

Understanding Attendees' Transformative Experiences Following Tony Robbins's Unleash the Power Within Seminars

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Tony Robbins is an American life coach and entrepreneur who claims his motivational workshop, Unleash the Power Within (UPW) can transform people's lives. This article is based on an interpretative phenomenological analysis of eight participants who had attended different UPW seminars and explored their experiences of transformation. Eight themes were identified: (1) a change in their sense of self, (2) the development of new skills, (3) changes in lifestyle, (4) transformation/conversion, (5) changes in relationships, (6) permanency of change, (7) feelings of fear versus anticipation, and (8) loss versus gain. The research concluded that participants had undergone transformation involving significant, valued and enduring changes centred on new meaning in their lives. Further research was suggested to examine both a wider and more in-depth approach, as personal development workshops offer a large and potentially rich field of transpersonal study focused on human meaning-making and change.

Keywords: Tony Robbins, Unleash the Power Within, transformation, conversion, transpersonal, peak experiences, flow, quantum change, personal development

The research was inspired by my own experience of attending an Unleash the Power Within (UPW) seminar (Robbins, 2020) in 2002 and experiencing the three-day event as transformational. Within a few hours of starting, participants were storming across red-hot coals, a metaphor for change being possible and exhilarating, if frightening.

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During the event, the affect and energy of the audience was controlled by the use of loud music, frequent bouts of energetic dancing, expecting participants to shout out “aye” to confirm what Robbins was asserting, and encouraging hugging and interaction, all aimed at keeping the energy level high.

The seminar’s major turning point, The Dickens Process, is based on the type of leverage described in *A Christmas Carol* (Dickens, 1843/2012). It involves identifying self-limiting beliefs that prevent participants from fully embracing their personal power in the present. Throughout this process, the darkened room is filled with wailing and guttural noises, as each participant fully experiences the pain these beliefs have caused in relationships, self-esteem, confidence, energy, wealth and health. This becomes the leverage for behaviour and attitude change, and is followed by the installation of new, empowering beliefs. The session ends with an emotional exercise in experiencing gratitude, connection and joy.

The experience provided some insight into rave parties, evangelical movements and large group dynamics. The music, dancing, hugging fellow participants and the groundswell of emotion all contrive to engender a conversion-type experience. While the event did not feel exploitative, but aimed at participants’ own highest good, towards the end there is a sales pitch for Robbins’s three follow-on workshops, known collectively as Mastery University. Participants are invited to enrol to further their development, although only a small proportion sign up, as the investment is prohibitive.

The academic literature on Robbins’s work is limited. Ramones (2011) acknowledged there had been little research into his work for proprietary reasons. She questioned whether the changes endure, but as her focus was an analytical overview and not a phenomenological investigation, this was not developed. Eret (2001) placed Robbins within the Human Potential Movement and American Awareness Training seminars of the sixties and seventies. According to him, “Robbins vernacularizes and popularizes science to make his self-empowerment products appear both authentic and authoritative” (p. vii). Cordon (2011) was dismissive of the role of pop psychology, delivering directly to the public without the critiques of peer reviews in academic journals. While acknowledging Robbins’s influence with political leaders such as Clinton and Mandela, and parallels with cognitive behavioural therapy, Cordon concluded that pop psychology is simplistic and gives people what they want. Finally, Grant (2001) noted there has been little research on the self-help or personal development industries, which have grown since the fifties. He examined evidence for the effectiveness of Robbins’s ‘Neuro-Associative Conditioning’, with its roots in Bandler and Grinder’s (1979) Neuro-Linguistic Programming, concluding “Robbins’s claims are somewhat overstated” (Grant, 2001, p. 236). None of the above, however, constituted a phenomenological study, looking into participants’ experiences, any changes they made subsequently, and how they understood their transformation, which was the focus of the present research.

As defined by Anderson and Braud (2011), transformation “involves a qualitative shift in one’s lifeworld and / or worldview...[which] may occur rapidly or gradually, dramatically or subtly” (p. xvii) with possible changes in perspective, knowing or relationships. The literature relating to transformation is vast, ranging from the spiritual and religious to the secular. Emmons and Paloutzian (2003) commented that the literature on religious conversion was “almost as vast and diverse as religious life itself” (p. 378). Situating the UPW experience within this, however, is complicated. Given that this field of personal development has not been subject to much previous study, understanding the transformations claimed by the UPW participants therefore necessitated a wider framework, requiring examination of literature relating to transformation itself, religious and secular conversion-type experience and other change modalities, such as quantum change (Miller & C’de Baca, 2001), flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008) and peak experiences (Maslow, 1964) as either central or relating to the UPW experience. In addition, material pertaining to cults was also considered to provide a critical approach to the claims made, while understanding the high emotional context of the seminar. Together these constituted the researcher’s lens.

Method

An idiographic study aimed at capturing the meaning and reflections of attendees was favoured, as central to understanding the human experience. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009) was the method chosen, as it focuses on “the detailed examination of human lived experience” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 32), understanding it from the participant’s viewpoint (Smith & Osborn, 2008). As such, it is an approach rather than a set of steps (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009).

Ethical considerations were covered under Middlesex University’s protocols and the anonymity of participants was preserved by using pseudonyms. While the research question centred on how people felt they had experienced transformation as a result of UPW, the definition of transformation was deliberately left unspecified. It was important for potential interviewees to define transformation for themselves to reduce researcher preconceptions and allowed for a wide variety of experiences to be examined.

Initial participants were identified by emails to volunteer staff member groups set up after UPW events, followed by a wider trawl of known participants who might know others who would like to be included. Eight further participants were identified by directly approaching crew members and participants at a UPW event in London, although only two of these eventually participated.

Table 1*Participant information*

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Place of Residence	Approximate Age	Number of times at UPW	Crewed?
Ailsa	Female	White/UK	Wales	60s	1	Once
Ben	Male	White/UK	England	40s	1	Multiple
Cait	Female	White/UK	England	50s	1	No
Diane	Female	Black British	England	50s	1	Multiple
Elaine	Female	White/UK	Scotland	60s	2	Once
Fadi	Male	Indian	Germany	40s	Multiple	No
Gabby	Female	White/UK	Scotland	50s	1	No
Henrik	Male	White/Russian	Russia	40s	1	Yes

Some interview questions established practicalities, like when they had attended UPW and how often. Others focused on the meaning they had made of the experience, at the time and later, the specific changes they implemented and any comments they had received from people close to them. As participants were geographically spread, the sixty to ninety minute interviews took place over Skype or telephone and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Following the interviews, the data were subjected to eidetic reduction to identify the essence of the experiences described (Smith & Osbourne, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). This involved successive readings of the streams of information, colour coding and refining to establish similarities and differences. Eventually, through this process, the forty-one themes initially identified were reduced to eight superordinate themes. The seven most frequently mentioned were identified foremost because they appeared in the transcripts of all participants and were therefore common to each person's experience. One further theme, loss versus gain, experienced as a result of the workshop, was also mentioned by all participants, although there was much less emphasis on this than the others. Themes that superficially might have appeared significant, such as the firewalk, were not present in all transcripts and therefore did not feature in the final analysis.

Results

Eight superordinate themes were identified: 1) a change in their sense of self; 2) the development of new skills; 3) changes in lifestyle; 4) transformation/conversion; 5)

changes in relationships; 6) permanency of change; 7) fear versus anticipation, and 8) loss versus gain.

1. Change in Sense of Self

The predominant theme was experiencing a change in their sense of self, marked by a more compassionate and less judgemental self-attitude, and was more encompassing than increased confidence, bringing discoveries and new understandings. Diane realised, “gosh I’m allowed to dream.” Elaine talked about being “more joyous” and “carrying a light ... a bubble, a sense of self-esteem”. Henrik, initially repulsed by the high levels of emotion which reminded him of communism, later realised he too was jumping, crying and shouting, and thought, “Oh my God, is that me?” and laughed.

Secondly, they felt stronger in themselves and more resourceful. Elaine expressed it as “I’m a firewalker, I can do anything”. There was a new sense of compassion towards others. Henrik described helping a woman to overcome her fear of the firewalk. When she succeeded, he said, “then I was crying and we were crying together. This was when I really helped a person... So yeah, that was very, very, very important.”

Their self-compassion changed too. Ailsa had not liked herself much before UPW but said, “I loved myself a lot more afterwards”. Gabby said she “definitely felt more comfortable within myself... I shared more of me...I didn’t feel stupid...to voice the comment”. Fadi had been born into a poor Indian family, which had restricted his opportunities in life. Through UPW, he realised, “I was giving stories to myself,” which changed his belief that he was a victim. Instead, “I changed the meaning, that it was a gift that I was born with such a family that, so the meaning changed, mak[ing] me much more calmer person.”

Finally, noting a point of change or making a decision seemed key for some. For Diane, “It wasn’t the walking over the hot coals... the most important thing for me was the decision to do it.” Elaine said, “I... moved my energy to abundance. I’ve never looked back.”

These changes were also reflected in how others began to see them. Ailsa’s colleagues remarked that: “I looked a lot happier. A lot more relaxed. Less grumpy... I walked differently.”

2. The Development of New Skills

The second major area was the acquisition of new skills, which allowed them to undertake new ventures, both personally and professionally. Ailsa “did some life coaching certification training” and “took up various multilevel marketing things.” Ben described himself beforehand as “conventional, pretty unremarkable.” Afterwards he decided he could “also look at other business... opportunities so you know I was more open-minded... and I did some trading.”

Elaine felt she “definitely embraced change.” Diane’s communication skills as a trainer improved. Now, when she ran workshops, she had “a different energy” and felt more playful and comfortable in making mistakes.

Gabby, devastated after divorce, applied what she learned to develop her interpersonal skills. Her current employer now regards her as their best negotiator, saying, “I’ll send you because you will communicate with everybody and get the right story, and settle it all down.”

3. Changes in Lifestyle

There were significant changes in participants’ lifestyles. Henrik “started to exercise six days a week”. Ben and Diane started meditation and Ailsa joined an amateur dramatics society “to get out and meet different people.”

In the work environment, Ben became less focused on his corporate job. Conversely Cait worked on a solitary, self-employed basis, but “in the wake of... the weekend, I started applying for jobs”. Elaine “incorporated a lot of ... Tony’s teachings... into workshops that we ran. I incorporated it into my training of my staff.”

The biggest change, however, happened to Fadi, whose personal situation before attending was “hand to mouth”. He achieved financial success after years of systematically applying Robbins’s teaching but was clear the catalyst was his first UPW, after which “I make [an] action plan.”

4. Transformation/Conversion

This theme addressed potential concerns about whether UPW is a cult, as well as exploring different interpretations of transformation. Ailsa acknowledged UPW’s similarities to cults, referencing the fervour generated and the business side focused on making money. However, she concluded the outcomes were good and for people’s benefit, saying that UPW was “giving them their lives back, ... [and i]n a way you can’t put a price on that, can you?”

Disapproving of her decision to return to UPW as a volunteer, Diane’s extended family said: “He has obviously brainwashed you in some way... you are part of a cult.” However, Diane was clear she was getting a lot from the experience and felt sorry for those who thought she was being exploited, especially when “people had definitely noticed that my confidence had grown.”

Elaine’s transformational moment came when she found she could sing, reducing her to tears, because her voice had been damaged following throat surgery some years before. She described the effect of this as “something that was broken inside of me ... was healed, helped, moved”.

Fadi was inveigled into attending UPW by a friend without knowing what it involved. Once he fully appreciated what Robbins was teaching, he applied the lessons assiduously, adding, “And the transformation came; it was me who decided to transform... but he who helped me to transform my life”.

Henrik was also clear what he thought: “The meaning is very simple. It’s a life changing experience and it’s a transformational experience, definitely.” He had heard people suggest it was a cult but disagreed. He saw Robbins more like a rock star, with “a huge machine creating the show”. Elaine also experienced comments about being brainwashed and having wasted her money but responded by saying, “No, I’m not brainwashed. I’m actually waking up. I’ve been asleep all my life.”

Some participants began to develop a consciousness of connection, with Diane having “a sense of me being part of everything around me... when I didn’t have that connection before.” Gabby also came away feeling “that we are all connected.”

5. Changes in Relationships

There were changes too in relationships. Ben, Henrik, Gabby and Fadi were not in intimate relationships, but there were effects on colleagues and friends. Ailsa’s relationship with her husband became “a lot less prickly”. Diane felt “it had a really positive effect on my personal relationship, and my relationship with family, my relationship with children.” For Elaine too, there was less conflict with her husband over money. She said, “I think it’s because I’ve changed my relationship with finance and he was quite happy with that.”

Cait, however, was in a casual relationship at the time of UPW. Her partner just shrugged his shoulders, saying, “I’ve never heard of Anthony Robbins. I don’t know what you’re talking about.” This highlighted their differences, and she ended the relationship within a few months of attending.

6. Permanency of Change

The changes experienced were not always instant. For Ailsa, “it was more subtle than dramatic.” Ben did not feel “the complete hallelujah of transformation at the first UPW.” While both identified they were looking for change, they were also ambivalent. Ben wondered if it might be “a whack job” but on the other hand, “the potential payoff could be quite significant for me personally.”

Participants did not see UPW as a panacea, but now when things became difficult, they felt more equipped to cope. More than a decade after her initial UPW, Ailsa was still feeling the benefits, saying: “Well, it’s lasted this long, I don’t think it’s going to go away now.” Ben was more resilient and able to tolerate uncertainty and going back “would be crackers really.” Cait simply said, “It’s me now.” No-one could envisage returning to their pre-UPW state.

7. Fear versus Anticipation

There was a tension between the genuine fear evoked by aspects of the seminar and the anticipation and excitement generated. Prior to attending, Ailsa had never heard of Robbins and did not know what to expect. When she realised there was a firewalk, she “was absolutely petrified”, and shocked by the level of noise and people jumping up and down. Along with Diane, Cait and Gabby, Elaine was “absolutely overwhelmed” by the huge queues and the long waiting time. Gabby described this as “like cattle waiting to get in”, and Cait as “going into this corral.” Once the doors eventually opened, Diane said, “it was a stampede,” and she found herself running to get a seat, amidst the support crew high fiving, the heightened level of excitement and the loud music.

Ben, on the other hand, was more pragmatic – either he immersed himself or accepted he had wasted a lot of money. Partly for this reason, he said that, although you were not compelled to engage, “you’d feel a bit of a lemon if you didn’t.”

8. Loss versus Gain

In terms of coverage, this theme was much smaller than the others. However, in relation to the effect on some participants, it was nevertheless significant, reflecting both what people felt they had lost as a result of attending, as well as major regrets. It was the only other theme present in the transcripts of all eight participants.

Ailsa regretted losing the bravery and fearlessness she had felt when young, and somehow “became very dull”. In attending UPW, however, she said, “I just felt that I’d regained great chunks of my life, you know.”

Cait thoroughly enjoyed UPW, feeling “enormous euphoria” which she believed others felt as well. However, it put a distance between her and the people around her, especially when she adopted a healthier diet, including green smoothies, which her colleagues found odd. She said: “It was like, depressing, because it was quite scary.”

Asked if there had been drawbacks to attending, Gabby said, “No. In my personal experience, no,” and Henrik: “No, not for me.” Ben, Diane, Elaine also made similar comments. Whatever difficulties they faced, UPW was purely a positive experience.

Fadi encountered resistance from his peer group, who mocked him for attending, thinking he was being influenced by a guru trying to make money out of him. He was saddened at losing these friendships, but could no longer associate with people who did not support his growth, saying: “It’s a kind of drawback that those were my near people, and I don’t connect with them anymore.”

Discussion

From the findings it is evident that participants did consider they had experienced transformation as a result of attending UPW. Bankston et al. (1981) noted that conversion involves “a reorganization of self about a new core identity” (p. 282). Instead of adopting a victim mentality, believing his poor upbringing had been a drawback in his life, following UPW, Fadi now viewed it as a gift. In considering her changed sense of self, Diane realised she was allowed to dream. Elaine adopted the identity of a firewalker, who could achieve anything. This is what Greil and Rudy (1983) referred to as “a radical transformation of personal identity” (p. 7).

The intense experiences created by UPW, and the infectious, thrilling and frightening nature of the emotion generated, were reminiscent of the ‘revivalist’ type of conversion outlined by Kilbourne and Richardson (1989), who found such group activities could cause “an individual to go through the outward movements of a fundamentalist or evangelical conversion” (p. 7) and change their behaviour and attitudes. All the interviewees described such changes with Gabby feeling a sense of connection and Diane being part of everything around her. UPW is not, however, a religious experience so comparisons here are limited.

While the accounts did describe peak experiences as defined by Maslow (1964), which “give meaning to life itself” (p. 68), these changes, unlike peak experiences, continued over time. Aspects of participants’ experiences also involved flow states (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008), during which people became so absorbed that nothing else mattered. Although Henrik was initially repulsed by the high levels of emotion, he was surprised to find himself swept up by the excitement. This sense of flow was recognisable in both the functioning and the effect of the workshop, contributing to the experience of transformation.

Quantum change, as described by Miller and C’de Baca (2001) was characterised by vividness, surprise, benevolence and permanence. These changes are similar, but the transformations described by the UPW experiences were contrived through the engineering of the workshop programme and were not spontaneous as described by Miller and C’de Baca’s research. Most people did not know what to expect at UPW. Ailsa had not heard of Robbins beforehand and neither she nor Diane were aware of what they were going to be doing.

Also, unlike quantum change, these changes did not necessarily happen suddenly. For both Ailsa and Ben, the changes were gradual and subtle; for Fadi, it was the dedicated application of the material that brought him success. A follow up study by C’de Baca and Wilbourne (2004) revealed that the dramatic changes described by participants in the original research had endured since interview and often twenty years after the initial experience, with none of the interviewees returning to previous behavioural patterns. This was similar to the UPW experiences.

Although there were similarities with all these methodologies, such types of belief change and meaning-making are also common to a wide variety of other groups. Petrunik (1972), for

example, studied conversion to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), defining it as “the acceptance of and commitment to another world view or meaning system” (p. 34) as it required the member to reassess their previous beliefs and behaviour.

The emotional atmosphere of UPW did evoke notions of ‘conversion’ and ‘hysteria’ and raised concerns from some family members about cult membership. The possibility that Robbins was only interested in money or was the head of some kind of cult made exploring cults important, especially as it was aimed at examining potential criticisms of Robbins’s methods.

In the literature, however, the arguments are complex and nuanced, with evidence that while these sects and groups were not to everyone’s tastes, there were both positive and diverse reasons why people joined them. Galanter’s (1999) studies highlighted the positive aspects of ‘cult’ membership, including belonging, group cohesiveness and shared beliefs, which were important factors in cults, with many adherents becoming happier as a result of membership.

Generally, the popular notion of cult converts as involuntarily controlled has been widely discredited (Barker, 2011; Bromley & Shupe, 1986; Richardson, 2003; Snow & Machalek, 1984). Certainly, there are leaders who abuse power, such as Jim Jones, David Koresh and topically at the time of the research, the Maoist cult leader, Balakrishnan, but equally there are movements like AA that are positive, while often utilising similar methods. There are emotional and psychological reasons for membership, as opposed to the crude brainwashing concept. In fact, according to Maslow (1964) revelations of individual seers are at the heart of every religion which over time become codified into doctrines and practices.

Whatever participants’ families and friends thought about their involvement in UPW, this clearly had no resonance for the participants themselves, who unanimously felt transformed and, in some way, released by their experiences. Elaine received comments about being brainwashed, but rejected these, experiencing UPW as a wakeup call. Henrik disagreed it was a cult, describing it as more like a rock concert. Fadi broke off friendships with peers who thought he was being influenced adversely, rather than deny the positives of his change process.

It took Fadi a while to understand what the event was all about, and Ailsa, Diane and Gabby were overawed by its size, intensity and overwhelming nature. However, while Cait and Elaine were also frustrated by the long delays and waiting times, they both recognised this as a deliberate strategy to increase the sense of anticipation, contributing to the event’s excitement and high energy. Clearly this was one strategic part of how the effects of UPW are generated and would in itself constitute potential for academic study.

Limitations and Further Research

The study represented one small-scale phenomenological exploration of eight participants, who self-identified as experiencing some type of transformation as a result of attending one or more UPW events. They were therefore positively inclined towards Robbins. Questions were asked to ascertain their attendance at other types of workshops and possible economic

contributions to assess their potential dependency on personal development programmes, but these were not found to be significant.

Some interviewees returned to attend the workshops as participants at least once and five had worked as crew during an event, which might also indicate a favourable bias. This would suggest some limitations in the research's scope, although the aim of the present study was not to evaluate Robbins's ideas or the efficacy of his methods.

The lack of research into the personal development industry noted by Grant (2001), as well as the small number of studies on Robbins, would suggest further research into this area would be fruitful, especially given the strong effects experienced by the participants in this study. It represents a potentially rich field of transpersonal study, with the aim of understanding the relevance to human meaning-making.

Conclusion

The study showed that the experience of attending UPW had a transformational effect on the eight interviewees' affect and behaviour, which endured over time. Even where there was some relapse, all expressed a commitment to continuing the development that had started at UPW. For them, it was not a transient experience. Although concepts such as 'peak experiences', 'flow', 'quantum change' and 'conversion' contributed to understanding participants' experiences of transformation, some aspects of UPW were not covered. For this and the other reasons outlined above, this presents an opportunity for further research into personal development workshops and the work of Robbins.

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