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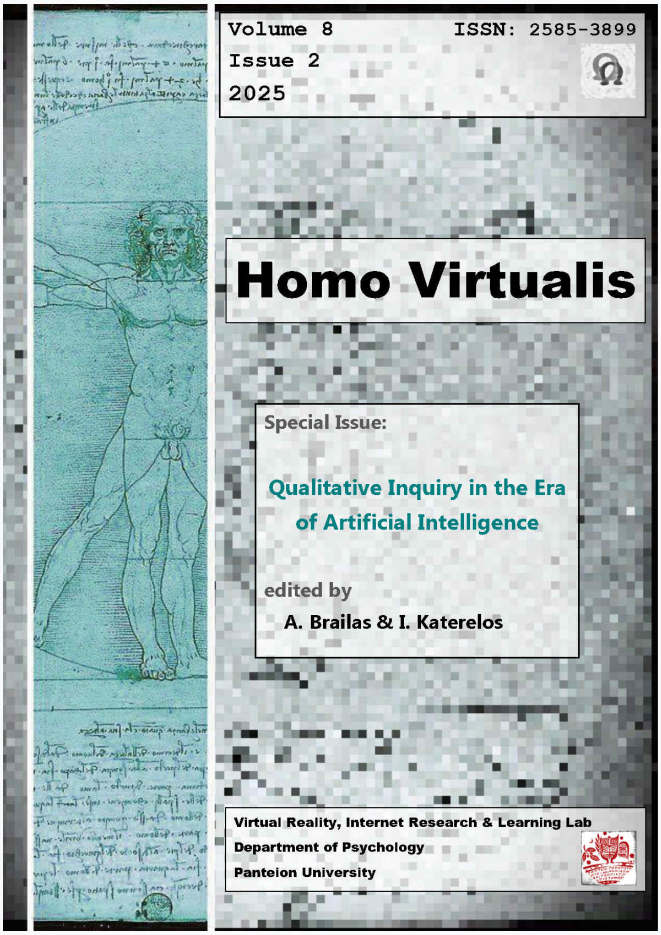

Life dreams, appreciative inquiry and empowerment: A study of creative and narrative approaches among university students

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Life dreams, appreciative inquiry and empowerment: A study of creative and narrative approaches among university students

Anna Kouroukouni [1]

Abstract: This study explores the relationship between university students and their life dreams through a qualitative, creative, and narrative research framework. Based on Appreciative Inquiry and a multimodal approach, the research combines semi-structured individual interviews with techniques such as drawing and photo-production. These methods allowed participants to express their dreams in multidimensional ways and reflect on their personal growth, identity, and aspirations. The findings highlight the interplay between self-awareness, self-esteem, and the challenges faced by young individuals in academic environments. Empowerment emerges through supportive networks and affirming experiences, while life dreams are framed as acts of resistance to societal and familial pressures. A recurring theme is the refusal to compromise, which participants embrace as a life philosophy. Through the combination of verbal and non-verbal data, this study aims to bring to light the richness of university-student experiences, emphasizing the role of creative expression in constructing meaningful life narratives. It invites dialogue about how psychology and the social sciences can support youth empowerment by cultivating spaces of appreciation, possibility, and authenticity.

Keywords: Qualitative Research, Appreciative Inquiry, Multimodal Approach, Life Dreams, Empowerment

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Introduction: Entering the Inquiry

Emerging adulthood represents a pivotal phase in which individuals seek to define their identities and articulate their life dreams. University students, as young adults navigating higher education, often grapple with questions of purpose, direction, and the construction of personal success. Within this transitional space, dreams are not only aspirations for the future but also powerful reflections of the self; shaped by personal stories, values, and social contexts.

This study explores how university students describe and make sense of their life dreams within a dialogical and appreciative framework. It focuses on how meaning, self-awareness, and agency are constructed through personal storytelling and creative expression. Life dreams are understood not simply as future goals, but as dynamic narratives that reflect students' evolving sense of autonomy and purpose.

Contemporary academic life often places students under considerable pressure. Beyond academic achievement, they are expected to clarify life goals, manage familial expectations, and plan their futures. Many find themselves at the crossroads of internal desire and external obligation. Qualitative inquiry provides a fitting framework to study such complex, layered experiences, emphasizing subjective meaning and emotional depth.

The research adopts an Appreciative Inquiry approach and a multimodal design, combining semi-structured interviews with creative techniques such as drawing and photo-production. These methods invite participants to express their life dreams in multidimensional ways and to reflect on personal growth and identity.

The main research questions guiding this study are:

(1) What kinds of life dreams do university students describe?
(2) How do these dreams relate to their lived experiences and social contexts?
(3) In what ways can appreciative and creative methods foster empowerment and reflection?

By examining how students narrate their life dreams, this research contributes to psychological and social understandings of youth empowerment, identity development, and the role of creative expression in meaning-making.

Literature Review

This study is based on psychological and interdisciplinary literature that highlights the principles of qualitative research and the value of appreciative, narrative, and multimodal approaches in understanding lived experience. It aims to create conditions for participants to reflect on what gives life to their experience and to explore how such reflection can enhance a sense of empowerment and personal direction. Such approaches are particularly relevant to young adults in higher

education, who often negotiate their life dreams within contexts of social expectation and personal growth.

Qualitative inquiry, as defined by Creswell (1998) as an effort to understand *"the meaning people have constructed,"* and described by Denzin and Lincoln (2005) as *"a set of interpretive practices that make the world visible,"* seeks to interpret how individuals construct meaning within their social worlds. This form of inquiry privileges depth, context, and dialogue over prediction and measurement (Bloor & Wood, 2006; Symeou, 2007). Within this approach, the researcher attends to subjectivity, reflexivity, and the co-construction of meaning. Such a stance aligns with the view that qualitative research reveals how people experience, interpret, and transform their realities through interaction (Willig, 2015; Fossey et al., 2002).

From a systemic and constructionist standpoint, knowledge and identity are relationally constructed through dialogue and social interaction (Gergen, 1997). Meaning does not exist in isolation but is co-created within linguistic, cultural, and interpersonal contexts that shape what can be expressed, imagined, or desired. Language and meaning emerge through interaction and context, emphasizing that understanding is always situated (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992). This view is further supported by systemic and networked approaches that highlight relational meaning-making and interconnected contexts (Brailas, 2014). In this framework, research itself becomes a dialogical process, a meeting between researcher and participant in which meaning is collaboratively produced and co-constructed rather than discovered or observed (Brailas, 2025).

The study is informed by the principles of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), which approach individuals and systems from a stance of recognition and potential. Appreciative Inquiry, as extended by Barrett and Fry (2005), has been used to enhance cooperation and generativity in diverse contexts. In Greece, Gotsis (2016) and Markou (2016) introduced Appreciative Inquiry as a systemic and relational practice that emphasizes values, connection, and shared understanding. Drawing also from recent methodological developments in Greece, Brailas (2025) discusses in his methodological work that the Appreciative Qualitative Interview can function as a generative and empowering research encounter. Together, these perspectives show how Appreciative Inquiry can function both as a methodological orientation and as a stance of inquiry that privileges strength, meaning, and potential.

The dialogical and narrative dimensions of the study are grounded in theoretical work that views stories as central to human understanding. Narratives are not static records of experience but dynamic acts of meaning-making through which individuals interpret, reframe, and sometimes transform their identities (Bruner, 1991; White & Epston, 1990). Within this dialogical view, Lang and McAdam (1997) describe how articulating future dreams in present living allows individuals to connect hope with action, a notion that resonates deeply with the study's focus on

life dreams. Recent appreciative interviewing work also incorporates future-oriented activities, with Brailas (2025) describing "*imagining the desired future*" as a key reflective task that enables participants to envision possibilities and articulate emerging life directions. The semi-structured interview format adopted here supports such storytelling, allowing participants to describe their experiences and life dreams in their own terms and to reflect upon them through the interaction itself (Milena et al., 2008; Isari & Pourkos, 2015).

Given the complexity and richness of human experience, this study embraces a multimodal approach that integrates verbal and non-verbal forms of expression. Creative and symbolic methods, such as drawing and photo-production, enable participants to explore aspects of their inner world that might remain implicit in language alone. Visual and artistic elements serve as alternative pathways to self-expression, offering insight into emotional and metaphorical dimensions of experience (Bateson, 1972; Van Der Vaart et al., 2018; Brailas, 2020). This multimodal lens also aligns with contemporary frameworks for analyzing visual and narrative data (Serafini & Reid, 2023). Such multimodal engagement fits within a systemic understanding of dialogue as an interplay among voices, images, and meanings, what Brailas (2020) calls a *"multimodal dialogue."*

Within this theoretical landscape, empowerment is viewed as a process through which individuals develop awareness, confidence, and agency (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). The focus on strengths and personal resources aligns with the understanding that empowerment is sustained by self-knowledge and goal orientation (Linley et al., 2010). Finally, qualitative interviewing itself can serve as a reflective and supportive process, offering participants an opportunity for self-recognition and meaning-making (Rossetto, 2014).

Combining these perspectives together, the present study seeks to understand how university students describe and interpret their life dreams, how these dreams are shaped by their social environments and relationships, and how appreciative and creative methodologies can support empowerment and self-awareness. The reviewed literature therefore serves not only as a conceptual foundation but also as an interpretive lens guiding the exploration of life dreams as relational, narrative, and meaning-making constructions in the context of emerging adulthood.

Methodological Framework

This study adopts a qualitative, multimodal methodology shaped by the principles of social constructionism and guided by a commitment to exploring participants lived experiences in depth. Rather than fragmenting the research process into rigid stages, the methodology is presented here as an interconnected process, that moves fluidly between participant selection, creative data collection, and thematic interpretation.

Sample

The study used criterion-based sampling, focusing on individuals who held student status at the time of the research. No restrictions were placed on age, academic field, or institution type, allowing for a diverse sample. Ten participants took part in the study: four men, four women, one non-binary individual, and one with unspecified gender identity, aged between 18 and 24. Participants came from a broad range of disciplines, expanding from Film to Oceanography Studies, reflecting a rich field of different focuses within the academic community. This diversity was not only welcomed but viewed as essential for amplifying multiple voices and complex realities within a single demographic group.

Research Tools

Based on a multimodal approach, the data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews, complemented by two creative techniques: drawing activities and photo-production. This combination of narrative and non-verbal tools enabled participants to express themselves in multiple modes. Interviews encouraged open-ended storytelling while also incorporating metaphorical and future-oriented questions to evoke imagination and emotional reflection. Participants were invited to sketch their "life dream" as they envisioned it 20 years into the future, using drawing as a creative extension of the dialogue. These drawings, or "life-maps", provided visual representations of their inner worlds and were discussed in the interview context, allowing for a deeper and more layered expression of meaning (Willig, 2015).

Qualitative Interview

This interview approach draws on the Appreciative Qualitative Interview framework outlined by Brailas (2025), which offers a structured sequence of opening questions, appreciative tasks, and closing reflections, while still allowing a spontaneous dialogue to unfold. The method incorporates future-oriented activities, such as imagining and drawing a desired future, that support participants in articulating strengths, aspirations, and personal interpretations. As Brailas (2025) mentions, the semi-structured interviews can serve as "*prompts to help a more spontaneous dialogue to unfold, allowing unexpected and unanticipated information to emerge*". Within the semi-structured format open discussion with gentle guidance were combined, allowing the researcher to explore participants' stories in depth and adapt the process to each individual's context.

Two metaphorical questions from the interview guide are worth highlighting:

- "Take a moment and imagine your current mood as weather. What is the forecast today?"
- "In one word, how are you leaving here today—what's the 'weather' like?"

These aimed to capture the evolving emotional climate during the interview and reflect participants' inner changes and self-awareness.

Further extending the inquiry beyond the interview setting, participants were also invited to engage in an optional photo-production task. After the interview, they were encouraged to notice and photograph something in their daily life that resonated with the conversation or their dream, and to accompany the image with a short reflective text. This task was designed to foster reflection, emotional continuity, and participant agency in the research process (Del Busso, 2013). As Harper (2002) suggests, visual stimuli can evoke deeper layers of consciousness than verbal language alone, facilitating access to non-verbal knowledge and memory. Thus, both the drawings and photographs served not only as data but also as expressions of inner processes that might otherwise remain inaccessible.

Drawing Task

A central component of the interview process was the Dreaming Activity, which invited participants to pause, relax, and allow their imagination to guide them toward their deepest desires and long-term aspirations. In the interview guide, they were asked to draw *how they imagine their life in twenty years, in their most ambitious dream without limitations*, and to give their drawing a title that captured the essence of this envisioned future. This activity created a symbolic and creative space where participants could externalize hopes, reflect on personal values, and describe possible future selves, often with vivid enthusiasm and emotional depth. Several participants identified the drawing as the most engaging and resonant moment of the interview, enhancing their sense of openness. The design of this activity was also inspired and guided by discussions with my thesis supervisor, whose work on the Appreciative Qualitative Interview (Brailas, 2025) emphasizes imaginative and future-oriented tasks that support reflection and empowerment within the research dialogue.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded using a voice recorder app ("Tape-a-Talk") and later transcribed. Drawings were scanned using a scanner app ("CamScanner") allowing participants to retain the original artwork as a personal artifact from the process. Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This included familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing and naming themes, and finally, composing the narrative of findings. The process was supported by Taguette, an open-source software tool that facilitated the organization and coding of the transcribed material.

Thematic analysis was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being imposed by a priori categories. Consistent with social constructionist epistemology (Willig, 2015), the analysis emphasized the co-constructed nature of meaning and experience. As noted by Braun and Clarke (2006),

thematic analysis offers both theoretical flexibility and analytical depth, making it particularly well suited to studies exploring complex human experiences. While sometimes described as theoretically "free," it is more accurately characterized by theoretical flexibility, requiring researchers to make clear epistemological choices (Willig, 2015, p. 153).

Multimodal Approach

The individual semi-structured interviews provided the main framework within which these activities were inviting participants into a truly multimodal dialogue (Brailas, 2020).

> "*Life is a multimodal dialogue.*"
> — Brailas (2020)

The use of creative, narrative, and visual tools was not simply a matter of data enrichment, but a deliberate methodological and epistemological choice. It reflects an understanding of identity and meaning as fluid, contextual, and co-created. The "weather" metaphor used at the beginning and end of interviews, by asking participants to describe their emotional state as a weather forecast, helped participants externalize and reflect on their inner world.

This research aimed to create space for a deeper dialogue to unfold, within and beyond words, between image and voice, amongst present experience and imagined future. Through this integrated, multimodal, and meaning-making approach, the study sought to illuminate not only what participants experience, but how they dream, imagine, and narrate their lives into being.

Findings: Meaningful Patterns

This chapter presents the analysis of the research material, beginning with the description of the step-by-step coding process from lower to higher levels of thematic analysis and culminating in the identification of the main themes.

Data coding was the first step of the thematic analysis and required the researcher's deep familiarity with the material. Manual transcription by the researcher played a vital role in this process, allowing time and space for reflection, idea development, and preliminary insights into the data. Open coding involved processing the transcripts line by line to identify meaningful units and assign them descriptive labels (Brailas, Papachristopoulos & Tragou, 2023, p. 38). As this study followed an inductive approach, codes were generated from the data itself without the use of a predefined codebook.

The first-level codes reflected surface-level responses that aligned closely with the structure of the interview guide:

1. Academic Impact (AI 1): Examined how university shaped participants' character and identity.

2. Life Dreams (LD 1): Captured references to life goals expressed in interviews and drawings.
3. Negative Experience (NE 1): Identified challenges and their resolution as opportunities for growth.
4. Empowerment (EN 1): Focused on moments where participants expressed a sense of personal strength.
5. Participant Impressions (PI 1): Captured post-interview reflections and feelings.
6. Positive Experience (PE 1): Highlighted progress and confidence derived from academic experiences.
7. Appreciative Experience (AE 1): Recalled personal moments of achievement and validation.
8. "Weather" After (WA 1): Used metaphorical language to reflect emotional state after the interview.
9. "Weather" Before (WB 1): Reflected emotional state before the interview.
10. "Interesting" (INT 1): Taguette's default label used for items needing further review.

The second-level codes represented more abstract patterns:

1. Daily Impact (DI 2): How university affected or was balanced with daily life.
2. Career Development (CD 2): How academic life contributed to professional goals.
3. Relationship with Professors (RP 2): Influence of educators on academic trajectories.
4. Social Networks (SN 2): Reflected participants' relationships and sense of belonging.
5. Conditions for Growth (CG 2): Covered academic challenges and supportive environments.
6. Negative Experience and Coping (NEC 2): Combined difficult experiences with strategies for overcoming them.

Finally, the third-level codes gave rise to overarching themes grounded in participants' lived experiences:

1. Reflection and Growth (RG 3): Demonstrated participants' evaluation of personal and professional development over time.
2. Self-awareness and Self-esteem (SASE 3): Expressed how academic life fostered self-discovery and confidence.
3. Philosophy of Life and Purpose (PLP 3): Captured participants' evolving sense of meaning and purpose.
4. Life Dreams and Appreciative Inquiry (LD-AI 3): Focused on how life goals were shaped by affirming experiences.

5. Social Networks and Empowerment (SN-EN 3): Highlighted supportive relationships and their empowering effects.

In the following sections, each theme is explored in depth, supported by quotes and examples.

Reflection and Growth (RG 3) Participants shared how academic experiences influenced both their personal and potential professional development. They compared past and present selves, expressing how their university journey reshaped their identity and helped clarify future goals.

> "I don't regret it at all, I think it's the best decision I've made so far."

Even those in early semesters recounted their evolving journeys, positioning their current path as aligned with their values, even if not yet fully formed:

> "We have to do what we want, and it's okay not to know, what exactly that is, at 18. It's okay to want many things."

Self-awareness and Self-esteem (SASE 3) Through academic challenges, participants developed deeper self-knowledge and pride. They reflected on moments of growth, no matter how small or significant, as sources of inner strength:

> "I'm proud of myself. Even going out alone is something I now value without guilt."

Philosophy of Life and Purpose (PLP 3) Participants expressed strong resistance to societal or familial pressure in academic and career decisions. Many described pivotal moments where they reclaimed their own path:

> "If I had stayed in that school, I would be miserable."

They advocated for authenticity and non-conformity:

> "I want to live my life the way I want. That's the message: nonconformism."

In the image below (Figure 1), we see a participant's drawing, titled "*The Split"*, which depicts two contrasting aspects of life and self. The participant explained that the image represented her effort to integrate these dimensions, symbolizing inner balance and authenticity in the pursuit of purpose.

Life Dreams and Appreciative Inquiry (LD-AI 3) Participants described moments of personal achievement that shaped their goals and fueled their aspirations, whether it was being admitted to their first-choice program, leading a team project, or receiving validation from others.

Although the appreciative framework emphasized positive experiences and life dreams, participants also reflected on challenges that had shaped their personal development. These moments of difficulty, such as academic setbacks, emotional struggles, or uncertainty about the future, were reinterpreted through dialogue as valuable learning experiences. Rather than being avoided, they became meaningful reference points for resilience and self-acceptance, illustrating how empowerment

often emerges through the re-authoring of one's own story. As one participant reflected, *"Even though it was a difficult period, it made me see how strong I can be."*

These reflections on their life dreams revealed deep emotional connection and self-awareness. Through the appreciative process, participants described rediscovering values and sources of meaning that guided their sense of direction:

> "When I drew my dream, it felt like seeing myself clearly again, like remembering what truly matters to me," said one participant.

Another added:

> "My life dream is not something distant; it's a part of me, something that connects me with what I love and who I want to become."

The creative and dialogical process allowed them to recognize both their inner strengths and the transformative value of past challenges. This experience fostered a sense of gratitude, clarity, and empowerment, highlighting the potential of appreciative and narrative approaches to support young adults' visions for their future.

Social Networks and Empowerment (SN-EN 3) Participants emphasized the importance of meaningful support from others, such as family, friends, professors. These relationships acted as mirrors of recognition and sources of strength:

> "My mom finally understood when she saw what I created for a school event. That's when she realized (in the form of accepting): 'this is what you want to do.'"

Teachers also played a central role in affirming students' direction:

> "It made me love the field even more. I felt I was on the right path."

One participant reflected on how a professor's supportive comment inspired her vision of helping others in the future:

> "Someday I want someone to feel the same comfort from me. I'll hold on to that."

This analysis illustrates the rich interplay between academic life and young students' inner worlds, offering insight into how affirming, multimodal research settings can support empowerment and meaning-making.

> "My mum accepted my choice when a university play, which I directed, went live for the public. She was thrilled. I went home in tears and then it dawned on her, after all these years, that this is what I really want and I stay with it."

Participants also referred to their teachers, who often also acted as a compass and reassurance that individuals were on the "right [for them] path".

> "It made me love it more. It's not a very big thing, I just remember it as a nice moment. It was like a confirmation that I'm on the right path, that I like what

> I'm doing. And I feel that both on a philosophical level and in a personal life-mindset, this profession suits me a lot. Especially when we discuss a little bit more about the mentality (of the art conservator), I really like it and I feel like it fits me as a character, as a temperament."

For some participants, their action reinforced the connection the latter had with the subject and inspired the future attitude they intended to adopt being in the same position.

> "I was told by a professor, one of the ones I admired the most because he had experience abroad and quite a long career, 'We all start somewhere -I was also nervous my first time.' For a while it was like we were equals, without me feeling very inferior to them. And it made me feel that, in a parallel universe, he is also experiencing his first time, as I am now. And maybe there will be someone else someday who will be experiencing their first time, perhaps they will be admiring me and I'd like to make them feel that way too.
> So yeah I'm keeping that as a thought for the future."

The findings reveal the richness of the connections between academic experiences and important aspects of young students' lives, offering valuable insights for promoting youth empowerment and support by utilizing affirming and multimodal empowerment frameworks, such as appreciative inquiry.

Figure 1. "The Split".

Note. A participant-produced drawing during the interview. Studies of participant: Oceanography and Marine Biosciences. (Image used with permission)

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in full compliance with the ethical principles of psychology, ensuring integrity and respect throughout the process. All participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, and their rights, including withdrawal, anonymity, and access to information about the study. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Given the particular ethical challenges of visual methods (Willig, 2015), separate consent was secured for the creation and use of images, with clear explanation of their role in the research. The main topic was introduced neutrally to avoid influencing participants' responses, while the appreciative framework was discussed in detail only after data collection. The study followed a human-centered approach, emphasizing fairness, respect, and unconditional acceptance. Data collection and analysis were carried out transparently and confidentially, ensuring the ethical, reliable, and valid conduct of the research.

Discussion: Connecting the Threads

This study explored how young university students make sense of their academic experiences, personal growth, and life dreams through a framework grounded in Appreciative Inquiry and enriched by creative and narrative methods. The findings demonstrate strong correspondence with existing theoretical concepts of empowerment, narrative identity, and relational meaning-making.

A central insight concerns how academic challenges were experienced not merely as obstacles but as opportunities for self-reflection and transformation. The development of self-awareness and self-esteem often emerged through participants' reinterpretations of past difficulties and their recognition of growth within adversity, an observation consistent with narrative approaches that emphasize re-authoring life events as a means of constructing a coherent sense of self (Isari & Pourkos, 2015).

Moreover, the tension between societal or familial expectations and personal values appeared as a recurrent theme. Participants resisted external pressures and redefined success in personal terms, advocating for authenticity and non-conformity. This perspective reflects qualitative views of identity formation as a relational and reflective process in which individuals seek coherence between inner values and social contexts (Isari & Pourkos, 2015). In this sense, autonomy is understood not as separation from others but as a co-created process of meaning-making through dialogue (Gergen, 1997).

These findings also relate to broader theoretical perspectives on empowerment and autonomy that were discussed earlier. According to Cattaneo and Chapman (2010), empowerment involves developing awareness, confidence, and agency through reflective interaction with one's environment. Similarly, Linley et al. (2010) emphasize that personal growth and direction emerge from recognizing individual strengths and internal resources. From a systemic and social-constructionist perspective,

Gergen (1997) and Brailas (2014) highlight that self-definition is formed in dialogue with others, rather than in isolation. Within this context, the participants' resistance to external pressures can be seen not as opposition but as the expression of a relational form of autonomy grounded in reflection, connection, and meaning-making. This interpretation resonates with the appreciative stance described by Gotsis (2016) and Markou (2016), who frame Appreciative Inquiry as a relational practice that cultivates self-awareness through mutual recognition. Language and vision are seen as generative forces shaping identity and action (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Goleman, 1987).

The methodology itself, by combining interviews, drawings, and photo-production, appeared to foster a rich emotional and reflective environment. The multimodal design allowed participants to express themselves beyond words, accessing embodied and intuitive dimensions of their experience. Several participants reported that the interview process and the stance of the interviewer helped them articulate and affirm aspects of themselves previously unspoken, a finding consistent with the constructivist and participatory ethos of the second-order change (Von Foerster, 2003; Gergen, 2009).

However, some findings diverged from expectations. While Appreciative Inquiry typically emphasizes positive narratives, several participants brought forth painful or unresolved experiences. Rather than dismiss these as contradictory, it became evident that affirming experiences often coexisted with struggle; and that it was precisely the combination that fueled a richer, more grounded vision of self and future. This complexity challenges overly simplistic applications of positivity and invites more nuanced understandings of human development.

The study's contribution lies in demonstrating how multimodal, appreciative, and relational research practices can support processes of meaning-making and empowerment among young adults. In contrast to deficit-based approaches often found in psychological assessment or institutional settings, this project created dialogical spaces in which participants could recognize their agency, reconnect with their aspirations, and reimagine their paths. The emphasis on relational recognition, ranging from peers, professors, and/or family, proved particularly impactful in affirming participants' goals and validating their identities.

Nonetheless, limitations must be acknowledged, not as shortcomings, but as opportunities for reflection and improvement, informed by the knowledge gained through this experience. The research was conducted within a specific cultural and educational context, involving Greek-speaking-only university students. It causes great interest to contemplate of the uniqueness or each language and the different gravity each society places on its mean of communication, for example sometimes focusing the responsibility (and therefore the blame as well) on the individual (e.g. in western societies), or giving a collective feeling of mutual responsibility, aid and share of the burden.

Besides the potential interest in the different cultural background, the sample appears to be focusing only to a certain group of people of a higher educational level. While this limits generalizability, it does not diminish the study's value, as emphasized by Isari & Pourkos (2015), qualitative research does not aim for statistical extrapolation but for contextualized, in-depth understanding. In fact, the situated nature of this research is one of its strengths, allowing for thick descriptions and grounded interpretations that speak to the particularities of the participants' lives.

The sample size, though small, was appropriate for the depth of analysis intended. The emphasis was on quality and subtleness rather than quantity and generalization, and the findings wish to be read through this lens. The subjective nature of the data, which is rooted in the participants' perceptions, emotions, and memories, but also in the researcher's participation, presence, ultimately some level of influence and acknowledgement of being part of the process, is intrinsic to the aims of the research and consistent with its epistemological grounding.

Future research might explore how Appreciative Inquiry and creative tools function across different populations and cultural, as well as social-economic settings. For example, similar methods could be applied with older adults, minority groups, or students in other educational systems and in other cities, countries or even continents. Further exploration of the role of visual expression (particularly photo-production) in supporting self-awareness and social identity would also be of value. Additionally, expanding the research to include intercultural samples could offer insight into how affirmation and meaning-making operate across cultural contexts.

Ultimately, the findings support the epistemological stance that knowledge is not discovered but co-constructed and that research, when conducted within a respectful and appreciative frame, can itself be an act of positive transformation. The study supports a paradigm of inquiry that is dialogical, hopeful, and ethically attuned to the voices and dreams of those involved.

In Dialogue with the Process: Tracing my Research Journey

This research was conducted in the context of my undergraduate thesis, during the final stage of my studies in psychology. As such, it was shaped not only by academic curiosity but also by a transitional moment in my life; a time of reflection, anticipation, and personal questioning. Therefore, the process unfolded in parallel with my own movement toward adulthood and my emerging identity as a future therapist.

From the outset, it was clear that this project would not remain a purely academic exercise. The very topic, life dreams explored through an appreciative and multimodal lens, was born out of a deeper desire: to create spaces where people could express themselves freely, feel genuinely heard, and possibly see their own stories through a new perspective. Early on, I was invited to envision what a "dream

thesis" would look like in my eyes. I was carefully, patiently and supportively guided, by my professor, to create a drawing: Two chairs facing each other, equal in presence, with a blooming plant between them and a radiant sun above their existence. These became quiet symbols of what I hoped to offer; a space grounded in warmth, equality, hope and possibility. That drawing guided me throughout the process, not just as a metaphor but as a compass for how I wished to meet the participants and perhaps what I also aspired to offer to/ leave them with.

During the interviews, I found myself acting more as a participant who was actively listening and reflecting, rather than as an investigator who focuses on extracting data. There was structure, but also real presence. A willingness to simply be with the other person without expectations, to follow their lead with openness and respect. What surprised me the most was how often that intention seemed to be felt and transmitted back. Participants shared with honesty, humor, vulnerability. Many later said the process left them feeling more connected, more hopeful, more grounded in their own journey. These moments were quietly powerful and deeply moving.

There were initial worries, of course. I wondered whether the drawing activity might be seen as childish, or whether the optional photo-sharing would be ignored. Instead, the responses surpassed expectations. The drawing process often became a meaningful point of engagement, and eight out of ten participants chose to continue our dialogue by sending photographs and reflective paragraphs accompanying them. That willingness "spoke" to me about the kind of space we had co-created.

As the research unfolded, I recognized myself in many of the stories. The tension of making life choices, the longing to be seen as you are and not be crashed by societal expectations, the pride in small acts of courage; all resonated personally. The changes in me after each interview also varied, as sometimes I was stirred, sometimes challenged, sometimes simply grateful. I wasn't standing outside the field. I was within it, listening and shaping alongside those who shared their voices.

This experience showed me the path of the researcher I hope to become. One who doesn't treat research as extraction, but as encounter. One who sees value not only in findings but in the spaces created along the way. This project showed me that inquiry can be intimate, relational, and alive. It reminded me that even in more formal and calculated academic settings, we can make room for care, presence, and shared meaning.

The drawing I created at the beginning bore the words: *Plant your dreams and water them.* In many ways, that is what this study became. A small shared garden of dreams, stories, questions, and possibilities. Some seeds were mine; some were theirs. What grew is something I will carry with me, not only as a researcher, but as a person.

Figure 2. "Plant your Dreams and Water them". A drawing I produced during the "Dream Thesis" exercise with my university professor and supervisor, Dr. Brailas.

Note: Own work.

Final Thoughts

This research set out to explore the life dreams, strengths, and lived experiences of young university students through a multimodal, appreciative lens. Across drawings, interviews, and photo-based storytelling, participants were invited into a space where their voices, visions, and values could emerge freely and creatively. Rather than

focusing on problems or deficits, the study illuminated how students locate meaning in their academic journey and how they connect personal growth with a broader sense of purpose.

What stands out most powerfully is the interplay between internal empowerment and external affirmation. Moments of recognition, whether through success, supportive relationships, or self-discovery, acted as turning points in participants' narratives. These experiences not only fostered self-confidence but also seemed to reactivate life dreams that had been dormant or unspoken. In this sense, the research process itself became a generative encounter, one that made visible the relational and narrative threads shaping the participants' evolving identities.

Figure 3. Photo-production. A participant-produced photograph after the interview: "For me, this photo shows how things progress over time. The background is completely chaotic, a rainy night on an avenue, and yet the light never stops moving. That's how I imagine my life. Always in a chaotic setting, but constantly moving forward."

Note: A photostory by a participant in the study (Image used with permission).

The findings reaffirm that when students are offered spaces of trust, creativity, and non-judgmental listening, they can articulate with clarity what matters most to them. They can resist imposed expectations, redefine what success means, and reclaim authorship over their life paths. In particular, the use of Appreciative Inquiry in combination with visual and narrative tools highlighted how hope and possibility can emerge not in spite of difficulties but through them.

This study contributes to the growing body of qualitative, strengths-based research in psychology and education by offering a grounded, emotionally textured look at how young people envision their futures. It also demonstrates the value of multimodal methodologies in accessing complex layers of experience, especially among populations navigating identity formation and social transition.

While the research was rooted in a specific cultural and academic setting, its insights resonate more broadly. The capacity for reflection, for reconnecting with dreams, and for drawing strength from meaningful relationships is not limited by geography. As such, this work offers practical implications for educators, counselors, and community practitioners around the world who wish to foster environments that truly support the growth and empowerment of young people.

Taken together, the findings suggest that Appreciative Inquiry, when integrated with creative and narrative tools, can function as a powerful approach for exploring and supporting the evolving identities of young adults. The emphasis on strengths, possibilities, and relational meaning-making not only deepens understanding but also activates processes of inner and interpersonal transformation.

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