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Catalysts for Developing Productive Life Reviews: A Multiple Case Study

Keywords

older adults, life review

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Nancy L. Davis and Suzanne Degges-White

Considered a naturally occurring process common to older adults, the life review becomes a more productive process through facilitation and development and application of effective prompts. The experiences of 6 older adults who participated in a facilitated life review process and the manner in which individualized prompts were developed are described.

Older adults have been encouraged, for several decades, to “tell their stories” via an oral life review process in therapeutic settings. Butler (1963) conceptualized this process as a naturally occurring process of all older adults during which their older memories and reminiscences are brought to the present for conscious contemplation. By reviewing experiences and decisions, individuals are able to make sense of their life, come to terms with their choices, and reflect on life and assign meaning. Ideally, their review would also promote successful navigation of Erikson’s (1982) eighth psychosocial conflict: integrity versus despair. The life review, therefore, serves an integral role in helping older adults accept their own mortality as they face their impending death. Beyond therapy, the exercise of life review is a process useful for people of any age to solve problems, resolve issues, process forgiveness, promote change, embrace bequeathment of values and ethics, and move toward self-actualization.

Historically, therapy dictated that the model for life review was an oral process (Butler, 1963). The evolution and alteration of purpose of life reviews have stretched the model to embrace writing, which makes the process more accessible to more people. According to Burke (1966), through the processes of written and oral life review, individuals use symbols, memories, and language to purposefully reflect on the past, select that which serves the purpose, and deflect reality to perceptions that promote healthy change. Life review, therefore, has the potential to promote individuals’ development of new perspectives through reconnection to their constructed memories. These new perspectives allow for empowerment and self-definition. However, the life review process may also lead to a less-than-positive outcome in which the individual is left with feelings of depression, guilt, or anxiety. A life review facilitator may be able to enhance the individual’s experience by carefully guiding the individual through

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the process and maintaining awareness of the individual's feelings arising from the life review. By providing prompts and questions in response to a client's expressed story, a facilitator can help that client more easily work through any negative feelings that surface.

The purpose of this article is to present a brief explanation of the theory behind the life review process and the results of a qualitative research study. The experiences of 6 individuals who created written life reviews are described, and the process by which effective prompts were chosen are explored. The processes of both the researcher (first author; hereinafter referred to as the researcher) and the participants are reflected in the multiple case study. Suggestions for further research and implications for counselors are discussed.

THEORETICAL BASIS FOR LIFE REVIEW

Life reviews are naturally occurring processes in which individuals share their stories through written or oral means. Individuals depend on language to make sense of mental images and on constructed symbols to communicate ideas and intents to others. As Butler (1963) noted, life reviews are generated as individuals become cognizant of their own mortality. Awareness of mortality occurs not only for older adults but also for people facing terminal illnesses. Existing literature has shown that the life review can be a therapeutically beneficial experience that assists people in coming to terms with advancing age and impending death (Hanaoka & Okamura, 2004), decreasing feelings of depression and hopelessness (Mastel-Smith et al., 2006), and finding meaning in lived experience (Haber, 2006). Erikson (1982) emphasized the need for integrity in later life, and the life review process allows for individuals to find meaning in their experiences and to accept their earlier decisions with integrity. By looking back from the new vantage point of age, older adults can understand and share their stories from a position of new understanding and enhanced self-knowledge.

Knowledge construction is mediated by language (Bencze, 2007) within the constructivist paradigm, and the use of language allows individuals to move beyond the limits of the present moment. People can talk and write about both the past and the future as realities despite their abstraction. In doing so, individuals' knowledge construction develops and assigns personal meanings to events and choices in their lives (Giles & Coupland, 1991). According to Mishler (1986), "a general assumption of narrative analysis is that telling stories is one of the significant ways individuals construct and express meaning" (p. 67). Through this form of abstraction and meaning making, the many processes of life review flourish, particularly through what Ritchie (1995) identified as the benefit of the passage of time because it "enables people to make sense out of earlier events in their lives" (p. 3).

Life review is a powerful tool for rescripting, reclaiming, or naming (Smucker & Niederee, 1995). Using *deflection* to create personal meaning is an arbitrary, positive, and fulfilling act that requires only moderate training to guide the process. Rather

than accept external, socially constructed meanings, individuals can manipulate (deflect) meanings to reflect authentic transformation, thereby adjusting personal representations that conceptualize their own value and philosophical acceptance of self as defined by self-actualization (Taylor & Armor, 1996). For those with histories that require resolution, the opportunity for *rescripting* exists (Edwards, 1990).

When resolving conflict, the purpose of the life review may be rescripting, that is, making the memory more acceptable so that a new story can be organized (Monk, 1997). Rescripting requires assignment of new meaning to old stories so that forgiveness and change may occur (Beck, 1996). Positioning self as victim is a common script that stymies individuals, but reinterpretation of the dynamic in play often provides the catalyst for change (Stiles, Honos-Webb, & Lani, 1999). Asking questions such as “What good can come from this?” or “What did I learn from this?” provides an opportunity for people to move on, which can be a valuable product of life review.

In summary, the life review process allows individuals to bring memories forward, focusing reflexively on how the memories serve them. The process of life review can further be used to solve problems, resolve issues, process forgiveness, and promote change. Life review celebrates the ownership of lived experiences through the acknowledgement of self. Beyond the immediate life review activity, opportunities arise for individuals to pass along their values to others. The purpose of this study was to explore the life review process for older adults and develop useful tools in the form of writing prompts that could provide catalysts in directing life review activity. Determining the prompts that were the most facilitative in self-reflection will allow other practitioners to be better prepared for their own work in guiding life review activities for their clients.

METHOD

Participants

The study included 6 participants, 5 women and 1 man, who volunteered to participate in written life review activities. The criteria for participation were to be 65 years old or older, be willing to write about their life, and be open to sharing their experiences. Participants’ ages ranged from 72 to 92 years. They were expected to commit to five sessions, during which they would receive their writing assignments and discuss their text and experiences, but could withdraw from the study at any time. All participants signed informed consent forms that promised anonymity. Participation occurred in phases, resulting in a multiple case study yielding the construction of the process (Rosenwald, 1988).

Measures

Interview guide. An interview guide developed for the study was used to gather information for a phenomenological description of the participants’ experiences that informed the process. Among the questions posed by the researcher from

the interview guide were requests for participants to rate their feelings about the act of writing, their feelings when writing, and their levels of anxiety. Because of the use of multiple interviews, the researcher was able to change questions or add new ones from one participant to the next.

Narrative Process Coding System (NPCS; Angus, Levitt, & Hardtke, 1999). The NPCS was used to analyze participants' writings to determine the level of narrative depth of their content. The NPCS is a two-step process used to examine therapy sessions. First, the session is divided into topic segments according to content shifts. Second, the topic segments are further subdivided and characterized into one of three process codes: External Narrative (description and details of life events), Internal Narrative (description and elaboration of emotions and subjective feelings or reactions), or Reflexive Narrative (the connection of previously described events in causal format suggesting meaning). These codes denote shifts in narrative process. The NPCS was developed to examine the discourse analysis of therapy sessions between client and therapist, particularly in areas of rescripting. This system allows a researcher to identify the language that promotes *reflexivity*, defined as a deeper connection with the memory in terms of meaning making.

Procedure

Interviews. Participants met individually with the researcher five times—once every 2 weeks—to read back and discuss their writings and receive their assignments. To establish structure, the researcher suggested a minimum duration for each interview of 30 to 45 minutes. The interviews were not timed and often proceeded much like typical conversations. The location for interviews with 3 participants was a private office in the same building that housed the senior citizen center they attended. For the remaining 3 participants, interviews took place in their personal living areas. At the initial interviews, the researcher reviewed with participants the intent of the study, the informed consent form, and the confidentiality rules and explained the availability of free counseling for participants, if they desired it, for the duration of the study.

Interview sessions began with participants' reading aloud from their assigned writings. After the readings, participants responded to the researchers' questions regarding their experiences. Interview sessions were designed to provide opportunity to discuss actions and reactions to life review activities but also included time for open discussion. The researcher followed the prepared interview guide to gather information from the participants. In addition to recording participants' verbal responses, the researcher also recorded what occurred during the readings of the text—inflection, physical responses, or other observable changes. The responses garnered through use of the interview guide and the researcher's accompanying notes prepared at the conclusion of each interview served as additional sources of information that allowed the researcher to search for patterns of experience for both the participants and the researcher.

The culminating interviews occurred after at least 1 month had passed from the last writing interviews so that participants would have time to reflect on their experiences with the writing assignments. In addition, these sessions served as a way to assess participants' reactions to not having a continued directed writing experience and to discover whether participants were continuing to write on their own. It is important to note that many participants wanted to continue their life review activities after the initial five meetings; arrangements were made for these participants to carry on with their directed writing beyond the auspices of the study.

Writing assignments. During the interview sessions, the researcher listened carefully to text and discussion, reflected on meaningful topics, and used reflection-in-action to specify the next writing assignments. The writing prompts for each assignment were chosen on the basis of cues from the text and discussions indicating unanswered questions. The researcher discussed the choice of writing prompts and assignments with participants before the conclusion of the interview sessions. Participants determined their method of writing; 4 chose to handwrite their assignments in cursive and 2 chose to use keyboards. All participants were given the opportunity to have their final texts edited and typed by volunteers who were engaged in a service learning project through a local university. Each of the cursive writers chose to use this service.

Coding. The text generated through the life review activities was coded using the NPCCS. Because of the subjective nature of this coding, two coders were hired to independently code the text and foster interrater reliability. Comparison of the researcher's and independent coders' coded texts occurred after all coding was complete. Coding discrepancies were resolved by establishing whether two of the three coders agreed and, if so, whether the coding followed the stipulations of the NPCCS. The interpretation was accepted when these conditions were met.

FINDINGS

Written life reviews presented opportunities to record in personal language the existential phenomenological presence of individuals. The written life review process served as a review of individuals' personal existence through self-recorded memories and required some knowledge of thematic prompting to be effective. Looking first at reflexivity and then comparing it with topic or theme provided insight into what themes produced more reflexive language. The following categories of themes emerged as most reflexive:

- Relationships: family, friends, roles
- Restraints: ethnicity, class, gender
- Beliefs: religion, spirituality, values
- Adversity: deaths, disasters
- Goals: education, career or life work, service, generativist

The categories emerged through a simple tally system from the NPCCS, but are blurred as they thread from one writing sample to the next. For example, what was conceived of as a relationship influence, at one point, may also be considered when discussing the topic of beliefs. Likewise, what was written about as adversity may also be demonstrated in writing about restraints. Thus, the categories remained fluid rather than rigid.

DISCUSSION

Additional information obtained during the interview sessions helped describe the written life review experiences of the participants. Although their text provided the indicators of reflexive thinking, the discussions with participants provided the descriptions of the experiences of the writers who were provided writing prompts for their life reviews. The interviews also revealed descriptions of the process of writing as participants discussed their ease or difficulties with the process.

Participants' Anxieties

Comments from the initial interviews showed that participants were anxious about the experience. Their comments reflected uncertainty about the life review process and their writing abilities. Some comments that revealed confusion and tension were “I wasn’t sure what you wanted. I just couldn’t get it together” and “I felt quite uneasy about writing at first: I was unsure why I was in your research or who would see my writing.” The participants clearly shared a nervousness extending beyond the initial sessions about not only the writing process but also the researcher. Some verbalized their anxiousness more openly than others did. One participant’s first reaction was to ask, “Who is going to read this?” Another participant, worried more about evaluation, said, “I’ve failed at writing before—I kept the papers with the comments on them from teachers who thought I wasn’t such a good writer.” The participants initially seemed more concerned about outside forces such as audience, setting, and purpose rather than the written life review process as it would be meaningful to them. Clarifying the parameters of the situation helped to ease them into the process. The participants were instructed to set the audience of the writing as self, yet they knew that the researcher would be reading their texts.

Regarding anxiety, one interview guide item requested participants to rate their levels of anxiety using a 10-point scale on which higher ratings indicated greater levels of anxiety. Anxiety levels directly related to the writing process, not the assignment topic. The ratings revealed higher anxiety levels (average rating of 7) for the writing process during the beginning assignments. As the sessions continued, however, the anxiety over writing decreased markedly. By the final sessions, ratings revealed generally low levels of anxiety (average rating of 3).

Review of the researcher’s personal reflection journal indicated that a shift in anxiety levels for most writers occurred around the third writing assignment

and interview session. Part of this shift was attributed to reassurance about confidentiality. By the third meeting, participants felt more comfortable with the researcher and often engaged in small talk before reading their assignments. The comments about anxiety disappeared, and new language took its place.

One concern during the initial phase of writing was difficulty in sleeping. Some noted that they could not sleep because they were worrying about what to write; others reported that their mind was so busy that sleep came only after they were able to outline their writing assignments. Generally, lack of sleep or disturbed sleep during this initial phase caused some anxiety but was not perceived as a negative. “After you give me the assignment, I start thinking about it right away, and my mind just doesn’t want to quit until I write.” Two participants reported getting up during the night to write. “You know me. I sleep in till 10:00 a.m. every chance, but I got up to do this assignment at 4:00 a.m. this week.” Despite these anxieties, none of the participants quit or threatened to stop writing. In fact, they seemed eager for the next interview session; therefore, participants’ early anxieties seemed to give way to a comfort stage.

Internal Shifts for the Participants

During the later sessions, individuals began noticing changes. “You know, I get such vivid pictures in my mind now about things that happened so long ago. It surprises me how the very act of writing brings back memories—like unpeeling layers of an onion.” Reports of improved memory were common during the later stages of writing. “It helped my memory. I was surprised how I began to remember details and how those detail sometimes meant something special.” In a sense, the process of remembering became a fascinating experience for the participants, even before they began writing; however, the process of writing spurred memories for others. Some participants were amazed that they could remember words to songs that they had not thought about for 60 or 70 years (i.e., reclaiming memories). Others were surprised at how they could remember smells or colors. Sensations that had long been forgotten became fresh in their mind. Bringing these memories forward to experience them again was another step that assisted the writers in making connections.

The details also seemed to activate emotions. Most participants commented on reliving certain memories, meaning they *felt* the emotions experienced so long ago. Although some emotions were difficult to relive, such as sadness or grief, no participants reported adverse effects. In fact, many stated that remembering the emotional times allowed them to analyze those situations differently now. “Distance makes things easier. I haven’t forgotten the pain—but it is not the same now.” Some participants viewed the reliving of emotions as a way of learning something new or promoting forgiving others or themselves. “There were emotional moments when I revisited some memories but they were emotional in a good way too. Even the tough times seem to have a different meaning now, like a moral to the story I guess.” As the writers began to

bring memories forward, record them, and analyze them, they could distance themselves in a way that lessened the pain, which allowed them to search for embedded meanings.

Other changes occurred midway through the sessions. For instance, several participants focused on the challenges of writing and noted the mental work that went into the activity seemed to be valuable. Some mentioned that they felt grateful to be involved with the project because it allowed them the opportunity to contribute something to someone. This sentiment may have been a reflection of an aging population and the feelings they might have had about their ability to contribute. Near the end of the sessions, some writers decided to share their writing with family members who applauded the efforts, which made the writers feel proud of the accomplishment and more willing to continue writing. Comments from family members seemed to note the idea of bequeathment as participants passed along their values and ethics for future generations.

At the same time that these positive changes were occurring, participants still reported waking up in the middle of the night to write and experiencing tension because of wanting to get started on the topic. One writer noted a tendency to dream more, particularly about the topics. "I dreamed I was sitting at the very desk I used for years, and I walked through the same duties I had. Even the same people were there." Although they continued to experience writing tensions, participants acknowledged that their perceptions about these tensions were changing. Rather than feeling uncomfortable about the experiences, they accepted the tensions as part of an interesting new development that made them more cognizant of the written life review process. Participants' feelings of tensions shifted to feelings of comfort, pride, and anticipation by the middle and later interview sessions. This shift signaled that participants were less concerned about writing ability and more focused on process and topics. The opportunity to ask the participants during the culminating interviews to look back at the experience holistically provided a better understanding of how the writers perceived the overall experience.

Participants' Summaries of the Process

In describing the experience, one participant stated that creating a written life review was "challenging, entertaining, and therapeutic." When speaking about some of the difficult memories, the participant commented, "I relived every single moment of sadness, but it helped to review all of them in order to see the big picture." This statement suggested a connection that difficulties were part of life for a reason. "Life is filled with ups and downs. If it weren't, it wouldn't be life." Maybe coherence would be a better way to view this. Perhaps the idea that life is a continuum of events that challenge and excite was a meaningful theme for this writer.

Another writer stated, "This life review made me look at my life as a whole and showed me how things that happened to me early in life caused me to develop as I did." This realization of early events and relationships contributing to development revealed connection. The statement about life as a whole related strongly to

a connection made about the coherence of life. The writer continued by *evaluating* when stating, “I have no regrets. It was interesting to look back, evaluate, and come to the conclusion that I had a good life.” This example provided a mixture of forgiveness, reclaiming, and self-actualization. The evaluation was not always obvious in the text; nevertheless, the participant was making the connections.

Likewise, the quality of life satisfaction was often mentioned as *accomplishment*. “I think the benefit of this writing has been the retrospective view of what I had accomplished in my life. It reinforces the accomplishments when I write them down.” Participants noted a sense of contentment at looking back to view a stretch of accomplishments that helped to shape them, allowing for self-actualization. Some were personally surprised that their blessings were long, and others mentioned pleasure in documenting activities and relationships. The written life review seemed to become a measure for them to document a cohesive and meaningful pattern. One writer described her life review as an accounting: “I approached this activity just like I approached my retreats. It was an opportunity to review weaknesses and strengths or roads taken or not taken.” Whether they viewed the activity as an accounting or as an evaluation, results were similar because, in most cases, an awareness existed of accomplishments throughout life.

In the culminating interviews, writers reported that they did not feel the activity was stressful, even though they all had mentioned their anxiety in the beginning sessions. One participant struggled with writing and anxiety over topics in the early sessions. Her coded text was often void of much reflexivity, yet it was rich in emotional language typical of the internal mode. In the interview sessions, she struggled to make the connection of why these memories were so deeply important to her but frequently could not because of her emotional reaction. Perhaps she stopped short because of her tears, or maybe she did not want to share. She surprised the researcher by providing insightful answers in the culminating interview. Her last comment before leaving the final interview was, “It just helps me understand why I am the way I am.” Perhaps much of what occurred was internalized without ever being written.

The fear that often accompanied anxiety in earlier sessions seemed to give way to a challenging and exciting tension or anticipation. Even the terminology about anxiety could be questioned. “I anticipate writing; yet, it still surprises me.” For this writer, the anticipation created a tension not necessarily viewed as a negative. The participants seemed to forget their anxiety about writing once comfortable in the writing process. This shift may also account for a new confidence about writing that came about as the practice became less stressful. “I enjoy writing now, and my children and grandchildren want me to continue.” Through their own discoveries, participants mentioned nuggets of pleasure. One writer noted, “It was easier than I thought to reveal some difficult things about myself.” Perhaps the comfort extended beyond the writing to a more comfortable level of self-disclosure and worked to improve the writer’s opinions about writing, disclosure, and self-reflection.

SUMMARY

To describe the written life review process for the 6 writers who participated, the researcher used case study notes and a personal reflection journal. The experiences described by the participants are positive. There were gaps in understanding regarding entry into a reflexive mode because no benchmarks exist to use for comparison. Comparing participants' earlier writings with their later writings and asking participants whether they thought the life review activities improved their ability to view themselves gave a more comprehensive perception. Overall, the participants viewed the activity as one that provided personal analysis rather than pure description of past activities or relationships. They generally believed they did deepen their understanding of themselves, and they felt that looking back did provide opportunity to find connections (i.e., self-actualization). Their comments revealed that the experience encouraged them to undertake a personal search for meaning.

The descriptions and use of reflexive language show a strong connection to writing for meaning, but the participants enjoyed the activity for socialization and entertainment as well. The written life review process combines the opportunity for inner work that can be shared with others. Allowing participants the opportunity to think through and work through their lifetimes of choices provides a positive experience for most individuals. This self-reflection coupled with the interaction with a facilitator may provide even greater meaning for the writers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELORS

Adult populations, particularly those actively participating in senior centers, nursing homes, and hospice settings, may have need to solve problems, resolve issues, process forgiveness, and embrace bequeathment of values and ethics, while moving toward self-actualization. Practitioners may choose to use thematic prompting tools to provide solid prompts for these populations, whether the participants choose to use them individually or in groups. Specificity in purpose should be clearly defined before the life review to ensure effectiveness. Certainly, understanding the differences in language use (defined as external, internal, and reflexive) will allow practitioners additional cues to successful prompting.

The researcher's choice of prompts for the assignments came from either textual cues left unanswered or interview cues that led to some new question. In either case, the chosen prompt was based on previous text or talk about it. In all cases, the researcher chose the writing prompt for the next assignment and discussed the choice with the participant before the conclusion of the interview. Practitioners may choose to take a similar perspective on life review as a process, rather than solely as a product. By perceiving the potential for the development of greater depth and self-understanding inherent in the writing, practitioners can use their training to develop client-appropriate prompts as the review unfolds.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study suggest that written, facilitated life reviews can be beneficial for older adults. This study highlighted the positive effects, as defined by participants, of generating written life reviews. Future studies might include attempts to measure outcome satisfaction solely on the basis of participants' purposes for life review. Several topics and themes were identified that were more likely than others to motivate participants to engage in reflexive thinking. These topics included relationships, restraints, beliefs, adversity, and goals. This study pinpointed specific areas for focused exploration for older adults who may have gained awareness of their own mortality and have sought to bring a sense of coherence and integrity to their lived experiences.

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