Life Review

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The Life Review Process in Later Adulthood: An Introduction

I am keeping a journal. I call it The Book of the Dead. By the time I finish it I shall be dead. I want to be ready, to have gathered everything together and sorted it out, as if I were preparing for a great final journey. I intend to make myself whole here in this Hell. It is the thing that is set before me to do. So, in a way, this path inward and back into the past is like a map, the map of my world. If I can draw it accurately, I shall know where I am.
- Caro Spencer in As We Are Now (Sarton, 1973)

Caro Spencer is a character in a novel written by May Sarton (1973). She is a 76-year-old woman who has recently suffered a heart attack and been committed to a home for old people. Miss Spencer realizes that she will die in this place and has undertaken the task of writing a journal. This journal represents a reminiscence of her life. Through this past reflection, Miss Spencer hopes to understand her past, integrate it into her present, and accept and prepare for her mortality. We, as readers, are invited along on this journey.

Reminiscence in old age, whether verbal or written, as in Miss Spencer’s journal, has often been viewed negatively. It has been seen merely as the rambling of an old man or woman who could not cope with the present. For example, in the novel described above, Miss Spencer’s journal was viewed by the staff of the old people’s home as the notes of a crazy woman. However, the process of reminiscence has come to be described as a normal developmental task of later adulthood. Miss Spencer’s journey is an example of the process described by Butler (1963) as the life review.

It has been theorized that all individuals experience the life review during later life (Butler, 1963). According to Butler, as individuals realize that there is limited time remaining to them, they will examine what kind of life they have lived, and whether they feel their life was a success or failure. The life review process and the knowledge of completion of being are thus, according to this theory, inextricably woven together. Butler proposes that the life review process is often manifested as reminiscence and leads to personality reorganization in old age. It should be noted that this theory parallels that of Erikson (1959).
Erikson proposes that the critical factor in accepting death is one’s acceptance of their personal life-career.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the life review theory proposed by Butler (1963). This will be contrasted by the theoretical position of Erikson (1959, 1982). Additional topics to be covered include: the relationship of life review to the death process, the relationship of the life review to disengagement, therapeutic uses of the life review and reminiscence, a historical view of the concept of life review, and my own personal perspective to the theoretical position of the life review.

The Life Review Process According to Butler

Butler (1963) proposes the concept of life review. He defines it as follows:

A naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experience, and particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts; simultaneously, and normally, these revived experiences and conflicts can be surveyed and reintegrated prompted by the realization of approaching dissolution and death, and the inability to maintain one’s sense of personal invulnerability (p. 66).

This definition of life review process as postulated by Butler (1963) has several characteristics that should be highlighted. First, the process is described as a “naturally occurring, universal mental process”. In other words, it is a normal developmental task of old age. As such, the life review process is hypothesized to be experienced by all older adults either consciously or unconsciously.

The life review process is also hypothesized to occur in response to the realization of approaching death. As individuals develop a sense of their own mortality, they come to look back over their lives. This sense of mortality and the concomitant vulnerability that this produces motivates the individual to look back and reassess their life in view of imminent death.

The last prominent feature of Butler’s definition is the review process itself. The life review process has often been described as a form of reminiscence (Hausman, 1980). However, for Butler (1963), the life review process and reminiscence are not synonymous. While the life review process may account for greater reminiscence in old age, the process represents more than just a look backward. The life review process is seen as essential to the final reorganization and integration of the personality. Of particular importance to the life review are unresolved conflicts. The life review represents a final opportunity for the individual to resolve and come to understand the conflicts of earlier life. Butler proposes that death can be accepted only through the resolution of conflicts and the resultant personality integration.

There are some features of the life review that are not noted in the definition provided above. Butler (1963) maintains that the life review occurs not only in the elderly but can also occur in the terminally ill or in the condemned. For
these individuals, the life review is also prompted by the inevitability of death. In addition, a reminiscence similar to the life review can be seen resulting from introspection and, in particular, introspection in individuals preoccupied with death. Thus, the life review is not the sole property of old age. Rather, old age and the unavoidability of death are inextricably tied together, thus, resulting in the naturally occurring phenomena of the life review in old age. In addition, Butler (1963) maintains that old age is also conducive to the life review process as individuals are becoming disengaged from society and thus, have more time for self-reflection.

The manifestations of the life review can take several forms. First, the process can be silent or oral, conscious or unconscious. This in part depends on the current personality structure of the individual. For some individuals, the process of looking back may be painful. Therefore, only glimpses of the past achieve consciousness with the majority of the review occurring outside the realm of awareness. For example, much of the review may be experienced through dreams. For other individuals, the life review process is experienced much more consciously. Much of the work may take the form of reminiscences that are shared and experienced with significant others. In fact, Butler (1980) maintains that the oral history of the life review has much to offer those individuals with whom the life review experience is shared.

The strength with which the life review is experienced also varies. For some individuals, the life review is experienced only as brief insignificant thoughts. For others, the process may take the form of mild nostalgia or regret. In its severe form, it can be experienced as anxiety, guilt, and/or depression. The severity of the life review is in part due to the outcome of the review. According to Butler (1963), as individuals realize that there is limited time remaining to them, they will examine what kind of life they have lived. They may examine whether they feel their life was a success or failure. They may look at what kind of person they feel they have become. If this review results in a positive evaluation, then the individual is thought to be able to deal with death positively. If the review results in a negative evaluation, the person may fall into despair. In other words, the person may be filled with regrets and want to change his/her life but may not feel they have enough time, thus making the prospect of death difficult to endure. Butler (1963) maintains that the outcome of the process is primarily influenced by the function of the personality as opposed to environmental influences.

The life review process is postulated to have the therapeutic outcome for those individuals who assess their life to be a success. Two positive outcomes are conceptualized to result from the outcome of a successful life review. First, the personality is hypothesized to reorganize into a more integrated whole. As such, it is similar to the process of individuation as described by Jung (1959). Second, the life review is seen as a preparation for death. As the individual is able to accept their life, they are thus hypothesized to accept their death. This acceptance is proposed to eliminate or mitigate a fear of death. As such Butler
(1963) maintains that his may account for the wisdom and serenity that one often observes in the older adult.

For those individuals who assess their life to be a failure, the life review process is hypothesized to produce psychopathological manifestations (Butler, 1963). These manifestations may take the form of guilt, depression, and anxiety. It its extreme form, Butler (1963) states, "it may involve the obsessive preoccupation of the older person in his past and may proceed to a state approximating terror and result in suicide" (p. 269).

Butler (1963) proposes that three groups are at significant risk for psychopathological outcomes as a result of life review. The first group that Butler describes as being at risk are individuals who always look to the future and avoid the past or present. For these individuals, the future holds promise and achievement. The future is a way to avoid current and past conflict. However, as these individuals age, the future may not be able to deliver on its promises. Rather, the future holds the inevitability of death.

The second group at risk for pathological guilt, depression, or anxiety are those individuals who at some point in their life have severely and consciously injured others. For these individuals, guilt is real. There is no way to reverse the injury. Therefore, these individuals often can see no way to achieve a positive life review outcome.

The narcissistic individual represents the third group at risk for psychopathological manifestations resulting from the life review process. Butler (1963) hypothesizes that the threat of death presents an insurmountable threat to their narcissism. Therefore, the life review for the prideful and arrogant may result in extreme depression.

In addition to the life review as a normal developmental task, Butler (1980) argues for its use as a therapeutic tool. Butler (1980) proposes three reasons why the life review might be termed "an unrecognized bonanza" (p.35). First, Butler argues the process of reminiscence often has a therapeutic benefit. It affords the individual the opportunity to talk about their past and their past conflicts. This provides the individual an environment conducive to the integration, reorganization, and resolution of past experiences. Butler maintains that the use of the life review is conducive not only to individual therapy, but also group and family therapy.

Second, Butler (1980) maintains that slips of the tongue often occur during the process of an oral history or life review reminiscence. These slips of the tongue provide valuable information to be used in the therapeutic setting.

The third reason that Butler (1980) proposes that the life review is valuable is as a tool with which older adults can leave a legacy. The desire to leave a legacy has been identified by Traxler (1980) as another developmental task of later adulthood. Butler maintains that the recording or transcription of an individual's oral history can provide such a legacy. Butler states, "There is perhaps no other group that can tell us something about the nature of human life with all of its successes and problems better than old people" (p. 37). Thus,
the oral history can provide a means by which older adults can make their mark on succeeding generations.

**Erikson's Integrity vs. Despair**

Erikson (1982) represents one of the few personality theorists to examine aging as a stage of development. According to Erikson’s theory, personality development goes through a series of eight, hierarchically ordered stages. Associated with each stage is a psychosocial crisis that the individual either successfully resolves or fails to resolve. Failure results in incomplete development of the personality, and inhibits further development of the personality.

The final stage of Erikson’s (1982) theory is later adulthood (age 60 years and older). The crisis represented by this last life stage is integrity versus despair. Erikson (1982) proposes that this stage begins when the individual experiences a sense of mortality. This may be in response to retirement, the death of a spouse or close friends, or may simply result from changing social roles. No matter what the cause, this sense of mortality precipitates the final life crisis. The final life crisis manifests itself as a review of the individual’s life-career. Similar to Butler’s (1963) life review, individuals review their life-career to determine if it was a success or failure. According to Erikson (1982), this reminiscence or introspection is most productive when experienced with significant others. The outcome of this life-career reminiscence can be either positive or negative. Ego integrity is the result of the positive resolution of the final life crisis. Ego integrity is viewed as the key to harmonious personality development; the individual views their whole of life with satisfaction and contentment. The ego quality that emerges from a positive resolution is wisdom. Erikson (1982) defines wisdom as a kind of “informed and detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself” (p. 61). Conversely, despair is the result of the negative resolution or lack of resolution of the final life crisis. This negative resolution manifests itself as a fear of death, a sense that life is too short, and depression. Despair is the last dystonic element in Erikson’s (1959, 1982) theory.

**Butler and Erikson Contrasted**

There are some similarities and differences between Butler’s (1963) and Erikson’s (1959) theories. The theories are similar on four points. First, both theorists view the final developmental task of reviewing one’s life as a response to the realization of mortality. In other words, both theorists propose that the nearness of death precipitates a life review. Second, both Butler and Erikson agree that this review can often take the form of reminiscence. Third, according to both theories, a positive resolution of the life review results in a reorganization of the personality. Both theorists agree that this positive reorganization can be seen in the older adult as serenity or wisdom. Fourth, both theorists propose that a negative resolution of the life review results in
despair and a sense that time is running out. As can be seen there are several similarities between the two theories.

There are also some differences between the two theoretical positions. First, Butler (1963) does not present his theory or conceptualization of the life review as part of an overall personality theory; Erikson (1959) does. Second, Butler does not relate the concept of life review to a series of stages. In other words, according to Butler, the life review can occur at any point across the life-span. The key to the precipitation of the life review is not old age but rather impending death. Erikson (1959), however, places the life review within a context of developmental stages. Third, Butler (1963) maintains that the life review can be done solely by the individual even to the point that the process is primarily outside of the individual's awareness. Other individuals, according to Butler, are not necessary to the life review process. This can be contrasted with Erikson's (1982) position that the life review is best accomplished with other significant individuals. These represent the major areas of difference between the two theorists.

**Relationship of the Life Review to Death and Old Age**

Butler (1963) has proposed that the life review process is precipitated by the knowledge of the completion of being or death and consequently, old age. This is a concept that makes sense intuitively, and one can see examples of the life review in literature (Sarton, 1973, for example) as well as in philosophical thought (Aristotle, for example). However, the empirical research concerning the relationship of old age and death to the life review process can at best be described as mixed.

Several studies have been conducted to determine the relationship of old age to the life review process. Most studies have examined if older adults do in fact reminisce more than younger adults as an indicator of the life review. In a study by Costa and Kastenbaum (1967), 276 centenarians completed test items relating to Earliest Memory, Most Exciting Event, Most Salient Historical Event, and Future Ambitions. Results of their study indicated that the subjects were more interested in remote as opposed to recent memories. Interestingly, those individuals who seemed to have the greatest command over past events, also exhibited the greatest amount of interest in future goals. Costa and Kastenbaum (1967) conclude that remembering the past serves as a means for creating the future.

Two studies compared middle aged subjects with older subjects, and found that older subjects engaged in a significantly larger amount of reminiscence (Lieberman & Falk, 1971; Revere & Tobin, 1980). In addition, three separate studies (Boylin, Gordon & Nehrke, 1976; Havighurst & Glasser, 1972; McMahon & Rhudick, 1964) using an interview technique demonstrated that two thirds of those subjects interviewed stated that they did reminisce about the past. Therefore, these studies provide additional evidence that older adults do
in fact engage in reminiscence and to a greater degree than individuals in middle adulthood.

Two studies, however, question the results of the studies described above. Using a thought sampling technique, Cameron (1972) and Giambra (1977) both found no age differences in the amount of reminiscence. In other words, younger adults reminisced with equal frequency as older adults. In addition, Cameron (1972) found that 63 percent of the older adults were thinking about the present, 23 percent were thinking about the future, and only 14 percent were thinking about the past. This data refutes the concept of greater reminiscence in old age.

The studies discussed provide mixed support for increased reminiscence in old age. It should be noted that the differences between the two studies, however, may be due to differences in methodology, interview/questionnaire versus thought sampling technique. Further research needs to be done. Also, Butler (1963) maintains that the life review can operate almost totally outside of consciousness. Therefore, the methodologies employed in the above would not be sensitive enough to record the life review in progress.

The studies described above use age as a variable. In an interview study conducted by Noyes and Kletti (1977), age was not a factor. Rather, 205 subjects of all ages who had survived a serious life-threatening situation were studied. The researchers found that 65 of the subjects reported experiencing panoramic flashes of their lives during the period of immediate danger and imminent death. This is similar to the anecdotal phrase of "my life flashed before my eyes". In this study, some subjects did report that an awareness of death precipitated a life review even if it lasted only a few moments. However, it should also be noted that 140 subjects reported no such similar experience. A study by Lieberman and Coplan (1976) provides evidence in contradiction to Butler's (1963) life review theory. Eighty subjects were tested using a variety of tests and interviews. These measures examined six realms of functioning: emotional states, orientation to emotional life, body imagery, self-concept, time perception, and cognitive functioning. Subjects were followed for up to three years to see who died and who survived. Subjects were then classified as death-near (died within one year of testing) and death-far (alive three years after testing). The six realms were then compared for differences between the two groups. Of interest to the concept of life review is the score on introspection. Death-near subjects experienced significantly less introspection than death-far subjects. This appears to indicate less inward self-reflection in the group for whom death was imminent. However, it should be noted that this may be confounded with the decreased cognitive functioning also found in the death-near group.

Other studies have examined the relationship of subjective well-being in old age (Larson, 1978). According to Butler (1963), the life review process is influenced by the function of the personality as opposed to the environment. Therefore, subjective well-being, according to Butler, should be dependent on the success or failure of the life review as it relates to personality functioning. However, the
research in the field of subjective well-being as reviewed by Larson (1978) indicates that subjective well-being is most influenced by environmental influences as opposed to personality influences. The two major influences on subjective well-being were found to be physical health and socioeconomic status. This contradicts the premise of the life review as outlined by Butler (1963).

The evidence described above does not demonstrate a strong relationship between the life review process and old age or the realization of death. This may be due to the methodology employed to study the life review or perhaps life review, as a theory, needs to be reconceptualized. Either way, additional research needs to be done and the concept of life review needs to be critically examined.

**Reminiscence Therapy**

Reminiscence therapy is a direct outgrowth of the life review hypothesis (Butler 1980). This therapy consists of having the individual reflect on their life. Through this reflection or reminiscence individuals are postulated to resolve conflict, deal with past painful experiences, and thus be better able to deal with the present. A reorganization of the personality is thought to occur.

As with any new therapy, a large amount of the information concerning the effectiveness of reminiscence therapy is in the form of case reports or anecdotal data (for example, Kaminsky, 1984). Some experimental and quasi-experimental data has been collected, however. This will be presented below.

Havighurst and Glasser (1972) conducted a study examining the relationship of frequency or reminiscence to personal-social adjustment. Three hundred subjects (150 men; 150 women) were asked to complete a questionnaire concerning amount of reminiscence, quality of reminiscence, attitudes and lifestyle, and personality and perception characteristics of the respondent. The researchers found the following three characteristics to be highly correlated: high reminiscence, positive affect of reminiscence, and good personal-social adjustment. It should be remembered, however, that this is a correlational study. Therefore, no cause and effect statements can be made. It is uncertain whether good personal adjustment leads to high reminiscence, high reminiscence leads to good personal adjustment, or whether they are related by some third variable, such as health.

Boylin, Gordon, and Nehrke (1976) examined the relationship of reminiscing and ego integrity in 41 elderly institutionalized males. The amount of each subject’s reminiscing was determined by having the subjects complete part of the Havighurst and Glasser (1972) questionnaire. Ego integrity was measured using a structured interview and was based upon Erikson’s (1959) theory of adult development. Results demonstrated a high positive correlation between reminiscence and ego integrity. The authors concluded that the reminiscence in the sample was in the form of the life-review. This study represents another
example of correlational data and thus, the results should be viewed as exploratory.

Lewis (1971) examined the relationship of reminiscence to stress adaptation. Twenty-four men were selected to participate in the study. These men were designated as either a high reminiscer or a low reminiscer. Group placement was based upon the number of references each man made to past events (5 years or more in the past) during a nondirective interview. Following group designation, each subject was placed in a socially stressful situation. The hypothesis was that high reminiscers would experience a greater consistency of self-concept than low reminiscers. This hypothesis was supported. The authors conclude that reminiscence may be a factor in successful aging. As this study is quasi-experimental the results should be viewed with caution.

Fallot (1980) conducted an experimental intervention study on the use of reminiscence as a therapeutic tool. Thirty-six women, of various ages, participated in two one-hour therapy sessions. These two sessions consisted of a reminiscence session and a nonreminiscence session. These were counterbalanced so that one-half of the women received the reminiscence session first and the other half received the nonreminiscence session first. Self-ratings of mood were made before and after each session. Results demonstrated increased positive mood following the reminiscence session. These results support the hypothesis that reminiscence may be adaptive. It should be noted that no differences were found between various ages. Therefore, the therapeutic nature of reminiscence may not be age-specific.

Using clinical populations, Liton and Olstern (1969) and Hellebrandt (1978) found that reminiscence therapy improved self-respect and self-awareness in individuals who had been diagnosed as suffering from senile dementia of the Alzheimer’s type. Also, McMahon and Rhudick (1967) examined the relationship of depression and reminiscence. The study found that nondepressed subjects reminisced with greater frequency than depressed subjects. These studies demonstrate that reminiscence may also be of value to a clinical population.

Kaminsky (1978) proposes that the use of reminiscence may serve functions other than those proposed by Butler (1963). He proposes four primary uses for reminiscence therapy. First, reminiscence may be used as a defense mechanism that allays anxiety and maintains self-esteem. The use of denial is important to this function of reminiscence. For example, an individual experiencing intellectual decline may reminisce upon times of intellectual integrity, thus reinforcing that individual’s sense of intellectual wholeness. Second, reminiscence may provide a means of communication between individuals and thus further interpersonal relationships. For example, reminiscence can function as storytelling or the passing on of the oral history as a legacy. Third, reminiscence can aid individuals in dealing with personal loss, grief, or depression. For example, an individual may not feel comfortable directly expressing anger towards the death of a significant other, but may be able to express such emotions through reminiscence. The final use that Kaminsky
(1978) proposes for reminiscence is for the process of the life-review and the reintegration of the personality. Kaminsky (1978) demonstrates these four reminiscence functions by means of presented case studies.

The studies presented above all provide support for the use of reminiscence as a therapeutic tool. It should be noted, however, that the majority of the research is quasi-experimental. Therefore, causality can not be conclusively determined. Reminiscence may lead to positive functioning or positive functioning may lead to reminiscence or they could be related to some third variable such as health or cognitive functioning.

One study failed to find a relationship between reminiscence and improved self-esteem or decreased depression. Perrotta and Meacham (1981) randomly assigned subjects to one of three groups:

1. A treatment group that received the reminiscing intervention (n=7);
2. A control group that received a current life events treatment (n=7);
3. A no-treatment control group (n=7).

Subjects were given a pretest and a post test for self esteem and depression. All three groups met for a period of five weeks. The analysis consisted of a 3 (conditions) by 2 (pretest/post test) analysis of variance. No significant main effects or interactions were found. The authors conclude: "This study provides no support for claims that reminiscing can be effective short-term therapeutic intervention" (p. 29).

In short, the above study does not support the use of reminiscence as a therapeutic tool. This study is particularly important as it is experimentally designed and has relatively high internal validity. One problem with the study however is the small sample size; each group contained only seven subjects. Therefore, the study should be replicated with a larger sample.

**Historical Perspective**

The relationship of aging and death has shifted across historic time (Kastenbaum, 1979). This has changed the way that death is viewed, death is conceptualized, and the way that death is bureaucratized. Death used to be very common among the young. In fact, it was quite uncommon for an individual to live to a ripe old age. When an individual died, they often left family and responsibilities. In a sense, the individual still had obligations to the living which he/she will not be able to fill. Blauner (1976) uses this as an explanation for the belief in ghosts in high-mortality societies. the living have a need to be engaged with a vivid community of the dead.

This can be contrasted with modern low early-mortality societies. Typically, individuals have completed their parenting and work responsibilities before they die. His/her obligations are over. In fact, the debt seems to have reversed itself with the survivors experiencing unpaid social and psychological debts. For example, they may have intended to share appreciation, affection, or love but
never got around to it. Often time, individuals "make up for" their debts through
the funeral (Blauner, 1976). In other words, they want their dead to have "the
best" as a way to repay debts that can no longer be paid socially or
psychologically.

Blauner (1976) claims that ghosts are not needed in a low early-mortality
society. In a sense, the aged are already disengaged from society. Therefore,
there is no need for a community of ghosts to replace the missing societal
members. Death and old age are often thought of synonymously (Kastenbaum,
1979). Blauner hypothesizes that this disengagement affords the individual the
time to reminisce and review their life. However, as previously stated, empirical
research does not support the concept of normative disengagement in old age.

What this historical perspective does give us is a reason why old age is not the
sole proprietor of reminiscence or the life review. Most individuals, historically,
did not live to old age. For example, the average life expectancy around the time
of the American Revolution was 35 years of age (Kastenbaum, 1979). Therefore,
it was important for individuals who were younger to be able to assess their lives
in the face of death’s reality; most individuals died young. However, as death
has become associated with old age, so has the life review process.

**Conclusions**

While the concept of life review make sense intuitively, it has not be subjected
to critical examination. Certainly, there is much to support the concept of the
life review in the form of case studies, anecdotal data, fiction, and
autobiographies. However, this is not how psychology traditionally evaluates a
theory.

Very few empirically based studies have been conducted examining the life
review. This may, in part, be due to the fact that much of the life review process
is proposed to occur outside of consciousness or awareness. As such, it will be
time consuming and cumbersome to study. It may also not be amenable to
traditional research strategies thus necessitating the use of alternative
methodologies.

By far the greatest amount of research and study has been in the area of
reminiscence therapy. Most research in this area is supportive of the position
that reminiscence can be a valuable therapeutic technique. However, as stated
previously, most of the research in this area is either correlational or quasi-
experimental and thus low in internal validity. The clinical efficacy of
reminiscence needs to be evaluated using experimental intervention designs.

Therefore, the first conclusion to be reached in the review is that increased
critical and experimental study needs to be done concerning the concept of the
life review.

Four other conclusions can be drawn from this review. First, the concept of life
review needs to be separated from the concept of reminiscence. This is
important as Kaminsky (1978) has identified four functions of reminiscence only
one of which is characterized by life review processes. If these distinctions are not clarified much research will be conducted using different forms of reminiscence and labeling it life review. As such, many contradictory research results are bound to occur. In addition, the life review may be manifested in other ways besides reminiscence ie. dreams.

Second, it is clear that the life review process can occur at all points across the life span. It occurs in response to the realization of death. However, as death is associated with old age, so is the life review.

Third, it is clear that the life review can have either a positive or a negative outcome. As a negative outcome can manifest itself as debilitating guilt, anxiety, or depression, treatment strategies need to be developed. Also, the role of environmental influences on life review outcomes need to be explored.

The last conclusion that this review supports is that a life review process can occur both intrapersonally and interpersonally. It is hypothesized that both can be of great value to the individual.

In summary, very little empirical evidence supports the concept of life review. However, it is too important of a concept to dismiss because of a current lack of evidence. Both traditional and nontraditional methodologies need to be employed to enhance our understanding of a life review.

Bibliography


