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The Value of Religion and Politics in Geriatric Clientele

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Background of the Problem

Perceptions and stereotypes of the aged in the United States have been fairly pessimistic (Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005). The United Nations declared 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons. This action prompted a renewed interest in focusing on meeting the needs of the aged. Concern with how to treat our elders is not a new phenomenon (Alexopoulos, 2005). Etzioni (2005) reported that,

compared to other developed societies, the United States does not lavish benefits upon its older citizens. Many developing nations show much more respect to their elders than we do, and all developed nations provide much more extensive benefits to them than we do. (p. 34)

The views held by many in past societies did not create a very optimistic prognosis in helping those who were aging. Aristotle considered old age a time of “small-mindedness.” As early as the third century A.D., Bion stated, “we ought not to heap reproaches on old age, seeing that we all hope to reach it.” (Quoted in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*). Writers during the middle Ages and the Renaissance shared similar views. Pope Innocent III in the thirteenth century saw the elderly as stingy, avaricious, sullen, and quarrelsome. Shakespeare’s writings conveyed the idea that people in late adulthood were childish. While the elderly (especially men) were esteemed during the colonial period in the United States, the Industrial Revolution

seemed to lead to a significant setback in terms of how the elderly were viewed (Hendricks & Hendricks, 1981).

In 1919, Edgar Watson Howe made a reference about society's aging population when he stated, "How good we all are, in theory, to the old; and how in fact we want them to wander off like old dogs, die without bothering us, and bury themselves" (p. 203). Thus, the elderly in society began to be seen as another social "problem." However, over the past 50 years, people in late adulthood began to work together in a concerted effort to reaffirm their rights as evidenced by the formation of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). This organization, which was originally formed to promote life insurance and other group benefits, has slowly evolved into one of the most powerful lobby groups in the U.S. today.

Despite the marginalization of the elderly throughout much of history, there has been the shifting of emphasis over the last several decades away from isolationism and towards efforts to meet the needs of the elderly which includes meeting their physical and mental health needs through treatment. However, an article in *Counseling Today* underscores the notion that older adults continue to remain "relatively invisible and underserved" (Roland & Long, 2003, p. 26). But before senior adults can be effectively treated, they must first be understood.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the issues of the elderly to better understand the challenges that they face. According to Cavanaugh and Blanchard-Fields (2002), the explosion of people in the United States that will reach late adulthood over the next few decades will prompt the combined effort of many different disciplines to become even more aware than ever before of the various facets that comprise the elderly. As mentioned above, many senior adults feel marginalized and misunderstood. The media has used the term "Detroit Syndrome" to describe older people in terms of the obsolescence that exists for cars (Hillier & Barrow, 1999). As such, they suffer the potential for being managed much like surplus commodities: devalued and discounted.

Younger adults today continue to hold negative stereotypes of the elderly in general (Prince, 2002) and this is especially the case with elderly women (Hurd, 1999). Not only do senior adults feel that the younger, more vibrant population is pushing them to the side, the elderly themselves feel uncomfortable with their aging status. This is evident in the euphemisms that they give themselves when establishing their own clubs and organizations and giving them names such as "Fun after 50," "Golden Age," "55 Plus," and "Senior Citizens Club."

As people get older, searches for existential meaning seem to be more prominent in their thoughts. Such sources of meaning may include personal relationships, personal growth, creativity, achievement and success, freedom from hardship, altruism, seeking enjoyment, religion, and legacy (Bar-Tur & Savaya, 2001). Life events, social involvement and engagements, cultural environments, and historical time all modify these sources of meaning and purposes in life as people move along the life span. Therefore, by gaining a better understanding of the many aspects of their existence and the many issues that they consider to be important in their lives, counselors may learn to

be more empathic and accepting of this historically neglected population. According to Jacobs and Adams (2002),

The counselor's role in promoting healthy aging is multifold. It involves intervention and prevention. It includes teaching others and ourselves about the issues facing older adults and society, the distinctions between usual aging and illness or disability, what we know about successful agers and effective activities, and the diversity and heterogeneity of older adults. To promote aging well, counselors also need to develop an understanding of how to change behaviors that damage health and maintain behaviors that promote health, utilize interventions that optimize older adults' psychological functioning, and help older adult clients maximize and maintain productivity into late adulthood. This will require tapping the wealth of older people's experience, wisdom, and expertise as well as the expertise of other professionals. (p. 366-367)

Methodology

To accomplish this goal of increasing understanding of the issues facing the elderly, a small number of elderly adults participated in a group therapy session for 12 weeks in order to explore and investigate relevant themes that emerge as important concerns in the lives of the elderly. A life review and reminiscence therapy approach was used since this strategy has been demonstrated in the literature to be an effective technique to facilitate elderly clients in opening up and sharing about the meaningful issues in their lives (Atkinson, Kim, Ruelas, & Lin, 1999). This case study also considered the experience of a group of elderly participants as well as their reflections on the use of life review and reminiscence therapy as a viable approach when working with older adults. Sokolovsky (1996) found the case study method to be a particularly effective research method when exploring reminiscence, or the telling of one's life history, among the elderly.

Finally, this study considered the experience of the counselor in working with elderly adults and any reflections that the counselor had regarding perceived curriculum needs in a counseling or counselor education program. The counselor's experience using life review and reminiscence strategies was considered as well. Counseling approaches for the elderly are just beginning to be the focus of attention for counselors and other mental health professionals (Brown-Shaw, Westwood, & De Vries, 1999) and the results of this study could make a significant contribution in gaining a better understanding of the issues and concerns that are important to senior adults.

Data Collection

The life review and reminiscence counseling sessions were recorded using audio recording equipment (cassette tape player) and the sessions were then transcribed. As discussed in more detail below, the transcribed text from each of these one hour counseling sessions was analyzed using a grounded theory approach at the conclusion of the 12 counseling sessions. Each of the 12 weekly counseling sessions lasted for one hour in duration and each session had a specific activity or topic that encouraged reminiscing and life review discussions. In addition to the transcriptions of the counseling session content, the counselor recorded behavioral observations after each

session had concluded and the participants had left the room (Spradley, 1980). The counselor maintained a reflexive journal to record personal reflections, thoughts, and ideas as they related to the counseling sessions (not just at the conclusion of each session but throughout the week as thoughts came to the counselor). Using the grounded theory approach described in detail above, the findings from the transcriptions of the sessions and written behavioral observations (field notes) were analyzed (found in more detail below) and triangulated (Mathison, 1988) with a review of relevant literature and consultations with other professionals who have experience with the elderly. What makes grounded theory different than many other research approaches lies in its emergent nature. In other words, this type of research approach does not set out to test a hypothesis but aims to discover and understand. With any research endeavor, the role of the researcher is to understand what is happening through observations, conversations, and interviews (Glaser, 1978). Constant comparison is the heart of this approach whereby the researcher continually compares data from one participant with the data from other participants in search of emergent themes from within the data (Glaser, 1994). This was done in accordance with Glaser's (1998) recommendations to continually search for evidence, which disconfirms any emergent themes or patterns as a means of enhancing the rigor of the study. The audiotapes were transcribed in a private setting using a word processing application on a personal computer. The data from these transcriptions were saved to floppy disk and not on the hard drive to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. The floppy disk was secured in a locked box when not in use. Furthermore, the data was transcribed at times when no other persons were within earshot of the playback of the audiotapes.

Data Analysis

At the conclusion of the counseling sessions, a content-based thematic analysis was applied to the transcriptions using a pattern coding procedure in accordance with the grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1978). Consistent with McCracken's (1988) recommendations, the researcher read and reread the transcripts, highlighting themes relevant to the study. Upon reading through the data collected, the researcher was able to highlight specific themes from the emerging data. Using various methods of coding, the researcher was able to categorize the themes, and then apply further interpretations to the category of themes found in the data. Several ancillary data reduction techniques were used to further interpret the data. Memo writing or reflexive journaling as mentioned earlier (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was another data reduction technique used in this study. Memos were used to help develop concepts from the data, to refine and expand on codes, to demonstrate interrelationships between main categories, and in general to construct a more integrated overview. Memos were dated, given a title that illustrated key concepts, and were anchored to specific sections of the transcribed data.

After the conclusion of the 12 counseling sessions and after the data had been analyzed (i.e., codes and thematic categories emerged), a researcher (not the counselor) contacted the group participants to interview them for the purpose of member checking the themes. In this manner, member checking (Johnson, 1997) was employed. Member checking is a technique that consists of testing with informants the researcher's data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This

strategy of revealing research materials to the informants ensures that the researcher has accurately translated the informants' viewpoints into data. Assessment to see if the data make sense through member checking decreases the chances of misrepresentation. The testimonial validity of this research was sought by asking the participants after the counseling sessions had concluded to indicate whether the interpretations derived from the transcripts were consistent with their experiences. The criterion of redundancy was applied to the generation of themes. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) the data was analyzed repeatedly until it ceased to generate new themes or until a point of saturation has been achieved.

Finally, the researcher (not the counselor) who contacted the participants after the counseling had ended also interviewed the participants to gain a better understanding of their overall experience in a group therapy setting as well as any reflections that they might have about life review and reminiscence therapy. The researcher also asked the following question to the participants, "What fears or reservations did you have about joining the group?" The counselor who conducted the 12 weekly sessions was later interviewed by the researcher to ask about their experience as the leader of a group of older adults as well as any impressions or ideas that the counselor might have regarding the curriculum needs of a counselor education program to better serve older adults. All of these follow-up interviews with the participants and the counselor were audio recorded and the data was transcribed to text for analysis.

Results

With regard to politics, most of the group members stated that they were Democrats. One woman recalled, "I always told people that the reason I was a Democrat was because Roosevelt had us supply cotton." Another member agreed and stated that "Hoover was the president during the depression and he didn't do nothing...Roosevelt was the one who put people back to work." One member who grew up on a farm remarked, "I never did understand a farmer voting for a Republican. I still can't." Voting seemed to be important to all of the group members. They talked about how important it is to get out and vote. The group also seemed to agree that it was important not to impose personal values onto others. One member stated, "what a man believes about God and how he chooses to vote is his own business and other people should stay out of it." The value placed on this particular topic in the group counseling sessions, highlights the importance of this theme in the lives of these individuals. A counselors understanding of the these values may play a vital role in the development of rapport and the continuation of the counseling relationship.

Church attendance and involvement seemed to be important to most of the group members. Among the group members there were Baptists, Methodists, and Church of Christ members. One member reported that, "church is just a way of life. Your family attended every Sunday no matter what". Many of the group members reported that they pray often. Some of the group members enjoy watching religious programming on television or listening to sermons on the radio. A couple of the group members regret not having the physical ability to actually leave the nursing home and attend church on a regular basis. Even though many of the local churches will offer services in the nursing home, one member reported that, "it's just not the same as being there". One of the

group members talked about how a lot of people tend to become more spiritual as they get older and especially when they get closer to death. As mentioned earlier, a lot of the group members talked about looking forward to seeing loved ones in the afterlife.

Some of the members described a carryover effect of the group experience in that they would continue to visit with each other about the past after the counselor had left the nursing home facility. One member reported that because of his counseling experience, he started writing down some of his stories and experiences from the past so that his children would have his memories after his death. Another member reported that this counseling experience had given her a greater sense of self-esteem and that she almost felt as if she were taking on the role of a counselor because she would look for opportunities to visit with other residents of the nursing home who appeared to be lonely and sad. She stated that some of the people that she would visit with would “light up” when she asked them to talk about their past. Often, their discussion would also shift to a discussion of current problems or stresses and she would offer compassion, which she felt was helpful to the people that she talked with.

Spiritual Aspects of Reflections on Death

Almost all of the group participants professed that their faith in God gives them a sense of peace and acceptance of death. According to one participant,

Some people say you start becoming more spiritual or you start thinking more about religion as you get older. Well, you do. You go making all your affairs in order. And one of the first things you make in order is to believe in God and knowing Him, and always being able to attend services and we're not always able to. We're lucky here [at the nursing home] because they bring the services to you.

Furthermore, many talked about looking forward to seeing loved ones in the afterlife. Another participant stated,

I may be about half nuts. I think I'll see my wife. That's why I don't mind going. I think I'll see her again. So knowing that you've got someone there you'll see again...we're talking a little bit about Christian faith now.

In addition, another participant reported, “I think that gives us peace to go on. I know my grandmother is there, and I believe that. I think you need to have some sort of belief for peace.” This participant went on to report that he had not lived the best life and sometimes wonders if he will make it to Heaven or not. Spirituality and religious values seemed to be an important part of the lives of many older adults. This theme supported the research of Cashwell and Young (2005). Therefore, counselors working with individuals or groups of older adults may want to be aware of any ethical implications involving exploration and discussion of religious values and spirituality with clients. A better understanding of an individual's religious preference may prove beneficial in a counseling relationship.

Importance of the Study

As mentioned above, this study is important for a number of different reasons. It cannot be overemphasized that gaining a better understanding of any population will make a counselor more effective with that particular group of people. By considering the themes that emerge from the content of this group experience, the results of this study will shed light on what the elderly consider to be some of the more important aspects of their lives. This in and of itself can provide the groundwork for further exploration into the issues that become themes as the data from this study is analyzed. The importance of this study is not simply for the benefit of counselors and counselor educators. Through understanding the salient themes in the lives of these participants, those who read this study may become more sensitive to the needs of the elderly outside the scope of a counseling setting. People's daily experiences involve interactions with those who constitute an aging population. Sensitivity to the needs of the elderly will be enhanced as people take care of their aging parents and grandparents, as they stop by to check on a neighbor who is older, and as they interact with the senior adults at their local churches. This is just a small list of the unlimited opportunities that people have to make a small difference in the lives of those who are in their later stages of life.

This study is also important in that it will provide a glimpse of the experience of conducting a form of therapy, namely group work, with elderly participants. There is still much to discover in terms of how best to tailor counseling approaches with an aging population. Asking the members what they found beneficial about this group experience, as well as what they did not find helpful, can hopefully contribute to the literature in a meaningful way as the counseling community continually polishes current strategies and techniques to meet the needs of the elderly. There are a number of very solid theoretical frameworks from which counselors work. Many of these have been used with the elderly but some have not had as much exposure to this population. While the present study does not set out to test all of the current theoretical counseling approaches with the elderly, one approach will be utilized—life review and reminiscence group therapy. The results of this study provide helpful data that may inform counselors regarding how counseling approaches might best be utilized with the elderly. Furthermore, the results of this study may provide rich data that could help counselors understand how to use specific strategies and techniques as well as microskills in a manner best suited for using with senior adults.

According to Lee (2005), counseling should benefit the client but the counselor should also continue to promote social justice for populations who do not always share the same level of equality with others. It is hoped that the results of this study will help decrease the pervasive stereotypes that many people, including counselors and medical professionals, have held towards those who are in late adulthood (Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005). Being a member of late adulthood creates its own culture within a greater historical, political, and economic context. This cohort group has its own idiosyncratic issues and values that can be understood by listening to their narratives. Counselors should be very skilled listeners to be effective with the various populations encountered.

With regards to life review and reminiscence group therapy in particular, this study will be an important contribution to the literature by explaining how to conduct this particular form of therapy with the elderly. While there is limited research in the

literature regarding the use of life review and reminiscence techniques with the elderly, this area of research is lacking in comparison to many other types of therapy that are currently being used today. Not only will this study shed light on the use of this form of therapy in a group setting, it may provide new and creative ideas in the application of life review and reminiscence therapy in an individual counseling setting with the elderly. According to Murphy and Cleveland (2005), "older adults' goals include freedom from excessive disability or pain, continued ability to manage their daily affairs, and freedom from dependency on their children" (p. 471). While not all older adults may be so fortunate to achieve these goals, group counseling using techniques such as life review and reminiscence therapy appears to be particularly suited for this specific population and may be beneficial in helping them to cope. According to MacDonald (2005), "The majority of our current psychotherapy models rely heavily on therapeutic conversation as the primary vehicle for change" (p. 43).

This study is important in that it will provide information to the existing body of research about the experience of a newer counselor working with the elderly. Many counselors and counselor educators will acknowledge that the academic training of counselors-in-training is only one component to their overall competence as counselors. Consultation with supervisors is essential as well. In addition, many counselors will describe some of the most helpful advice that they have received as coming from other counselors who have used a certain counseling strategy or who have worked with a particular population. It is the hope of this researcher that many counselors, particularly those who have had little exposure to working with the elderly or who have had limited experience with life review and reminiscence therapy, will benefit from the results of this study.

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