Affective Meanings of Life Review Through Activities and Discussion

(activity programs, geriatrics, group process)

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Life review is often incorporated into therapy with the elderly in the form of verbal or activity groups. This study compares the affective meanings of life review through activities with life review through discussion. Twenty-two women between 60 and 85 years of age participated in one of two activity groups or in one of two discussion groups. Individuals in the activity groups expressed a positive event or accomplishment of their past by drawing and making collages. Then they discussed their finished products. In the discussion groups, subjects took turns describing a positive life event to other group members. Afterward, all subjects rated how they felt about themselves during the group using Osgood's semantic differential scale. Analyses of variance for nested designs were completed on the scale's evaluation, power, and action factors of affective meaning. They revealed significant differences between the groups within the activity and discussion conditions. However, differences between the activity and discussion conditions were not significant. In terms of clinical practice, life review was perceived as good, powerful, and active by this sample, and practitioners are urged to consider the importance of group-to-group differences in responses to activities.

A tendency to reminisce and reflect on past experiences is common in elderly individuals of all cultural backgrounds. In 1961, Butler (1) postulated that this inner mental process of reviewing one's life is a naturally occurring, universal phenomenon. He further proposed that this reexamination of one's life can facilitate the integration of unresolved conflicts, give new and significant meanings to life, and prepare for death. His theory is closely aligned with Erikson's (2) eighth stage of ego development, "integrity versus despair." An individual's acceptance of his or her one-and-only life cycle is the hallmark of ego integrity in later life, and a successful life review may be the means of achieving this ego integrity.

In response to Butler's (1) proposed theory, several investigators have looked at correlations between the frequency of reminiscing and measures of life satisfaction and adjustment in the elderly (3-5). As Merriam (6) pointed out, these studies show conflicting results and do not demonstrate a clear relationship between reminiscing and present adjustment. He attributed these discrepancies to unclear definitions of life review and reminiscence. Butler does distinguish life review from simple reminiscence. While life review may involve reminiscence or a return to events of the past, it also involves a reevaluation of these past events (1). In addition, the reminiscence cited in these studies was naturally occurring rather than the result of intervention in the form of life review therapy. As Butler points out, spontaneous life review may not be a successful process. For those who are not able to resolve past conflicts and find value in their achievements, life review may contribute to feelings of guilt and to psychopathology (1).

Since life review may be either positive or negative for elderly individuals, life review therapy has evolved as a means of enhancing this process to make it more conscious, deliberate, and efficient (7). Therapy can be done individually or through group work. Lewis and Butler (7) have pointed out that group interaction decreases feelings of isolation in elderly people because it enables them to face jeanette Froehlich, MS, OTR, is an occupational therapist at McLean Hospital, Belmont, MA 02178. David L. Nelson, PhD, OTR, is Associate Professor of Occupational Therapy, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI 49008.
their losses and fears of death together (7). Also, acceptance and support from group members may help individuals reconcile feelings of regret, guilt, and despair that may arise during life review.

Burnside (8), Lazarus (9), and Dietsche (10) have given subjective reports on the positive impact of life review in group work with the aged. In these groups, discussions were primarily focused on positive life events. Reports indicated that patients appeared less depressed and more sociable after participation in these life review groups. Kiernat (11), an occupational therapist, attempted to measure change in confused nursing home patients after they had participated in life review activity groups. Using nine-point rating scales, subjects were rated on group and ward behavior at the beginning, middle, and end of the ten-week program. Although subjects with the greatest group attendance tended to show the greatest change in ward behavior, the group scale presented problems and was not used in data analysis. Consequently, Kiernat also relied on subjective reports to support the effectiveness of the life review groups. Anecdotal records on group behaviors did show significant improvement in 48% of the subjects, with increases in attentiveness, interest, and conversation reported.

Kiernat's (11) life review groups were primarily discussion groups. Although she used multisensory materials (slides, tape recordings, historical objects, the smell of baked goods, etc.) to promote life review, there was no “doing” component to her groups. The subjects did not manipulate the materials provided; rather, the materials were used to facilitate a discussion of life events. Cole and Gross (12), also occupational therapists, have incorporated “doing” activities in life review groups. Although data were not collected, they reported that craft and expressive art activities such as quilting, weaving, and drawing enhanced the review and expression of past events with elderly patients.

The general goal of life review therapy, whether through activities or discussion, is to promote the psychological well-being of patients. Although occupational therapists run verbal groups, the tradition has been to involve a “doing” component to treatment. More specifically, this “doing” refers to purposeful or meaningful activity. The fundamental assumption made by occupational therapists is that through “doing,” or “engagement in meaningful activity,” mental and physical health are promoted.

As Fidler and Fidler (13) have pointed out, many mental health professionals place great significance on verbal skills and introspection in the isolation of “doing.” Occupational therapists have been urged to systematically investigate the therapeutic properties of the profession's primary treatment tool—meaningful activity (13, 14). In a study by Mumford (15), an activity group and a verbal group of college students were compared as to their development of interpersonal skills (15). A comparison of pre- and posttreatment scores on the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation Behavior Test (FIRO-B) showed a significant increase in the inclusion and affective dimensions of the scale in the activity group, as compared with the verbal group, at the end of the four-month program. Only tentative conclusions can be drawn from this study for several reasons. As Mumford reported, leadership bias may have influenced group dynamics; the group leader may have felt limited by not being able to use activities in the verbal group. Also, the groups were not equated on the basis of topics or issues covered.

Several other occupational therapists have researched the affective meanings of selected activities (16-19). As was noted, meaningful activity is a primary tool used by occupational therapists. Since it is difficult to operationalize the concept of meaningfulness, this basic characteristic of occupational therapy activities has only recently been researched. Using Osgood's short-form semantic differential (OSD), these researchers have demonstrated that our assumptions and inferences about the affective meanings of activities to our patients can be tested. Osgood's short-form semantic differential measures the affective meaning of concepts and stimuli on three factors; power, evaluation, and action (20). Power refers to the magnitude of the potential effect something has on its environment. Evaluation represents the degree to which something is perceived as positive or negative. Action refers to the amount of movement or volatility associated with something.

This study compares the affective meanings of life review discussion groups to life review activity groups. The activity groups involved some discussion. Subjects were free to talk while they worked on collages, and once projects were completed, a structured discussion of these projects followed. Subjects met for only one session, and the dependent variables were Osgood's three factors of affective meaning. It was hypothesized that the process of life review would be enhanced through engagement in
"doing" activities, that participants in the life review activity groups would rate their experience higher on the power, evaluation, and action factors of the OSD than the discussion groups.

Method

Subjects

Twenty-eight women between 65 and 80 years of age volunteered to participate in this study. They were all from an urban, subsidized housing project. At recruitment, these women were informed about the purpose of the study, the time requirements, the content of the two experimental conditions, and the method of random assignment of groups to the conditions. Since a minimum of five and a maximum of eight subjects were needed for each of four experimental groups, six to seven women were scheduled for each group. However, only five or six women actually came to the groups. See Table 1 for characteristics of the subjects.

Prior to participating in this study, 4 of the 22 subjects participated in a pilot life review activity group with three other women from the housing complex. During this pilot, both the OSD and the Bipolar Form of the Profile of Mood States (POMS-BI) (21) were used as dependent variables. Four subjects who participated in this pilot study were assigned, one each, to the four experimental groups.

Instrument

Osgood’s short-form semantic differential consists of 12 scales of paired adjective opposites: nice-awful, bad-good, fast-slow, quiet-noisy, sour-sweet, powerful-powerless, young-old, weak-strong, alive-dead, deep-shallow, big-little, and helpful-unhelpful. As in a study by Henry and others (19), but not as in studies by Nelson and others (16), Carter and others (18), and Shih and others (17), subjects were asked to rate how they felt about themselves during the group on a seven-point scale for each of the 12 scales. Scoring produced the three factors mentioned earlier: evaluation, power, and action. Research has shown the semantic differential to be both a valid and a reliable tool for studying the affective meanings of concepts and stimuli (22).

Procedure

Subjects were assigned to one of the four groups based on which meeting time was convenient for them. Groups were then randomly assigned to either activity or discussion conditions, resulting in two activity and two discussion groups. The activity conditions involved some discussion, but to simplify identification, these two groups will be referred to as the activity groups. Each discussion group had five subjects, and each activity group had six subjects. The four groups were led by the social coordinator of the housing complex. She had experience in leading both activity and discussion groups with individuals in the complex. At the beginning of each group’s session, the purpose and time requirements were announced; consent forms were read and signed; and a short questionnaire on income level, education, and work experience was completed. Once this was done, introductions were made.

Activity Groups. Supplied with pencils and paper that was sectioned into blocks labeled childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, and later adulthood, subjects were given the following verbal instructions: "Draw a graph that represents your mood and general feelings during different stages of your life. Some people use hills and valleys to represent highs and lows. As long as you start on the left end of the paper and cover each of the sec-

<table>
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tions, choose whatever types of lines you'd like to represent how you felt at different times in your life. You'll have five minutes to complete this activity."

Subjects were then given several magazines, construction paper, glue, and scissors. They were then given the following new instructions: "Now that you've reflected some on your past, think for a minute or two about either a time or event in your life that was particularly good or some accomplishment that you are proud of. When you've thought of something, make a collage using the materials provided to represent this time, event, or accomplishment. You'll have 30 minutes to complete this activity." Subjects not familiar with collage were given instructions. Each subject completed a collage.

Discussion was then structured in the following way: "You've each represented through your collage some event, time, or accomplishment that was positive. Please now turn to the person next to you, and for five minutes each, talk about your project. I will time you and let you know when it's time to switch." Subjects then regrouped, and each person shared her event with the group. Forty-five minutes were allotted for this discussion.

Both the activity and discussion groups lasted for approximately one hour. Each involved sharing a positive life event with a partner and then with the rest of the group. While each activity group had two activities and discussion, each discussion group had only discussion. In each group, the leader facilitated discussion in the same way. Subjects were encouraged to participate and were given supportive, positive feedback on their contributions to the group discussion. The leader also encouraged each group to follow the schedule described earlier.

Results

First, computation of group means and standard deviations was completed (see Table 2). Originally, the plan was to combine subjects from the two activity groups to compare them with the combined discussion groups. However, preliminary analysis suggested that the two activity groups were very different on each factor of affective meaning. Therefore, the groups were not combined, and the decision was made to treat the data in hierarchical fashion, with the four groups (two each) nested within the activity and discussion conditions. One analysis of variance (ANOVA) for nested design was used for each factor of affective meaning. The results of this analysis (see Table 3) showed that groups within the experimental conditions were significantly different from each other on the evaluation, power, and action factors. However, the two experimental conditions, activity versus discussion, were not significantly different on any of the factors.

Discussion

Contrary to initial expectations, groups within the experimental conditions were significantly different from each other. In examining the means (see Table 2), it becomes clear that the largest differences were between the two activity groups. The scores of activity group 1 tended to be the highest, and the scores of activity group 2 tended to be the lowest on the evaluation, power, and action factors. One possible explanation for these differences is that group dynamics influenced subjects' responses. A basic notion about groups is that they are not just a collection of separate individuals. As Zajonc (23) postulated in his social facilitation


<table>
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<tr>
<th>Source</th>
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ANOVA, analysis of variance.
totally random, is there any reason to suspect that the two activity groups were not equivalent at the beginning of the experiment? No systematic bias could be identified in the method except that individuals in activity group 2 were the last to volunteer for the study. Perhaps these women tended to be less outgoing and less interested in interacting with their peers than the women in the other three groups. This might partially explain why group dynamics in activity group 2 developed in an affective way that was the least positive among the four groups.

In this study, subjects were asked to rate how they felt about themselves while participating in the groups. Henry and others (19) also used the semantic differential this way, while Nelson and others (16), Carter and others (18), and Shih and others (17) had individuals rate activities. To increase sensitivity in studies that ask subjects to rate how they feel about themselves during an activity, both pre- and posttest scores of the OSD could be collected and analyzed. Change scores would probably offer a clearer indication of how an activity affects an individual's experience of herself or himself. However, when individuals rate an activity rather than themselves, pretest scores are not possible.

As Table 2 shows, group means for each factor are relatively high. Scores on the semantic differential range from 0 to 24, with 12 as the midpoint. Even the lowest group mean score—activity group 2 on the power factor (X = 13.2)—is still apparently greater than 12. This score suggests that the process of life review as structured in this study was generally regarded as a good, powerful, and active experience for individuals in both the activity and discussion groups. The evaluation factor resulted in especially high means. Subjects felt good about themselves while they were engaged in the groups.

The groups were structured in such a manner that the focus was on positive life events and achievements. Subjects described events such as pleasurable childhood experiences, travel, college graduation, reunions with family, events of motherhood, work experiences, and special times spent with spouses. However, as Lewis and Butler (7) have pointed out, ongoing life review therapy almost inevitably involves sessions that deal with feelings of guilt, regret, and loss. At these later points in therapy, individuals do not always experience themselves as good, powerful, and active.

Each session within ongoing therapy may not result in the kinds of positive feelings found in this study. However, long-term life review therapy helps individuals take pride in the life they have lived and helps them work through their unresolved conflicts. The ultimate goal is greater ego integrity. A future direction for life review research lies in concretely measuring long-term changes associated with different types of life review therapy. It is probable that as patients engage in ongoing therapy sessions that contribute to feelings of high self-evaluation, power, and action, the cumulative effect of such treatment sessions will be improved mental health.

The semantic differential has been used by psychologists for measuring changes in an individual's perception of herself or himself before and after ongoing therapy (25). It has value as a tool for measuring both short- and long-term effects of the life review process. Other tools appropriate for measuring change after participation in ongoing life review therapy include ego integrity scales and measures of life satisfaction.

As occupational therapists consider using life review as a treatment process with elderly patients, be it with groups or individuals, there is great room for them to be creative in synthesizing life review activities. Cole and Gross (12) have described a “fabric of life” activity that involves the representation of different stages of an individual's life by weaving fabrics of various colors, prints, and textures through the spokes of a small wheel. Quilting, drawing, arranging a photo album, and writing a life story are other possible activities. There are many potential “doing” activities in which therapists can creatively engage elderly patients to facilitate the life review process, and there is a need for the systematic investigation of the health-promoting characteristics of these activities.

Conclusion

The results of this research do not answer the question of whether life review in elderly people is better enhanced through activities than through discussion. However, this study documented differences between groups doing the same life review activity under the same conditions. Group dynamics might explain these differences; however, a lack of random distribution of subjects by group was a necessary limitation in this study.

Relatively high scores on the evaluation factor of the OSD support the idea that expression of positive life events to a group of peers, either through discussion or collage, appears to be a positive experience for elderly individuals.
Given the fact that occupational therapists must increasingly document the therapeutic benefits of treatment, further research into the affective meanings of life review through activities and discussion is warranted.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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REFERENCES


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