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The Life Reflection and Consequences of Older Adults' Relationships: An Empirical Study

Sylvia Lindinger-Sternart and John Laux

Fifty-eight Austrian adults, ages 65 to 99 years, participated in semistructured life reflections regarding their relationships with life partners, children, relatives, and friends. This study identified the consequences of the reflections, the implementation of the consequences, and the degree to which participants were satisfied with the life changes they made.

Keywords: life reflection, older adults, relationships

Humans tell stories to understand life. Traditionally, older adults who remembered the past helped younger generations learn from their experiences. The tradition of storytelling provided interaction between generations and enhanced the reputation and status of older adults within the community. However, changes in society, politics, and values systems have reduced the importance of the storytelling practices of older individuals. One intervention that could be useful in helping older adults is the use of reminiscence, life review, and life reflection.

Erikson's (1950) stages of psychological development provided a platform upon which life reflection research could be built to foster life reviews. Butler (1963) argued that a life review is an elemental part of the normal aging process. Butler described the process of looking back at life as a progressive return to awareness of past events with particular focus on revisiting unresolved conflicts. The successful review of these conflicts may serve as a reintegration vehicle, which can bring new meaning to an older person's life and assist in acceptance of end-of-life matters (Haight & Webster, 1995). Life reviews and reminiscence have been used over the past few decades among diverse populations to enhance older persons' satisfaction with life and their quality of life (Bohlmeijer, Smit, & Cuijpers, 2003).

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It is important to delineate the development and structure of reminiscence and life review. Reminiscence describes the process of thinking and remembering different experiences or periods in the past; there is no intention, however, to look back over the whole life span. Rather, the reminiscence may focus on only one specific event, for example, one's marriage or the birth of a child. Reminiscence is a comprehensive process that can be categorized into differing subtypes: simple, mastery, transmissive, negative, and integrative. The integrative subtype can be further reduced to a life review (Rybarczyk & Bellg, 1997). A life review is a structured look at the past over one's entire life span. The process of reminiscing is a common, normal, and everyday part of life (Gibson, 2004). For the purposes of this article, *reminiscence* is defined as an active process to remember several experiences and life events from the past. Reminiscence is limited to the simple act of remembering and does not include any type of evaluative component. Butler (1963) declared that reminiscence is "the act of process of recalling the past" (p. 66).

A life review, in contrast, is a "retrospective survey of existence, a critical study of life, or a second look at one's life" (Burnside & Haight, 1992, p. 856). A life review is a formal and structured intervention through which memories across one's life are recalled for the explicit goal of examining, evaluating, and valuing them (Gibson, 2004). In this regard, a life review is a particular type of reminiscence. Used as a therapeutic tool, a life review addresses issues regarding unresolved conflicts, guilt, and resentments that are difficult to resolve independently. The process of conducting a life review can affect one's present life by providing stabilization and integration through a new assessment of past life events (Heuft, Kruse, & Radebold, 2000).

Butler (1963) proposed that successful life reviews provide individuals with the ability to accept the past, to live more fully in the present, and to be less anxious about death. This line of thinking was echoed by Wong and Watt's (1991) findings of a positive relationship between life reviews about past coping experiences and successful aging. Furthermore, Watt and Cappeliez (2000) demonstrated significant enhancements in coping, adaptation, and emotional feelings due to group life review interventions. Therefore, looking back on past experiences can inform current attempts to face challenges and provide a basis for hope that the future will be brighter because of enhanced feelings of control, agency, and competence (Rybarczyk & Bellg, 1997). The life review process is structured and includes the reflection of one's whole life from childhood to adulthood, involves an evaluative component, and includes working through difficult life events and memories.

Staudinger (2001) introduced the term *life reflection* to differentiate the concepts of life review and reminiscence on the basis of a social-cognitive process analysis across the life span. Staudinger argued that the process of life review not only includes cognitive mechanics or fluid intelligence but also depends on prior knowledge structures, social context, and emotional and motivational elements.

All these factors are parts of social cognition. Staudinger postulated that life reflection begins in adolescence and occurs at all ages to contribute to self-insights and a self-critical perspective. Life reflection can be described as a social-cognitive analysis of life events. In other words, a person who is accomplishing a life reflection does not necessarily look at the whole life but rather concentrates on various spheres of life, such as a partnership or children. It is important to note that life reflection includes an evaluative component of particular life events, life spheres, or life periods. In summary, reminiscence is the process of remembering; life review is looking back at the whole life with an evaluating factor; and life reflection describes looking at various life spheres, life periods, or life events with an evaluative component and the inclusion of social components.

The following example by Staudinger (2001) may be useful to demonstrate the difference between reminiscence and life reflection:

I just remembered last year's New Year's Eve party. We were about 25 people meeting at Italian Olive Restaurant. The food was delicious and we enjoyed dancing and telling jokes (reminiscence).

I just remembered last year's New Year's Eve party. We were about 25 people meeting at Italian Olive Restaurant. We enjoyed the delicious Italian food and danced. Why did I decide to go there? Didn't I want to do something else at first? Is it always my problem that I have a difficult time saying no? No question, I enjoyed the party but I had planned to do something else after celebrating with the same people for 5 years. Well actually, come to think of it, maybe it was not so much being unable to say no, but rather my fear and uneasiness about new settings that made me go back to Harry's (life reflection). (p. 150)

The current literature on life reflection and reminiscence as active processes of memory to remember various past life events, as well as life review as a structured reflection of the whole life span and future evaluation, is focused on guided accomplishments. The empirical literature on reminiscence is robust and provides evidence that reminiscence can decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety (Karimi et al., 2010), reduce the avoidance of thoughts of death (Alea, Vick, & Hyatt, 2010), reduce negative thoughts about the past and increase hopefulness about the future (Bohlmeijer, Westerhof, & Emmerik-de Jong, 2008), and be useful for the treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder (Böttche, Kuwert, & Knaevelsrud, 2012). Life reviews are productive for people with structural brain damage, such as the reduction of poststroke depression (de Man-van Ginkel, Gooskens, Schuurmans, Lindeman, & Hafsteinsdottir, 2010) and dementia (Ito, Meguro, Akanuma, Ishii, & Mori, 2007; Woods et al., 2009). It is important to note that the opportunity to take a second look at

one's life may cause the resurgence of unresolved conflicts, unfulfilled dreams, and difficult life events. Evidence suggests that for many who face current challenges, reflecting past experiences can enlighten the present situation and bring hope for the future.

The existing research is unclear about whether older adults naturally reflect about their past. Also, the consequences resulting from the process of looking back at and evaluating specific life events, life spheres, and life periods are unknown. In particular, there is a paucity of research with respect to self-guided life reflection. Therefore, the current study addressed this dearth of information among adults ages 65 and older. Specifically, this study focused on the frequencies, causes, and outcomes of life reflections that occur in various spheres of life.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 58 adults agreed to participate in this study. The majority of participants ($n = 39$, 67.2%) were women. The participants' mean age was 78.3 years (range = 65–99; median age = 79 years). Most ($n = 35$, 60.3%) were widowed. Ten (17.2%) participants reported that they were married, and 10 (17.2%) stated that they were divorced. Three (5.2%) were single and never married. Most (93.1%) participants, with the exception of four, were parents. Forty-seven (81.0%) participants resided in urban settings, with the remaining 11 (18.9%) living in rural settings. Twenty (34.5%) participants lived in a private home, 18 (31.0%) resided in an independent assisted-living environment, and 20 (34.5%) lived in a retirement community. Twenty (34.5%) participants completed primary school, 11 (18.9%) finished secondary school, 18 (31.0%) graduated from a vocational training program, seven (12.1%) had some general-education higher training, one (1.7%) did not complete primary school, and one (1.7%) reported education as "other."

Materials

Influenced by Erikson's (1950) theory of development over the life span, the life review work of Butler (1963) and Burnside and Haight (1992), and the life reflection work of Staudinger (2001), we developed a semistructured questionnaire to guide the life reflection interview process. Specifically, the interviewer (first author) asked participants to indicate whether or not they had conducted a life reflection in each of Sivaraman's (2003) following spheres of life: relationships, children, relatives, and friends/acquaintances. Participants who indicated that they had engaged in a life reflection in any of these areas were asked to identify the frequencies, catalyst, or cause of the life reflection; the reflection's outcome or results; whether or not the life reflection influenced any action on the participant's part; and the degree of satisfaction that was achieved from any implemented changes.

A demographic questionnaire was designed to solicit participants' age, gender, marital status, parental status, educational attainment, occupation, and place of residence. These data were collected to describe the sample under consideration.

Procedure

The procedures were guided by phenomenologically based qualitative research (Newman & Ridenour, 1998). This field-based study in Austria was conducted in different sections of Upper Austria and Vienna. The first author conducted structured interviews in the participants' residential settings, which were an assisted-living setting, personal residences, or retirement communities. Prospective participants were identified through a contact with residential staff nurses, who provided a list of persons whose health was sufficient to answer retrospective questions. The first author then wrote and sent letters of invitation to prospective participants in the assisted-living setting, as well as to residents of a retirement community and to older adults living in private residences. The letter informed prospective participants that the purpose of the study was to examine whether individuals look back at their life and to conduct life reflections in various spheres of life. Furthermore, recruited persons were informed that if they decided to participate, the first author would conduct an interview that would last about 1 hour. The first author explained what a life reflection was and then posed the open-ended questions through a topical-guided interview and carefully recorded the participants' responses. Specifically, participants were asked if they ever experienced a life reflection about their partnerships, child/children, relatives, and friends. Those who indicated that they had were further asked to express the genesis of their life reflections; the resulting actions, if any, from the reflections; and their degree of satisfaction resulting from any undertaken action. The data were collected in accordance with the legal requirements concerning confidentiality and data security as established by the University of Salzburg, Austria. Accumulated data were kept free of identifying names. Data were reviewed and analyzed to pinpoint key themes. Commonalities across participants were identified. These themes and commonalities are discussed in the Results section.

RESULTS

Participants were allowed to provide more than one life reflection per category. Therefore, the number of life reflections may exceed the total number of participants reported to have a life reflection in each respective area, and the total percentages reported may exceed 100.

Forty-eight (82.8%) participants reported that they had a life reflection about partnership. Of those, 43 had relationship life reflections when faced with a partner's death ($n = 22, 45.8\%$), at separation/divorce ($n = 8, 16.7\%$), and on the anniversary of a partner's death ($n = 13, 27.1\%$). The remaining

five (10.4%) participants' life reflections were about New Year's, marriage, loved one's disease, change of address, and personal birthday. Of those 48 participants who experienced a partnership life reflection, 37 (77.1%) felt motivated to action as a consequence of the reflection. Half of these decided to not engage in a future partnership, three (8.1%) decided to seek future partnership, three (8.1%) felt motivated to enhance their current partnership, and four (10.8%) decided to move to be with others. When asked about whether they carried out the action to which they were motivated by the reflection, 33 (89.2%) of the 37 participants who felt motivated to action stated that they completely implemented their decision, three (8.1%) extensively implemented the decision, and only one person (2.7%) did not implement the decision at all. Finally, when asked about their satisfaction regarding the outcome of their actions, 26 (70.3%) participants reported that they were completely satisfied, nine (24.3%) said that they were rather satisfied, and two (5.4%) said that they were rather not satisfied.

Most ($n = 54$, 93.1%) participants experienced a life reflection about children. Frequently reported causes ($n = 34$, 63%) of these reflections include when prompted by requests from their children, when their child or their children experienced personal troubles (e.g., divorce/separation), when the topic of family comes up in general discussion, and when the country or region was experiencing political insecurity. Other catalysts included death of a loved one ($n = 9$, 16.7%), personal health problems ($n = 7$, 12.9%), birthdays ($n = 4$, 7.4%), and loved one's serious illness ($n = 3$, 5.6%). Personal separation/divorce and change of living situation accounted for the final three cases (5.6%). Of those who experienced a life reflection about their children, 25 (46.3%) felt inspired to action as a consequence of the reflection. Goals resulting from these reflections included intensifying their relationship with their children ($n = 7$, 12.9%), resolving conflict with their children ($n = 5$, 9.3%), and distancing from children for self-protection ($n = 3$, 5.6%). Adoption was a stated goal of two (3.7%) participants. Two others (3.7%) stated that they wanted to take measures to ensure that they had no more children. The majority ($n = 17$, 68%) of the 25 participants who set new goals following life reflection about their children completely implemented their goals. The remaining reported implementation statuses of extensively ($n = 4$, 16%), rather less ($n = 2$, 8%), and not at all ($n = 2$, 8%). Correspondingly, most were either very ($n = 11$, 44%) or rather ($n = 10$, 40%) satisfied with the outcomes of their decisions regarding their children. Four (16%) were rather not satisfied.

Thirty-six (62.1%) participants conducted a life reflection about their relatives. The death of a relative was the most frequently reported reason for these reflections ($n = 16$, 44.4%). Fifteen (41.7%) reported that their reflection was stirred by either current conflicts with their relatives or recent and/or anticipated meetings with relatives. Additional causes of reflections were stimulated by birthdays ($n = 5$, 13.9%) and changes of living arrangements ($n = 2$, 5.6%).

Marriage, birth of a child, personal health problems, and separation/divorce were cited by one participant each (2.8%). Nineteen (52.7%) participants who had a life reflection about their family members felt moved to do something in response. Associated objectives included intensifying their relationship with their relatives ($n = 9$, 25%), creating protective distance between themselves and their relatives ($n = 6$, 16.7%), and moving residences ($n = 2$, 5.6%). The majority ($n = 12$, 63.2%) of the 19 participants who felt moved to do something fully implemented their relative-specific goals. The remaining reported implementation statuses of extensively ($n = 3$, 15.8%), rather less ($n = 1$, 5.3%), and not at all ($n = 3$, 15.8%). The majority of these were either very ($n = 12$, 63.2%) or rather ($n = 4$, 21.1%) satisfied with the outcomes of their decisions regarding their children. Three (15.8%) were rather not satisfied.

Finally, 36 (62.1%) participants conducted a life reflection about their friends. The death of a close person was among the most frequently reported reason for these reflections ($n = 9$, 25%). Eighteen (50%) reported that their reflection was motivated by either disappointment or let-downs by one's best friend or a desire to intensify and deepen their relationships with friends. Additional causes of reflections were stimulated by changes in housing arrangements ($n = 5$, 13.9%), personal health problems ($n = 3$, 8.3%), a loved one's serious disease ($n = 3$, 8.3%), separation/divorce ($n = 3$, 8.3%), and retirement ($n = 1$, 2.8%). Twenty-three (63.9%) participants who had a friendship life reflection felt moved to do something in response. Life reflection friendship-related goals included distancing themselves from their friends ($n = 11$, 30.6%), drawing closer to friends ($n = 5$, 13.9%), continuing current friendships ($n = 5$, 13.9%), and changing their living arrangements ($n = 1$, 2.8%). The majority ($n = 12$, 52.2%) of the 23 participants who felt moved to do something fully implemented their friendship-specific goals. The remaining reported implementation statuses of extensively ($n = 7$, 30.4%), rather less ($n = 2$, 8.7%), and not at all ($n = 1$, 4.3%). Most of these were either very ($n = 14$, 60.9%) or rather ($n = 4$, 17.4%) satisfied with the outcomes of their friendship-related decisions. Four (17.4%) were rather less satisfied, and one (4.3%) was not at all satisfied.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to reveal the natural process of relationship life reflections in older adults over the age of 65 years. This goal was accomplished through 58 individual in-home interviews with Austrians between the ages of 65 and 99. The results provide insight into the process of normal aging, particularly as it relates to the way this population views relationships with life partners, children, relatives, and personal friends. Additionally, the study examined whether the participants made any life-change commitments as a result of their life reflections, the degree to which they took any action as a result of their commitments, and the degree to which they were satisfied with the outcome of their actions.

This exploratory analysis indicates that the sample's most frequently experienced life reflections centered on relationships with children. The most frequently cited catalysts for these children-focused life reflections were problems with their children, when the child needed something from the parent, or when the child faced relationship problems such as divorce or separation. In general, these older adults concluded from their reflections that they wanted a closer and improved relationship with their children.

The findings support the conclusion that older adults mostly conduct life reflection about their partnership when their partner died, when they are separated by divorce, or on their wedding anniversary. It is interesting to note the different intended actions generated by participants' reflections about their partnerships. During the personal interviews, the first author observed in participants both sadness about the death of a spouse and also the enjoyment of living independently. Concordantly, ideas about building a new partnership might decrease as age increases (Wrosch & Heckhausen, 1999). Some participants made clear intentions to physically move closer to surviving loved ones, whereas others made firm commitments to remain single and relationship-free. Similarly, life reflections about relatives and friends were prompted by conflicts, death, and the desire for greater contact with family members and friends. More than a third of the participants conducted a life reflection about their relatives when a close person passed away. Similarly, 20% conducted a life reflection about friends when they lost a family member through death. More than 40% reported that their reflection about friends was motivated by either disappointment by one's best friend or a desire to intensify and deepen their relationships with friends. These results are consistent with Staudinger's (2001) theory, which suggests that life problems encourage individuals to look back on their lives. Staudinger pointed out that older adults use life reflection to integrate their experiences of the past into the present and to draw a life balance. In the current article, the participants' intended plan consequent of their life reflections about extended family and friends was to either work to improve their relationships or create psychological and protective distance between themselves and the object of their reflection.

Recommendations for Counselors

The current study provides implications for counseling older individuals. Even though older adults may engage in self-guided life reflections without the aid of professional help, counselors can assist them to deepen and expand the reflective process at all levels. Counselors who facilitate integrated life reflections in various spheres of relationships can help their older clients find areas of their lives in which to seek improvements. For instance, focusing on older individuals' relationships with children and relatives may be more beneficial than encouraging them to build new social networks. Unresolved conflicts with children and relatives are central themes for older adults. A counselor can assess and work with

older clients to clarify which relationships are beneficial and therefore should be preserved and enhanced and which are detrimental and should be pruned and protected against. Furthermore, counselors can help their older clients to develop relationship enhancement and attenuation skills. For example, for some clients, conflicts with children or siblings about money or property may have led to silence between them for years. Unspoken emotional injuries or insults between older adults and their relatives may be an important part of counseling sessions. A counselor can support older clients by enhancing their awareness about possible positive outcomes when resolving these conflicts and finding ways to repair detached relationships with their children and relatives. In other words, resolving relational conflicts may be an important goal for older adults when seeking counseling. Learning how to be assertive without hurting others can help older adults to avoid complete detachment from people whom they love and feel close to. Learning how to differentiate assumptions and facts may help older adults to deal with their relationships. In addition, the findings in this study provide support to encourage older adults to take positive actions after they reveal the essential problems they want to work on during counseling sessions. Finally, reflection on one's life can bring up unresolved and painful emotions. Counselors are well trained in helping people process and address their uncomfortable affective states.

Several methods for conducting reminiscence are present in the literature. For example, Burnside (1995) recommended the use of props, which she believed were particularly useful with individuals experiencing cognitive deficits. A prop is any item that elicits memory and evokes the recollection of forgotten events, persons, or environmental scenes once associated with earlier developmental stages (Rodriquez, 1990). Props can include reminiscing stimuli, visual aids, tangible reminders of the past, personal artifacts, antiques and other objects, memorabilia, music, and other media (Rodriquez, 1990).

The creation of a guided autobiography can help clients to develop life themes to explore past strengths and limitations (de Vries, Birren, & Deutchman, 1995). Haight, Coleman, and Lord (1995) used a 6-week structured life reflection to help older adults to accomplish ego integrity. The therapeutic work during this 6-week life reflection between the client and the counselor focuses on examining, considering, and reinterpreting significant life events with the goal of finding meaning and relevance from the client's history.

Recommendations for Further Study

The current research shows a broad description of a pattern of life reflection that can be used for future examinations. This article focused solely on older adults' life reflections about their relationships. Future researchers may wish to investigate older adults' life reflections about other important life topics, such as physical, mental, and emotional health; occupational history; hobbies; and leisure histories. Because the participants in this study were

predominantly women, it was impossible to determine if there were gender differences in life reflections.

The participants in this sample were raised in a period of post–World War II austerity punctuated by economic instability, limited educational opportunities, and fairly rigid gender roles. It would be useful to understand the ways, if any, that increased educational and occupational opportunities for women over the years have helped shape the way older adults reflect on the course of their lives. Another opportunity for future research may be to investigate correlations between life reflections and psychological constructs such as self-efficacy, self-insight, and acceptance. It should be noted that the data from this sample were collected from Austrian citizens. It would be interesting to know which ways, if any, the findings reported in this study are consistent across different cultures. Therefore, we recommend that the procedures in this study be replicated in other and differing cultures.

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