

Life review and Psychological well-being among older adults

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Abstract

The study sought to determine the extent to which life review influence the psychological well-being of older individuals in Calabar municipality of Cross River State, Nigeria. The ex-post facts design was adopted using a sample size of 200 drawn through accidental sampling and a 20-part questionnaire with reliability estimates of 0.63 & 0.61 was used to collect the data. Pearson Product Moment correlation was used to analyze the data in line with the two hypothesis formulated and result revealed that earlier network of relationships and life style significantly influence psychological well-being of older adults. It is recommended that counselors assist older individuals as they take their journey into memory lane so that the pieces of reflection can be placed in their proper perspectives.

Key Words: Life review, reminiscence, relationship, life style

Introduction:

Life review is a progressive looking back at one's life experiences, the return to consciousness of memories and unresolved past conflicts for reevaluation, reinterpretation and possible resolution (Butler, 2002). It is believed to be a universal and private process; a normal developmental task of late adulthood that defers with each individual which ultimately brings new significance and meaning to one's life, reduce fear and anxiety and prepare one for death (Erickson, 1987). Reminiscence, the recollection of memories takes place in individuals that are younger, however, it lacks the evaluative component of life review. Butler (1996) contend that reminiscence is not unique to old age but may provide the material for life review which is often initiated by thoughts of death and, therefore, developmentally unique to the elderly. It is more like a drive to put one's life in order.

In these twilight years, people tend to forget events pertaining to the present but have a rather lucid detailed recollection of the past. According to Cully, La Voie and Gfeller (2001) people have a particularly vivid imagination and memory for the past at some point in late life and can recall with sudden and remarkable clarity early-life events, and they develop an ability to move thoughts from the subconscious to the conscious mind. These allow them to reassess the meaning of life and provide new insights that will culminate in the resolution of old issues, reconciliation with estranged loved ones and atonement for past mistakes. Butler (1996) stated that the core elements of life such as children, friendship, nature, humour and human contact often gain greater significance as people identify the things they hold dear and minimize less important parts of their life.

The life review may be told to others, or it may be told only to oneself. Some older people will tell their life history to anyone who will listen and may find the outpouring therapeutic. Others share their thoughts with no one and may even be in denial of their presence (Butler, 2002). Those who cannot resolve the issues uncovered by their life review may become anxious or depressed or enter a state of terror or panic. Some who cannot accept the resolution of their life conflicts may even commit suicide. Such situations tend to be more dire in the event of isolation due to the loss of family brought by retirement and death Cully et al, 2001). Others gain a sense of satisfaction, a sense of tranquility and a capacity to enjoy to the utmost the remainder of their lives (Erickson, 1987; Cappeliez & Robitaille, 2010).

Thus as the past rolls by in review, the older adult surveys, observes, reflects on it and then reconsiders the previous experiences and their meanings, leading to revision or expanded understanding of these past events (Hanaoka & Okamura, 2004). In the final analysis, each person's life review is unique to him or her as it is set in motion by the individual's looking forward to death (Butler, 1996). Hence, life review may help prepare individuals for death thereby reducing the fear of death. Life review of the twilight years can indeed offer validation of the life that has been lived and a way of achieving closure and saying goodbye to family members.

Statement of Problem

Oftentimes, when persons in late adulthood engage in reminiscing, people around them perceive this as a sign of senile dementia or that such old persons are just boring or living in the ancient past. Sometimes, family members may even prevail on them not to talk that way, because, to them, it is an indication of proximity of death or inability to adjust to the challenges of old age. However, Erickson (1968) in his theory of the eight

stages of the human life span, had designated reminiscence and life review as the singular most important developmental task in this stage of life. According to him, if retrospective glances and reminiscence reveal a picture of a life well spent, the older adult will be happy and contented (integrity). If, on the other hand, such glances reveal a life that was worth little or nothing, the older adult will experience panic and despair. Though, Butler (1963), the originator of the concept of life review, believes that it is the universal occurrence in all older persons, it has also been called a western phenomenon because of its focus on the individual. Hence, does life review influence the psychological well-being of older adults in Calabar municipality?

Purpose of Study

The main purpose of the study is to determine the extent to which life review influences the psychological well-being of older adults in Calabar municipality.

Hypothesis

1. An earlier network of relationships does not significantly influence the psychological well-being of older adults.
2. There is no significant relationship between earlier life style and psychological well-being of older adults.

Methodology

The ex-post facto design was utilized and the study was carried out in Calabar metropolis. Calabar is located within the Niger Delta and it is the capital city of Cross River State of Nigeria. The population here is predominantly Christian. The sample size is 200 drawn from different parts of the metropolis using accidental sampling since this population cannot be assessed through any institution and they are fewer and farther between. The sample comprised 96 males and 104 females; 88 were married; 10 were never married; 25 were divorced/separated; 77 were widowed; they were all Christians and literate. The age of respondents ranged between 62 and 81.

The instrument consisted of a structured questionnaire, Life Review and Satisfaction Scale (LRSS) that was in three parts. Part 1, comprised 6 items seeking background information such as age, sex, occupation, number of children etc. Part 2 consisted of 14 items that sought to establish the existence of network of relationships and the lifestyle adopted by the older adult respondents. Items included statements such as:- I made a lot of good friends over the years; There is a strong attachment between my children and I; I did not squander my resources & time on frivolous things. Part 3 was a 6 item scale that sought to establish the psychological well-being of respondents. Items here included statements such as:- I am pleased with the way my life has turned out; I am not bothered by the challenges of old age facing me; I take my life one day at a time. Respondents were to tick the most appropriate response that ranged from strongly agree, agree, disagree, to strongly disagree. The instrument was validated by experts in Psychology, Tests, Measurements and evaluation. Test re-test approach given at two weeks interval, to 50 older adults outside the sampled pool, was adopted to establish the reliability of the instrument. Using the Cronbach Coefficient Alpha reliability estimate, values of 0.63 and 0.61 were derived from part 2 and 3 respectively.

The instrument was administered by the researcher and two assistants in the respondents' homes, using the accidental sampling technique. Respondents were assured of strict confidentiality and the fact that this was purely for academic exercise. The questionnaires were self-completed by the respondents and were retrieved right there and then. The accruing data were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment correlation. Summaries of results are presented in the following tables.

Results

Hypothesis 1

Earlier network of relationships does not significantly influence the psychological well-being of older adults.

The hypothesis was tested using Pearson Product Moment correlation. The analysis of data produced the following results as shown in table 1

Table 1
 Pearson Product moment correlation of network of relationships and psychological well-being of older adults (N=200)

Variable	\bar{X}	SD	r	Sig level
Network of relationships	20.25	3.57	0.276	0.01
Psychological well-being	19.44	2.62		

*P<.05; df = 198: Critical r = .138

The results presented on table 1 indicate that there is a positive relationship ($r = 0.276$) between network of relationship and psychological well-being of older adults. Also, the significant level of calculated r value (0.01) is less than .05, which means that the calculated r is statistically significant at .05 significance level and 198 degrees of freedom. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected.

Hypothesis 2

There is a significant relationship between earlier life style and psychological well-being of older adults.

Pearson Product Moment correlation was utilized to test the hypothesis and the results are shown in table 2.

Table 2
 Pearson Product Moment Correlation of earlier lifestyle and psychological well-being scores of older adults (N = 200)

Variable	\bar{X}	SD	r	Sig. level
Earlier lifestyle	19.89	2.94	0.368	0.01
Psychological well-being	19.44	2.62		

*P<.05; df = 198; Critical r = .138

The results in table 2 point to a positive relationship ($r = 0.368$) between earlier lifestyle and psychological well-being of older adults. The significant level of the calculated r value (0.01) is less than .05, indicating that the calculated r is statistically significant at .05 level and 198 degrees of freedom. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected.

Discussion

The results for hypothesis 1 indicate that the network of relationships established and maintained earlier in life by individuals do significantly influence their psychological well-being as older adults ($r = 0.276$; Critical $r = 0.138$). This shows a positive relationship between earlier network of relationships and psychological well-being of older individuals. That is to say, the stronger the earlier network of relationships, the greater the psychological well-being and vice-versa. This points to the fact that those who in their earlier years, have formed and sustained mutually beneficial solid relationships with family members, friends, colleagues and others, upon review of their lives, will experience greater satisfaction and profound psychological well-being. Many pleasant memories may have been made, regrets, if any, may be few, and such reminiscence would bring more pleasure than pain. On the other hand, those who have had little or no relationship with significant others, or with

unresolved past conflicts, may have unpleasant memories that would keep them anxious and depressed. Reminiscence may bring on a painful experience, uneasiness and even fear of death. This is supported by Butler's (1996) view that the core elements of life such as children, friendships, human contacts, humour and others are the things that older individuals hold dear as these become the source of meaning and purpose of their lives. Also, Hanaoka & Okamura (2004) asserted that such relationships provide validation for the older individual, providing significant meaning to one's life.

Indeed, it is the network of relationships formed earlier – with family members, friends, colleagues and even neighbors that provide the social contact for older people and hence reduce isolation, boredom, loneliness & depression upon reminiscence. Infact, social contact and interactions have been shown to promote the psychological well-being of older individuals by the studies of Uche (2011) and Gilberts & Hirdes (2000). Similarly, Sugisawa, Shibata, Hougham, Sugihara & Liang (2002) found that having a greater number of social contacts was associated with lower rates of depressive symptoms. Godfrey, Townsend & Denby (2004) concluded that interdependent relationships were the essence of aging well because they met older people's need for intimacy, comfort, support, companionship and fun. Some studies have gone as far as suggesting that higher levels of social networking are associated with lower mortality rates and decreased rate of dementia (Flacker & Kiely, 2003; Sugisawa et al 2004).

The indication from the results of hypothesis two, is that the life style adopted earlier in life significantly influence the psychological well-being of older individuals ($r = 0.368$; Critical $r = 0.138$). That is to say, those who have squandered their time and resource on the frivolous and mundane, like drinking, partying, moving from one partner to the other, spending most of their time outside the home, thereby putting them in conflict with the significant others in their life, at old age, such people become isolated resulting in depression and despair and reminiscence bring back painful memories. On the other hand, those who have invested their time and resources wisely and expended them appropriately and have therefore developed strong bond with significant others in their lives have little or no regrets but rather have profound sense of satisfaction and psychological well-being as they reflect on the past. This reveals a positive relationship between earlier lifestyle and psychological well-being of older individuals. According to Erickson (1987) if retrospective glances and reminiscence reveal a picture of a life well spent, the older adult will be satisfied, if, on the other hand, reminiscence displays a picture of a life worth little or nothing, the older individual experience despair. Life review can cause panic, terror and preoccupation with the past that sometimes result in suicide, because such individuals are unable to accept the mistake and missed opportunities of the past (Butler, 1996). It is not uncommon to hear older individuals lament, I wish I spent more time and resources on my children, I wish I did not divorce my first wife or I wish I did not marry so many wives. Such people oftentimes, become bitter, angry and depressed and the challenges of being in old age become overwhelming (Cully et al). They are rather disappointed in themselves and the life they lived and many show their frustration by keeping to themselves and even refusing to eat.

Conclusion

This study revealed that older individuals in Calabar municipality do engage in life review which is more like a panoramic view of the life lived in one's younger days. Such reflection bring back painful memories for some, because of their actions, inactions and wrong turns taken in the past while others derive pleasure and contentment from such reflection because they feel they got it right. In essence while some experience anxiety and despair, a good many others feel a sense of well-being upon reminiscence and retrospection in old age.

Implication and Counseling

- Individuals in earlier stages of adulthood need to be counseled to stop, from time to time, to reexamine their choices and decisions made, to see how these meet the needs of the individuals themselves and loved ones around them. Wrong choices and turns often come to haunt individuals in old age.
- There is also need to steer younger individuals to focus on the core elements of life such as children, friendship, nature, human contact and humour because in the end these are the things that really matter in old age.
- Counseling units should be created in community centers where older people can drop in to review their lives and free associate, through the assistance of the counselor. Such therapeutic life reviews could go a long way to ease the emotional burden many older people carry around as they feel the end drawing close; as well as help them achieve reconciliation and gentle closure.

- More so, materials from such therapeutic encounter could be put into more acceptable perspective by the counselor who is also in a better position to reassure as well as encourage those in despair to find meaning and purpose even in this evening of their lives, earlier mistakes notwithstanding.

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