

*Special Issue: Pedagogy in Reminiscence and Life Review*

## Learning to Listen: Baccalaureate Nursing Students Conducting Life Reviews with Older Adults

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There is a growing need for geriatric nursing specialists. However, not enough nurses enter the specialty. This may be due to stereotypes about the elderly and believing that most live in long term care facilities. This paper describes the positive outcomes from using life review in a gerontology course in a baccalaureate nursing program. The life review had four objectives: 1) to gain a broad understanding of the elderly, 2) to describe the elder person's uniqueness, 3) to learn about the experience of aging, and 4) to dispel myths and stereotypes of old age. Student outcomes of the project were very encouraging and included a positive feeling about aging; a changed image of older people, learning about history, family, and culture, new ways to communicate with the elderly; and positive feelings about geriatric care. The need and potential for life review in education is discussed.

Key Words: Life Review; Gerontology and Geriatrics; Nursing; Baccalaureate

It is common knowledge that the number of older adults is increasing. By 2030, all the baby boomers will have reached 65 and represent 72.1 million of the US population (Administration on Aging, 2010). Likewise, the need for geriatric nursing specialists is increasing. However, the number of students and graduates entering gerontology is decreasing (Institute of Medicine, 2008).

This paper will describe the use of life review within a gerontology course for baccalaureate nursing students. More specifically, it will present student insights about older adults after completing a life review. The gerontology course included didactic content about biopsychosocial issues of aging and experiential content in a rehabilitation clinical setting. In addition, the major written course requirement was the completion of a life review of an older adult age seventy-five or older. The use of life review was considered an excellent positive introduction to an older person and may create an interest in care of older adults upon graduation.

### Review of Literature

When students enter a baccalaureate program, they usually are not considering geriatric nursing as a career. Reasons identified for not choosing geriatric

nursing include a belief that work with the elderly is not challenging (Happell, & Brooker, 2001) and is low status nursing (van Lersel, Latour, DeVos, Kirschner, & Scholte Op Reimer, 2017).

Research seeks answers to this lack of interest (Ryan, & McCauley, 2004-2005). Frequently, education is the link to improve attitudes toward aging and gerontology. Studies relate positive student attitudes to having more interaction with healthy older adults and having gerontology content throughout the educational program (Heise, Johnsen, Himes, & Wing 2012; Raudonis, McLean, & Caubel, 2012). Research on student attitudes reveals that older students, women, American Indian, and Hispanic students entered a nursing program with positive attitudes regarding work with older adults (Somani, Rozina, Saleema, & Dias, 2015; Sellers, 1999).

Life review is used in a variety of disciplines and populations with varying criteria. Studies usually focused on either client outcomes or student outcomes. The technique of life review has been used as a mental health intervention for patients of all ages (Lori, Boehnlein, & McCallion, 2015; Wise, Marchand, Aeshlimann, Causier, & Cleary, 2009; Voyer & Martin, 2003), in education for medical students (McFarland, Rhoades, Roberts & Eleazer, 2006), within gerontology courses (Schmidtke, 2000), and in writing programs (Chippendale & Boltz 2015).

Within the nursing literature, life review is used as an intervention to decrease existential distress in patients of any age with advanced cancer (Goreti Da Rocha Rodrigues, & Shaha, (2017). Raudonis, et al.

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(2012) used life review as a way to connect undergraduate nursing students with elders. Students chose a person 70 years or older, but who was not a family member. They were encouraged to limit the interview to two hours and were given a specific interview guide with questions to ask. The resulting report included the interviewee's childhood, adolescence, family and home, adulthood, with the addition of responses to summary questions asking the older adult about satisfaction with life. The students found the interaction positive and life review to be a way to connect with older adults.

Reminiscence was used to connect healthy older adults and nursing students (Gallagher & Carey, 2012). This qualitative research was directed at both the student and older adult and both found the experience positive. The older adult involved in the interview expressed positive feelings about being able to reflect on life. The student gained a non-stereotypic picture of the elderly and new communication techniques.

Heise, et al. (2012) used a life review technique as one part of a new gerontology course for undergraduate nursing students. The older adult to be interviewed was in a long-term care facility. The focus of the life review was directed at student outcomes: promotion of positive attitudes toward older adults, the learning experience, and thoughts about their professional career.

### *The Present Study*

No studies were found that used life review to teach students how to communicate and listen to older adults in the context of learning about aging from someone 75 years or older.

The use of life review in this study was different from others in that 1) it used an older population 2) it encouraged interviews with family members 3) it focused on the well elderly and 4) there was no time limit placed on the completing the life review. The thoughts behind the choice of the older adult include a belief that most of the students have never really spoken in depth to an older family member about past and present life. In addition, talking with a family member, friend, or community member was thought to be a comfortable and effective way to talk with an older adult. Finally, the interview had no time limit because the older adult appreciates the time for reflection especially with someone interested in her/his story. Often stories digress, and thus the older participant may need more than two hours.

Creating and teaching a gerontology course was challenging, knowing that students tend to enter a baccalaureate nursing program with somewhat negative attitudes toward older adults. This would also be the first clinical course for the students, and thus there was a possibility that students would not be at

ease communicating in a clinical setting or with an older person. The course format and life review were designed to help make the student comfortable talking with older adults as well as learning about aging and the experience of growing old. The primary requirement of the course was to document the life of an older adult, age 75 or older, who was cognitively intact. The final paper was divided into three parts: 1) the life story, 2) the identification of patterns of coping that were used by the older adult throughout life, and 3) a discussion of what the student learned about aging through the life review. It is the third part of the student report that will be discussed here.

### Method

Life review was the focus of the gerontology course. It was also an exploratory project to determine if using life review in nursing education would promote interest in gerontology and be a positive experience for engaging with older adults. Students were instructed to contact a person age 75 or older who was cognitively intact and ask permission to learn about her or his life. The older participant could be someone unknown to the student or a family member, friend, church, or community member. Students were given an interview guide that included a discussion of memories from childhood to the present: events, happy and sad times, schooling, families, friends, activities, and rituals, as well as the philosophy of life and concerns about the future. The interview guide was used for ideas, but students were encouraged to let the older adult lead the conversation with some redirecting as needed. The interview was in the participant's home.

The older adult was given a consent form stating the purpose of the interview and told that the report might be used for publication but that no names or other types of identification would be used. The consent forms, once signed, were kept in a locked cabinet. The older participant was also told that the report from the students would be available to her/him at the completion of the project.

The sample consisted of 105 junior nursing students. Of these, there were 87 females and 18 males, with a mean age 30. The 105 older participants consisted of 21 males and 84 females with a mean age of 77.

### Results

In order to identify commonalities among the students' reports of learning from the project, the author read and reread the papers four times, writing down the words of the students each time. Four themes emerged: 1) a positive view of aging; 2) a changed image of older people; 3) better understanding of history, family, and culture; and 4) positive ways to

communicate with an older adult. The following are examples of these four themes.

### *Positive View of Aging*

Students described decreased fears of their own aging and a decreased fear and avoidance of old people. They also reported an increased understanding of aging.

“My feelings of aging are more positive because of this interview. I have dispelled some of my own fears of death and dying.”

“My outlook on growing old truly changed. Seeing what a fulfilling life he had makes me more excited to see what kinds of things I will experience within my lifetime.”

“I have come to a new conclusion about aging. Aging is part of life, but it should not be seen as the worst part of life.”

“My insights about aging after spending time with Grandma are all new. I dreaded the thought of getting older, but now, after spending this time with her, I am no longer dreading or afraid of it.”

“Seeing her life, I won’t be sad or frustrated to become old.”

“Before my visit, I felt as though I wouldn’t enjoy spending time with the elderly. But I was surprised to learn that I had a lot to talk about with Ann.”

### *Changed Image of Older People*

Students found their older participant to be future oriented and positive about life and aging. Many of the older adults were once teachers and still quite involved with life.

“I learned that most older people have a lot to say, and hold great wisdom.”

“She has shown me that women can grow old gracefully, beautifully, and independently.”

“His health is excellent. He takes trips all over the country, his memory is amazing, and he is not afraid to learn and try new things.”

“I have a stereotype that most older adults are passive and slow. I discovered that she is neither.”

### *Learned History and Culture*

Students were surprised to learn about culture, family and traditions. They also found history interesting from someone who had experienced it.

“I am very thankful to be able to interview my grandma and that I was able to record our conversation for my children to hear and learn from.”

“This interview brought that awe-inspiring feeling one gets when meeting or seeing the last of a dying breed. C.B. is the essence of the West, old or not.”

“They are a book in themselves that have seen and experienced a life that we have not experienced. They have a lot to teach us.”

“It was interesting to hear the experiences of a black female child growing up in the South during the years of such severe racism. What a history lesson.”

“Although I have read history texts which tell about the Navajo Livestock Reduction and Westward Expansion, I did not realize the impact until I heard my grandmother’s experiences.”

### *New Ways to Communicate with the Elderly*

Students found life review useful in talking with older adults. It helped break down stereotypes and fears about talking with older people.

“I now realize that there is a lifetime of experience and knowledge and I’m going to pay more attention.”

“The stories the elderly share are real and meaningful. We just need to take the time to listen.”

“I would love to tell my story one day. I only hope that someone asks me.”

“I never really thought about what it would be like to be 82 years old. I will continue to strive to become more sensitive and aware.”

“I realize the importance of maintaining the dignity of the older patient as if he/she was one of my own grandparents.”

“I think that my greatest lesson was that every older person was once an infant, a child, an adolescent, a young adult, a middle adult, and now an elder. They have a history and knowledge of events that shaped who they are.”

“The elderly are truly unique individuals who deserve a lot of love, support, and respect.”

“A slower pace of life, the elderly come to notice and enjoy the everyday routines like the taste of a cup of coffee, watching the sunrise and set, feeling the breeze, and listening to the sounds a horse makes.”

Using life review in this course did help students develop communication skills and spark interest in engaging with older adults. Although all of the students may not enter gerontology as a career choice, they will be able to use the life review technique when assessing, caring for, and evaluating the older client.

### Discussion

The use of life review proved very positive in four ways. First, it provided a model for communication, particularly with older adults, but also within other clinical situations. Some students in the project were fearful of talking with an older person. At the end of the project, many noted that using life review was a comfortable way to talk with older adults, and they could see it as useful when working with other types of patients.

Second, students felt more confident in approaching an unfamiliar clinical situation. The use of life review was encouraged as an introductory method for assessing older patients during the clinical rotation in rehabilitation nursing. Their assessment of patients incorporating life review, when appropriate, brought different ideas to the rehabilitation team.

Third, the use of life review helped students to identify coping mechanisms and develop interventions that took these mechanisms into consideration. Students learned that not all older persons are alike in life experiences or coping with life experiences. During the last classes of the course, the students presented the life of the older participant they interviewed. The students in the class were quite interested in the differences among men and women 75 years of age and older.

Finally, students engaged with the elder interviewee and often returned to extend the interview or just to visit. Students reported completing the project with a positive attitude toward aging and toward older adults. Although only a few in the class stated that they might consider geriatric nursing, the majority came away with a greater appreciation of the older person.

The four objectives of the paper were met: to gain a broad understanding of the elderly, to be able to describe the elder person's uniqueness, to learn about the experience of aging, and to dispel myths and stereotypes of old age.

This project was not without limitations. Some students did not come away with a positive feeling about

older persons. At least one student interviewed someone who was depressed and very negative about aging. Other students interviewed someone who “just wanted to die.” Some students also had problems finding someone 75 or older to interview. Frequently faculty found older persons in the community, and some students used residents in long term care facilities, but that was not ideal.

The research was qualitative but did not follow all the guidelines for qualitative research. While the student encouraged the older participant to talk about life events without constraints, there was no requirement to record or take copious notes. Thus, the final paper only gave the interpretation by the student. There could be many different approaches to using life review for future classes. One would be to have two students in one interview with one responsible for the interview and one to only take notes. This would allow a review of findings and comparison of data. Of course, the interview could be taped, but that is often rejected by the elder, and it could take away the comfortable atmosphere needed by the elder and the student.

In more advanced classes and at the graduate level, the life review would need to be expanded with more analysis by the student of the interview and the process. The project reported here was for the benefit of the student. Future research could examine the benefit to the older adult.

### *Professional Education*

There has been a move toward more gerontology content in educational programs but there is no consistency in the amount or type of content. Greater levels of interest in gerontology result from positive experiences and having gerontology content embedded throughout a program of study (Heise et al. 2012). Education professionals may need to review and possibly make changes in the curriculum.

Education for geriatrics and gerontology continues to be elusive within baccalaureate nursing programs. A quick sample of baccalaureate nursing curricula at universities across the United States yielded concerns about gerontology. Most courses are not specific as to content. Universities in the eastern United States listed courses such as life span development, care of adults, courses related to patients with acute and chronic problems, and care of vulnerable populations. One course was found on health and illness in young, middle-aged, and older adults. Moving to the middle of the country, there were more courses indicating care of adults and older adults. The gerontology content in the southwest and western universities was more easily identified. For instance, at least two universities had specific gerontology courses in the junior year or in both the junior and senior years. One university had a required gerontology course plus an optional course.

Graduate education in nursing has taken a different approach. The national exam for nurse practitioners given by the American Nurses Credentialing Center is now for Adult and Gerontology rather than two different credentialing exams. This means that in graduate education there is an understanding that the older person may make up the majority of the advanced practice nurse's patient population. With an understanding of differences between the adult and the older adult, the advanced nurse will be able to provide quality, individualized care.

### Conclusion

The older person is a large complex puzzle. Each piece of the puzzle represents a different part of the picture that makes up the individual. It is the responsibility of the nurse or other provider to make sure this puzzle is properly put together. In order to do this, one has to know about each piece and how it fits into the whole. Consideration must be given to normal physiological, life experiences, social and psychological aspects, education, finances, family, past work, current living arrangements, illness, medications, culture, and ethnicity. There are many more large and small pieces to consider. Life review is an excellent way to understand this complex picture and should be incorporated into the curriculum of nursing and other disciplines that have graduates who will interact with the elderly.

Students discovered that older adults have wonderful life stories that they enjoy sharing. Important for the student was the realization that before illness takes the older person to the hospital or other health care setting, there was a human being with life experiences, families, roles, habits, and above all, respect.

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