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Character Education for Adults: A Phenomenological Overview of Future Social Realities

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Abstract:

While character education has focused on children and adolescents, adults also face complex moral challenges. This study aims to understand how adults shape and strengthen their character amidst social, technological and value changes. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, data was collected through in-depth interviews with 12 adult participants from various professions, and analysed using Moustakas' (1994) stages. The results showed that character in adults is a dynamic process influenced by critical reflection on life experiences, as well as adaptation to changing social contexts. The social environment and community proved to be an important space for authentic value learning, providing dialog, social practice, and spiritual reinforcement. Despite facing dissonance between personal values and social norms, participants showed hope for character transformation through open dialog and community support. This research concludes that adult character education needs to be reflective, participatory and community-based, and offers a model of character learning that is relevant for adult individuals as adaptive and critical moral agents in modern society.

Keywords: character education, adult education, phenomenology, social reality, future

Introduction

In educational discourse, character education has been mostly focused on children and adolescents, because it can shape the character of students who have social care, friendship and curiosity (Khasanah et al., 2025). This is based on the assumption that childhood and adolescence are crucial phases in the formation of individual moral and ethical values (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006). Character education is very important, especially in the age of character crisis among students (Surawan et al., 2022), because basic values such as integrity, responsibility, and empathy are increasingly eroded by permissive social and digital dynamics. Formal and non-formal curricula often place character as part of primary and secondary education. However, this approach leaves a big gap in understanding that character formation and development does not stop at a

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young age, but is a dynamic process that continues throughout life. Character is not static, but continues to evolve as life experiences, social challenges, and personal transformations change (McAdams & Olson, 2010). In this context, adults are not only passive subjects in maintaining the character that has been formed since youth, but also active agents in reconstructing their moral values in response to the complex dynamics of life (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009; Maderas, 2024). This suggests that character education should not stop at the initial formal education level, but should continue and be strengthened through lifelong learning mechanisms (Burns, 2020; Zheng et al., 2025).

Contemporary social realities show that mature individuals are at the forefront of dealing with the ethical and moral complexities generated by changing times. Phenomena such as the globalization of values leads to the confluence of different cultures which can be enriching, but also has the potential to cause value disorientation (Al Dwakat et al., 2023). Technological developments, especially the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and the digitization of everyday life, are changing patterns of human interaction, expanding the public sphere, and presenting new ethical dilemmas such as privacy, algorithmic justice, and digital disinformation (Costa, 2023; Sanchez et al., 2025). At the same time, the climate crisis has given rise to a collective moral responsibility towards future generations, which demands the emergence of leadership characters with vision and integrity. The crisis in public leadership-both in the political, economic and religious spheres-is clear evidence that character building cannot be left entirely to childhood. Many adult leaders experience integrity crises, ethical lapses, or lose their moral compass in decision-making. This indicates that character values are not final and fixed, but rather highly vulnerable to external and internal pressures experienced by adults (Pinxten et al., 2023). Therefore, it is important to realize that character education in adults is not just a reinforcement of old values, but also a reflective effort to form new characters that are in accordance with the challenges of the times (Lickona, 1992; Watts et al., 2021).

In this context, there is an urgent need to reassess the character education paradigm that is limited to early childhood, and explore character learning models that are relevant and meaningful for adults (Tohri et al., 2022). These models need to be contextual, flexible and dialogic - able to adapt to the unique experiences of individuals and their social environments. This calls for a transformative approach to education that does not just teach values, but invites adults to experience, reflect and internalize values through real-life practices (Liu, 2020). Furthermore, it is also important to create social ecosystems that support adult character learning-both through formal institutions (such as leadership training, professional development, and higher education), as well as informal forums such as social communities, spiritual groups, work environments, and digital spaces. In such ecosystems, character becomes not just a normative ideal, but part of a collective practice that is reinforced through interaction, dialogue and example (Ledwith & Springett, 2022). Thus, character education for adults is a strategic and fundamental effort to create a future society that is not only intellectually intelligent, but also morally mature. Amidst the uncertainties of an ever-changing world, the sustainability of social ethics depends heavily on adult individuals with strong, reflective and responsible characters (Li et al., 2023). This research comes as a theoretical and practical contribution in building a new awareness that character is an inevitable domain of lifelong learning.

This research offers novelty in the study of character education by shifting the

focus from young people to adults through a phenomenological approach. The uniqueness of this approach lies in examining the subjective experiences of adults in interpreting the formation and strengthening of their character in the midst of the rapidly changing dynamics of social life. While most character education studies emphasize normative, instructional, or psychometric approaches, this research places existential experience as the main source of understanding the character formation process (Dajun & Jingjin, 2025). The main attraction of this research lies in its ability to uncover character learning processes that occur informally, contextually, and reflectively in the daily lives of adults. Through a phenomenological approach, this research explores personal narratives that illustrate how values such as integrity, responsibility, empathy, and moral courage are not only taught, but lived and tested in a variety of real situations - in the work environment, family, community, and in dealing with personal crises. The urgency of this research cannot be overlooked, given the current social conditions that indicate an erosion of values among adults, even among power holders and policy makers. Without an awareness of the importance of lifelong character education, society risks being trapped in a crisis of social trust, degradation of public ethics, and loss of solidarity. Therefore, this research is important as a first step in formulating a theoretical foundation and practice of character education for adults that is more contextual, critical and transformative.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with phenomenological methods to explore the meaning of adult individuals' subjective experiences in character formation and strengthening in contemporary social life (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). The phenomenological approach was chosen because it is able to understand the essence of experience deeply and reflectively, which cannot be reached through quantitative or descriptive methods. The focus of the study was on how character develops dynamically across the lifespan, particularly in adulthood, which faces complex moral and social challenges. Twelve adult participants aged 30-55 from various professional backgrounds-teachers, entrepreneurs, social activists, and civil servants-were purposively selected based on a minimum of five years of work and social experience and their willingness to share personal experiences related to values and character. Data were collected through 60–90-minute semi-structured interviews, which were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis (Cossart et al., 2022). The interview atmosphere was made conducive for participants to feel comfortable revealing their deepest reflections.

The data analysis process was carried out by following the phenomenological stages developed by Moustakas (1994), which emphasized the importance of understanding the essential meaning of participants' experiences (Leigh-Osroosh, 2021). The first stage is epoche, which is a temporary suspension of the researcher's assumptions and subjective views in order to enter the world of pure participant experience. After that, horizontalization is carried out, where every statement that is considered meaningful is treated equally without any being considered more important than the others. Next, the statements were classified into clusters of meanings that formed essential themes (Lim, 2025). From this, the researcher developed textural descriptions (what was experienced) and structural descriptions (how the experience occurred), which were then synthesized into a comprehensive understanding of the

phenomenon of character in adult life. To maintain the validity of the findings, this study applied the strategies of source triangulation and member checking. Triangulation is done by comparing the experiences of participants from different backgrounds, while member checking is used to ensure that the researcher's interpretation matches the meaning intended by the participants (Natow, 2020). The entire analysis process was systematically recorded in the form of an audit trail to ensure transparency and traceability of data.

Results

Experience of Value Shifts

Most participants reported experiencing a shift in values in line with rapid social and technological developments. This change is not only adaptive, but also requires deep reflection on how old values are adapted to the demands of the times. One participant, a 42-year-old teacher, said,

> "I used to believe that information should be held by the teacher as the main source. But now, with the internet and social media, students can access many things on their own. I have to learn not to judge immediately, but guide them to be critical and selective in receiving information." (Interview with Mr. Adi on March 15, 2025)

This statement indicates a value shift from authoritative attitudes to more democratic openness and facilitation of learning. Another participant who is an entrepreneur also highlighted the value conflict between the demands of professionalism and family commitments. She said,

> "The pressure of work is getting higher, sometimes I have to work overtime or keep traveling. I used to prioritize family time, but now I feel like I have to balance the two, which is sometimes difficult. It makes me question my priorities and values." (Interview with Mr. Iwan on March 10, 2025)

This value shift illustrates the dynamic tension between traditional family values and modern values of work productivity that often clash in adult life (Raitis et al., 2021). Another emerging phenomenon is how technology demands an increase in critical and ethical attitudes in social interactions. A 35-year-old social activist stated,

> "Social media gives us a voice, but also a lot of information that is not clear. I must always remember not to spread hoaxes, and invite friends to think critically before sharing something." (Interview with Mr. Said on March 11, 2025).

This reflects the values of integrity and social responsibility that develop along with changes in the medium of communication. So, it can be concluded based on the interview data above underlines that value shifts in adult individuals are not just passive reactions to external changes, but are reflective processes that involve adjusting and reconstructing the meaning of moral values. The shift from information authoritarianism to openness and critical learning, as well as the conflict between family values and professional demands, indicates that adult character is dynamic and contextual (Bar-Tal et al., 2021). The context of globalization and digitalization presents new challenges that not only demand technical adaptability, but also an increasingly complex ethical depth (Afif & Ningrum, 2024). Husserl's phenomenological approach emphasizes the importance of *epoche* or suspension of prejudice, so that individuals can dive into life experiences purely and consciously (Husserl, 2014; Wertz, 2023). In this case, technology is not only seen as a tool, but also as a phenomenon that affects the

awareness and meaning of social and personal responsibility. Character education for adults should thus accommodate a reflective dimension that allows individuals to suspend initial judgments and review values critically and consciously, so that the internalized values are not merely normative, but also applicable and authentic in the real context of their lives.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of value conflicts emerging between professional and family life illustrates the complex and interrelated lifeworld of individuals. Adult character education needs to facilitate the establishment of an ongoing balance of values through a reflective process that places subjective experience at the centre of understanding (Jordan, 2023). This approach supports the development of holistic character learning models, which not only emphasize the reinforcement of classical values, but also prepare individuals to consciously navigate complex ethical and personal dilemmas, with full awareness of their social and emotional context (Purwaningsih & Ridha, 2024). Thus, this experience of value change strengthens the argument that adult character education is a lifelong learning process that must be responded to with a flexible, reflective and contextualized approach to education. Husserl's phenomenological approach emphasizes the importance of entering the world of individual subjective experience with the *epoché* to enable deep and meaningful character learning (Raphael, 2023).

This will enable adult individuals to become adaptive and responsible moral agents in a changing society, because they do not just passively internalize values, but actively construct and reconstruct the meaning of values in their life experiences. That is because in today's complex modern life, character education becomes very important to form individuals who have social responsibility and strong moral values (Lutfi, Hilmy, et al., 2025). In addition, in modern challenging life, adults face various problems, such as social pressure, family responsibilities, and the demands of the workforce. If not equipped with good character education, they may experience a moral crisis, lose their identity, and have difficulty making wise decisions (Lutfi & Pelu, 2025).

Character as a Process, not a Product

Participants consistently emphasized that character is not something that is completed in youth, but an ongoing process that develops throughout life. A crucial experience they shared was how in the face of a crisis situation or major change, they were forced to reflect on their values and even reformulate their moral identity. For example, Mr. Arman (48 years old), a civil servant, in an interview conducted on 10 March 2025 stated,

"When I faced the problem of corruption in the work environment, I realized that the value of honesty that I learned when I was young was tested again. I had to choose an attitude that suited the current context, and it made me see character as something that is always evolving, not static."

Meanwhile, Mrs. Sari (35 years old), a social activist, in an interview on March 15, 2025 said,

> "My experience in the field, which often encounters social injustice, makes me have to constantly review my moral commitments. Sometimes the idealistic values I once held must be adjusted to reality in order to contribute effectively."

This expression shows that adult character building involves a process of internal dialog and adaptation of values to concrete situations. The participants' reflections

confirm that character is not a final product that is finished being formed in childhood, but a dynamic journey that continues to be shaped and reconstructed through life experiences, social changes, and moral challenges faced throughout life. Husserl's social phenomenology approach emphasizes the lifeworld as the horizon of experience that becomes the source of meaning. In this context, character develops as a manifestation of how individuals live and give meaning to the various social experiences they experience directly (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). The process of adult character formation therefore involves tensions and complex internal dialogue between old values and new demands, which requires deep self-awareness (*epoché*) as well as the courage to overhaul and renew those values (Hegwood, 2023).

This finding strengthens the character education paradigm that places character as a lifelong learning process that is always open to adjustment and renewal. Husserl's social phenomenology perspective confirms that individual life experiences cannot be separated from their social context-both work pressures, technological advances, and social crises-which become catalysts in character formation and strengthening (Husserl, 2014). Therefore, the meaning of character must be understood as a construct that is constantly experienced and reformulated in daily social interactions, not just as a collection of rigid normative values. Adult character education, therefore, needs to accommodate reflective processes that allow individuals to enter their own lifeworld and reformulate values based on authentic and contextualized experiences.

Furthermore, the ability to reflect and reformulate values in new contexts illustrates character as an adaptive and critical capacity. Husserl's phenomenological approach that emphasizes the importance of intentionality - a consciousness that is always directed at the object of meaning - shows that individuals actively build and reconstruct their moral identity through a dialogical process with the surrounding world. Therefore, adult character education models should be dialogic and reflective, providing safe spaces for individuals to express doubts, evaluate values, and develop an authentic moral identity that is responsive to changing realities (Lickona, 1992). Thus, character education for adults should be designed not as a passive process of value transmission, but rather as a facilitation of continuous learning that is firmly rooted in real and relevant experiences in their lifeworld. This approach will empower adults to become resilient, adaptive and critical moral agents, who are able to face and give meaning to the complexity of the modern world with reflective awareness and high ethical responsibility. In addition, according to research by Khodijah & Surawan (2025), it is known that character education based on local wisdom can be an effective means of preparing young people to face the challenges of the digitalization era well.

The Role of Social Environment and Community

Social environment and community play a central role in character education for adults. Most participants stated that active involvement in social communities, group discussions or spiritual activities is a very authentic and meaningful vehicle for character learning. For example, Mrs. Rina (44 years old), a teacher and education community activist, said in an interview on March 18, 2025:

> "Through my community, especially regular discussions and joint social activities, I learned how to be patient, empathetic and responsible. The direct experience of interacting with various people opens my mind and reinforces the values that I have always held."

In addition, Mr. Joko (39 years old), an entrepreneur who is also active in the small business community, explained in an interview on March 20, 2025 that

> "The community provides a space for me to learn the values of honesty and solidarity in practice, not just theory. We support each other and give feedback, so my character is honed in facing business and social challenges."

This opinion emphasizes the importance of the social environment as a place for character learning that takes place interactively and contextually. The community is also a medium for strengthening spiritual values, which some participants consider to be the main source of moral strength. For example, Ms. Maya (50 years old), a civil servant and member of a religious community, stated,

> "In my spiritual community, there are lessons on the values of patience and sincerity that really help me overcome work stress and family problems. These values are not just doctrines, but life experiences that I have shared with others."

This interview data confirms that character education for adults cannot be separated from the central role of the social environment and community. The community provides a space for dialogue and reflection that allows the practice of moral values to take place in a real and authentic way in everyday life. Edmund Husserl's social phenomenology perspective highlights the lifeworld-the directly experienced world of social life-as the main context for meaning formation (Husserl, 2014; Maulana & Budiyono, 2024). In the community lifeworld, individuals do not just passively receive values, but actively interpret and live these values through meaningful social interactions. This is in line with social learning theory which emphasizes that character is formed and influenced through observation, imitation, and participation in social networks. Furthermore, involvement in the community allows individuals to experience value learning contextually and continuously, which enriches the character building process with social and emotional dimensions (Abiddin & Saroni, 2024). Social interaction in the community becomes a medium that strengthens the internalization of values through shared experiences, critical discussions, and real practices relevant to life challenges (Tripon, 2024). This approach not only expands the understanding of character as an individual construction, but also as a social phenomenon that develops through interpersonal relationships and community attachment. In addition, the community also plays an important role in shaping a person's character and morals (Lutfi et al., 2025)

In addition, the strengthening of spiritual values that occurs within the community adds a holistic dimension to adult character education, incorporating moral, social and emotional aspects in an integrated manner (Pokhrel et al., 2025). This spiritual dimension provides space for deep reflection on the meaning of life and moral purpose, which is often a source of strength and resilience in the face of ethical dilemmas. Therefore, the community acts as a character-building agent that not only provides norms and rules, but also supports the development of reflective consciousness and authentic moral identity. Thus, character education models for adults should integrate community activities as an integral part of the curriculum or character development program. This approach not only increases the effectiveness of learning through concrete and relevant social experiences, but also builds social networks that support sustainable character growth. The implementation of community-based character education will empower adult individuals to become adaptive, critical, and empowered moral agents, able to face the complexities of the

modern world with strong social support and authentically internalized values (Erickson & Anderson, 2023).

Challenges and Expectations

The participants revealed that the biggest challenge in the process of adult character building is the dissonance or tension between their personal values and social norms that are considered permissive or even contrary to their moral principles. For example, Mr. Budi (45 years old), an entrepreneur, in an interview dated March 22, 2025 stated,

> "Sometimes I feel that my values of honesty and integrity are difficult to implement because the business environment tends to be pragmatic and permissive of unethical practices. This makes me often feel alienated and in a dilemma."

This statement illustrates how social pressure can lead to severe internal conflict for mature individuals in maintaining character. On the other hand, Ms. Lina (38 years old), a teacher, said in an interview on March 24, 2025,

“Although there are significant value differences between me and the social environment, I believe that through critical reflection and open dialogue, we can find a way to understand each other and make positive changes together.”

This hope shows optimism that character transformation remains possible through a learning process involving self-awareness and constructive communication. In addition, the experience of Pak Arif (50 years old), a civil servant interviewed on March 25, 2025, confirms the importance of social support in overcoming these challenges,

> "I feel that the existence of a supportive community really helps me stick to my values, even though the wider environment sometimes makes me doubt. Discussions and reflections with community friends give me moral strength."

This indicates that social networks and community are key factors in dealing with value dissonance. The findings of this study highlight that character building in adult individuals cannot be separated from complex social dynamics, especially when there is a conflict of values between individuals and their social environment. Edmund Husserl's social phenomenology perspective places the lifeworld as a space of subjective experience that is a source of meaning and self-understanding (Husserl, 2014; Maulana & Budiyono, 2024). In this context, the value dissonance experienced by individuals is a very real and meaningful life experience, which triggers deep reflection and enables critical learning in the character construction process. Husserl emphasized the importance of *epoché*-the suspension of prejudices and assumptions-as the first step to dive into the meaning of experience without bias, so that individuals are able to manage value tensions consciously and authentically (Daniels, 2020). The participants' expectations confirmed that adult character education needs to provide a space for dialogue and critical reflection that allows individuals to openly and constructively dialogue value conflicts. This approach is in line with the principles of social phenomenology that place intersubjectivity as the foundation of social and moral meaning formation. Through meaningful social interaction in the dialogue, character transformation not only occurs internally, but also through a dynamic social process, where values are reconstructed and re-internalized in a context that is more relevant to everyday life.

Thus, the challenges and expectations that emerged from this research

emphasize the need for an inclusive, supportive and adaptive model of character education. This model should be able to bridge the tension between personal values and social norms, and strengthen the moral capacity of individual adults to survive and thrive in a changing society. Character education, from the perspective of social phenomenology, is not just a transfer of values, but a lifelong learning process rooted in subjective and intersubjective experiences in the lifeworld (Wertz, 2023).

Through Husserl's social phenomenology approach, adult character education can empower individuals to become reflective and adaptive moral agents, who not only maintain personal integrity but also actively contribute to social transformation (Anderson, 2024). In this way, character education is able to answer the complexity of the modern world full of dynamic ethical and social challenges. systematic efforts to instil moral and ethical values in students, especially in the digital era, moral development will become more complex due to the influence of the internet and social media (Putri et al., 2024). In addition, in Lutfi & Anwar (2025) the need for innovation in learning methods that not only emphasize the transfer of religious knowledge, but also develop 21st century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication (4C).

Conclusion

This research reveals that character education for adults is a dynamic and ongoing process that cannot be understood solely as character building during childhood or adolescence. Through a phenomenological approach, it is found that adult individuals experience changes in values that are influenced by social complexity, technology, and the ever-evolving pressures of life. Character is not seen as a final product, but rather as the result of critical reflection and value adaptation in the face of diverse situations and moral challenges throughout life. In addition, the social environment and community play a very important role in the process of adult character learning. Social interactions in the community provide space for authentic value learning through dialogue, social activities, and spiritual strengthening. This shows that adult character education needs to involve social aspects that are contextual and sustainable so that character building can take place effectively and meaningfully.

On the other hand, the research also highlighted the significant challenge of dissonance between personal values and often permissive or conflicting social norms. Nonetheless, participants showed strong hope that through critical reflection, open dialogue and community support, character transformation remains possible and can even be strengthened. Therefore, adult character education should integrate dialogic and supportive approaches that can bridge value conflicts and strengthen individuals' moral capacity in the face of complex social dynamics. Overall, this research makes a novel contribution by extending the paradigm of character education to the adult realm, emphasizing the importance of understanding character as an ever-evolving process that is strongly influenced by social context. The proposed character education model should be oriented towards reflective, participatory and community-based learning in order to support adult individuals to become adaptive, critical and empowered moral agents in facing future social realities.

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