The connectedness that was shared was significant and life-changing for Cami.

In essence, mentors frame life as a relationship where the understanding of connectedness means understanding humanity (Calabrese, 1996). Mentors are builders, nurturers, and guides who invest in humanity and see far beyond the fragile egos and into the depths of the soul to that inner child.

### *Textual and Structural Descriptions*

*From the thematic analysis, the researcher then provides a description of “what” was experienced in textual descriptions, and “how” it was experienced in structural descriptions. Textural descriptions are considered and additional meanings are sought from different perspectives, roles, and functions (Moustakas, 1994). This process of imaginative variation leads to the structural textures resulting in essential structures of the phenomenon.*

What did the mentors experience through the ripple effect? (textural description). When the mentors talked about the ripple effect they used words such as a “multiplier,” “empowerment filtered down,” “passing on traits,” and “a circle of influence.” One individual talked about it as “giving back,” “what you have been given and passing it on; a reinvestment that helps others experience what you have experienced and they, too, can pass it on.” It was described as a “circle” expanding outwardly, with the effects not necessarily “planned or conscious.” One person said that they did not realize the impact mentoring would have on them throughout their life; another said that it “happens without anyone really seeing it or knowing it.” Others referred to it as “a lifelong process to mentor and be mentored,” and “a reinvestment,” and “spill over.”

In what context did the mentors have this experience? (structural description). Some participants spoke about the individuals who mentored them. These individuals were older, such as a parent, teacher, employer, or community leader. These older mentors had seen something in these individuals that they were not cognizant of at the time, such as their giftedness, their potential to give and their capacity to receive. These mature mentors were willing to invest time, show interest, listen, understand, teach, connect, model, and live by example for these young people. Without their knowledge, these young people were being schooled in becoming mentors or re-investors themselves.

Another context was investing in peers, whether it was a sibling, classmate, or a group or committee member. At the time each entered college, they were “called” or motivated by their interest in others to become a collegiate mentor. They spoke about the context of whether they were a “sender” or a “receiver” of mentoring, and how the mentor must have the ability to give

and the receiver to accept the mentoring of others. The context of the type of communication – verbal or non-verbal – also shaped their experiences of the ripple effect. Verbal contexts involved listening and interacting while non-verbal occurred “without really seeing or knowing it.” Time was an important factor in how the ripple effect was experienced. Many mentors talked about influences from others that began when they were small children. One woman recalled memories of her grandmother, who was a well-educated woman born in 1902. Though women were not generally exposed to extended educational opportunities in that era, Ashley remembers how her grandmother talked to her during overnight outings about the importance of learning: “We were two peas in a pod.” Gary spoke of how his parents instilled the value of education in him, as well. They had graduated from college and he mirrored their example; he is now a medical student. Several mentors referred to the time element of experiencing the ripple effect on a daily basis. They consciously and unconsciously practice what they learned years ago through the NHRI program: to have a positive impact on those around them, in their family, professional, and community lives.

### *The Essence of the Experience*

*The textual and structural descriptions of the experiences are then synthesized into a composite description of the phenomenon through the research process referred to by Moustakas (1994, p. 100) as “intuitive integration.” This description becomes the essential, invariant structure of ultimate “essence” which captures the meaning ascribed to the experience.*

*The ripple effect in the mentoring begins with a person who is willing to invest in another and form a meaningful relationship built on trust. This person has the ability to give and mentors a*

*person who has the capacity to accept. It benefits both the mentor and mentee by impacting positive outcomes in personal lives, in organizations, and in society. Theoretically, the ripple effect is endless and its impact ripples outwardly as the experienced influences and feelings of connectedness are forwarded to others. It occurs both vertically and laterally. Mentors were mentored by others in a vertical fashion, and they pass it on laterally to peers through verbal and non-verbal communication, throughout time, and to individuals receptive to mentoring. This investing and reinvesting might also be seen as a “circle” of investing and reinvesting in others with the “circle” continually expanding outward. This investment can have both positive and negative effects. The essence of the experience is giving and that giving has the potential to be a multiplier.*

### **Reflections on the strengths and drawbacks of transcendental phenomenology**

Transcendental phenomenology based on Moustakas (1994) provides a systematic approach to analyzing data about lived experiences. It erases the Cartesian dualism between objectivity and subjectivity by allowing researchers to develop an objective “essence” through aggregating subjective experiences of a number of individuals. It is useful to use when the researcher has identified a phenomenon to understand, and has individuals who can provide a description of what they have experienced. The two questions, “how” and “what” is experienced, provide a concrete framework for asking questions and recording answers. The fact that this approach relies on individual experiences means that the stories to be told will be told from the participants’ voices and not those of the researcher or from individuals reporting studies in the literature, an approach consistent with human science research.

This research method presents specific challenges. A thread needs to flow between the significant statements, the meaning units, and the essence descriptions with the researcher building a composite description of increasingly general meaning. As an illustration, in this study, a significant statement (“Whatever good you build with one individual carries on to many, many more as you go out and form new relationships.”) funnels to a theme (Investing and Reinvesting in Others) and on to the essence (Giving). Although the analysis process works from the detailed to the more general, checks are not built into the analysis to make sure that this flow actually occurs. Further, the essences of any experience are never totally exhausted. The essence statement can only reflect a particular time, place, and the experiences of the individuals interviewed. It would seem that this essence can be difficult to develop when the researcher selects a more heterogeneous group of participants—all of whom have experienced the phenomenon, but their experiences vary greatly because of their cultural or historical backgrounds. The process of epoche is difficult to achieve, this pure state of being consciously present for perceiving and experiencing in a fresh way (Moustakas, 1994). It does not seem possible for a researcher to set aside completely all biases and assumptions (and personal experiences) to focus entirely on the participants’ experiences. Transcendental phenomenology requires that researchers learn a specific language of research and to understand the philosophical issues embraced by Husserl (1931). The unique language of this phenomenological method, words such as epoche, horizontalization, imaginative variation, intuitive integration, and textural and structural descriptions, to name a few, requires an openness to understanding these terms and how they might be applied in a specific study. Finally, as mentioned by those embracing hermeneutical phenomenology, absent from this approach is a reflection on the historical, cultural, and social contexts in which individuals read and interpret

texts. Moustakas (1994) is not clear as to how these are negotiated or included in a phenomenological study. Other writers on phenomenology include a vast array of texts (e.g., poetry, arts, music) in their data collection procedures (Reimen, 1986). It is not clear from reading Moustakas as to how these texts additional to the interviews can or should be used.

Still, for the qualitative researcher, transcendental phenomenology provides a systematic approach with procedures clearly identified by Moustakas (1994). Moustakas takes researchers through detailed analysis steps and provides good illustrations of the procedures. Although this approach to phenomenology may appeal to those in psychology (Moustakas' field), it provides an alternative to hermeneutical phenomenology and is widely used in the social and human sciences.

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