



EDUCATION AND HUMAN FLOURISHING IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

Settings, Encounters, and Transformations

Final Symposium

The Investcorp Lecture Theatre
St Antony's College, Oxford
25 October 2024

Cover Photo: Mosi-oa-Tunya (the smoke that thunders). Victoria Falls,
Zimbabwe, 2024, David Johnson

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This one-day Symposium brings to a conclusion the 'Education, Purpose and Human Flourishing in Uncertain Times' research project, funded by the Templeton World Charity Foundation. The three-year long project examined critically how human flourishing is understood, and traced the staggered and often difficult pathways toward its attainment.

Education is one such pathway, and its mediating role in the attainment of human flourishing was deliberated in over 24 public seminars under three themes: 'culture and context', 'personhood and social encounters', and 'society and transformation'. Each year, a residential Visiting Fellowship was offered to a scholar who contributed to the research project.

In this symposium, we return to the themes of the research and reflect on what we have learned.

Uncertainty prevails, sharply marked by an increase in personal hardships and human suffering, wars and threats of war, and an alarming unravelling of the thin threads that gave diverse communities across Europe and the United States of America some semblance of cohesion.

What then for Education, and for Human Flourishing?

Opening Plenary

9.00 – 9.30 am

Education, Purpose, and Human Flourishing in Uncertain Times Final Report.

David Johnson, University of Oxford

Chair: Dr Fiona Gatty, Templeton World Charity Foundation

Session 1

Settings:

Finding meaning in difficult circumstances

9.30 – 11 am

The aim of this session is to examine the proposition that human flourishing is a set of dynamic philosophical and psychological states of mind that is shaped and determined by personal hardship and suffering; but which states are transformed through personal engagement and struggle. Two papers recount the stories of 'pathways to meaning' of girls in Pakistan and Nigeria. The papers provide us with context and illustrations of hardship and adversity, and participants are invited to help us further clarify and refine the many concepts – resilience, grit, determination, virtue, character – used to describe states of mind.

Session Chair:

Brooks Newmark, University of Oxford

Speakers

Aditi Chidambaram and Dr Aliya Khalid, Department of Education, University of Oxford (9.30 – 10.00 am)

Title: A sense of self in times of crisis. Girls, education and the climate crisis in Pakistan

Abstract

The presentation recounts the experiences of girls caught up in the recent floods in Pakistan and analyses their constructions of meaning and their desire for education. The research argues for a deeper understanding of intersectionality as a contextual variable and a deeper engagement concepts such as 'aspiration' and with the processes of self-enrichment amidst crisis, in understanding pathways to Human Flourishing.

Nkpoikana-Abasi Aniefiok, Department of Education, University of Oxford (10.00am – 10.30 am)

Title: Navigating ‘new’ futures amid unplanned life events

Abstract

This paper explores how the intersection of gender, poverty, and motherhood affects the educational inclusion of teenage mothers in Nigeria and shapes the evolution of their aspirations over time. It looks at human flourishing as a social construct, and discusses resilience, persistence, and determination as key variables in the understanding of education as a pathway to social mobility, particularly in response to society’s judgmental perceptions and attitudes to teenage motherhood.

Discussion

10.30 – 11.00 am

Morning tea

11 – 11.30 am

Session 2

Transformations: Worldview and the politics of flourishing

11.30 – 1 pm

This session examines the shifting sands of international political relations and asks whether the idea of human flourishing is (once again) defined by history, ideology, and power. We examine the proposition that human flourishing – as an outcome – is a people's right, a nation's right to self-determination. This is a principle over which many battles have been fought, and many lives have been lost. The right, as a nation or as a people to exist, the right to belong, to be, and to become, are firmly held beliefs, mediated by different worldviews, religious, and moral beliefs, all of which attract political and other alliances. We might argue that Human Flourishing is ultimately attained through the peaceful co-existence of peoples and societies; but how this might be achieved is complex when it seems, that far too often, one people's right to self-determination is secondary to that of another. What can we learn about human flourishing in war and ethnic conflict, and from the contestation over the right to be, for indigenous populations in the face of modernisation?

Two papers are discussed in this session: the rights of indigenous peoples in the face of industrialisation and the effects of this on climate change; and the right to exist and to thrive and flourish, of Palestinian and Israeli peoples.

Session Chair:

Sajitha Bashir, The World Bank

Speakers

Professor Jonathan Lijebblad, ANU College of Law (11.30 – 12 noon)

Title: Decolonisation, Development Aid, and Contested Discourse: Reflections on Moral Authority and Flourishing

Abstract

The field of development aid is a complex space of state and non-state efforts to render transnational assistance to peoples in distant places. Frequently, the aid is tied to agendas of universalism, with programmes on issues such as environment and human rights asserting the need for international systems and global norms. Decolonisation discourses challenge such aspirations for universalism, pointing out the risks of colonialism that subordinates peoples at the margins of global power hierarchies. The consequence is a struggle for moral authority affecting the direction of political, legal, social, and cultural flourishing in local communities. The presentation is a reflection of such contestation, drawing upon the author's experiences as an Indigenous scholar in development aid programmes within authoritarian and hybrid regimes in Asia. The presentation highlights issues of structure-agency, positionality, and reductionism that impose binaries (e.g., good/bad, West/rest, etc.) that distort local contexts, erase local voices, and exacerbate the suffering of marginalised peoples. The presentation considers frameworks to better discern the different voices in discourses of development and decolonisation, with greater awareness of their contestation over flourishing.

Dr Walter Armbrust, Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, St Antony's College, University of Oxford (12 – 12.30 pm)

Title: The Right to Flourish? Palestine, Israel and States of Exception

Abstract

This paper offers a critical reflection on Human Flourishing and Self-Determination in Palestine

Discussion

12.30 – 1 pm

Lunch

1 – 2 pm

Critical Encounters: opposing views on human flourishing

2 – 3.30pm

The aim of this session is to explore the meaning of human flourishing as an outcome and to evaluate the pathways towards flourishing, in deeply polarised societies. In the last few years, we have seen a strong (re)-emergence of rights-based movements and of struggles for freedoms from colonial pasts and historical and present-day inequalities and new prejudices. But opposition to these struggles have been equally fierce, and not always shouldered only by flag-wearing, fist waving right-wing extremists. Two papers describe ‘critical encounters’ with the narratives of Apartheid in South Africa and Nazism in modern Germany and examine how history and thought define and shape the pathways to human flourishing.

Session Chair

Dr Velda Elliott, University of Oxford

Speakers

Dr Lynn Schneider, International Centre for Counter- Terrorism, Den Haag, Netherlands (2 – 2.30pm)

Title: Normalising Nazism: Infiltration of educational institutions by right-wing extremist parents in Germany

Abstract

Top-down legislation such as Florida’s Stop-Woke Act and the Parental Rights in Education Bill can be exploited by right-wing extremists to interfere with public education. Even in the absence of such statutory provisions, extremists have found ways to infiltrate the education system. In her presentation, Dr Lynn Schneider provides evidence of the processes through which German right-wing extremists successfully undermined the democratic values of their children’s schools and kindergartens. While extremist parents’ school activism poses a serious threat to the flourishing of other pupils (especially those with minority backgrounds),

it also significantly compromises the learning opportunities of their own children. Torn between irreconcilable worldviews at home and in their schools, they can assume the role of aggressors. These extremist parents are also particularly vulnerable to social exclusion and stigmatisation, are liable to experience excruciating loyalty conflicts, and rarely receive the support required to develop the resilience to flourish. The presentation concludes with suggestions of education policies and interventions to strengthen schools' capacity to ensure their pupils' flourishing in the face of adversity and polarisation.

Dr Natasha Robinson, Department of Education, University of Oxford
(2.30 – 3pm)

Title: Belonging to the Difficult Past: History education and human flourishing among Coloured* youth in Johannesburg

Abstract

Is knowing one's history important for human flourishing? In this paper, the author explores how Coloured history students in Johannesburg think about their identity and place in South Africa, and how this is impacted by the absence of any Coloured history in the South African history curriculum. Following 8 months of ethnographic fieldwork in a Coloured school, the author suggests that students interpreted the absence of Coloured history as evidence of national exclusion, while simultaneously developing historical identities that relied on narratives of abandonment, gang affiliation and sexual violence. This paper also explores how exposure to Coloured anti-apartheid activists over the course of 8 months began to transform ideas of what it meant to be Coloured among history students.

Discussion
3 – 3.30pm

*'Coloured' was a racial classification used in Apartheid South Africa and remains in official use today. It has caused alarm internationally and remains contested. Its use in this programme is not intended to cause offense.

Reflections and Conclusions

3.30 – 4pm

This final afternoon session is an open discussion on human flourishing as a concept and pathways to its attainment.

Chair: David Johnson

Afternoon tea

4pm

Symposium drinks reception, followed by High Table

6.30pm



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