



Retirement and existential meaning in the older adult: A qualitative study using life review

Judith Malette
Luis Oliver

Abstract

Dramatic increases in life expectancy over the past century have created a number of challenges for society as its members age. Life Review can help individuals navigate many such difficulties. Further, existential meaning and personal growth are strongly linked across the lifespan. The purpose of the present study was to explore whether and how Life Review can facilitate adjustment to retirement. A qualitative analysis of Life Review sessions with seven older healthy adults exploring themes of Strengths, Retirement, and Life Goals and Mission was conducted. Results suggested that Life Review can facilitate the retirement process and contribute to older individuals' search for existential meaning. It can also promote conscious ageing and the compassionate re-definition of self.

*Memory is not just the imprint of the past
time upon us; it is the keeper of what is
meaningful for our deepest hopes and fears.*
– Rollo May

The last century witnessed a sensational and unprecedented surge in longevity in industrialized countries, with average augmentations in life expectancy of up to thirty years for men and close to forty years for women (Dubé, 2003; Friedan, 1995; Houde, 2003). Increasingly, people reach retirement in relatively good health, with several years of life still ahead of them. These new, so-called “supplementary” years (Houde, 1999; Friedan, 1995) often present unique challenges for individuals and society. For example, ageing persons may face a number of losses (e.g., professional, relational, physical, cognitive or emotional) often associated with ageing and the mere cumulative passage of time. Consistent with this, it has been observed that an extended lifespan has not guaranteed an increase in the quality, meaning and purpose of life for older adults (Cole, 1984; Gaillot, 1996; Wong, 2000).

Over forty years ago, Birren (1964) and Butler (1963) emphasized the importance of personal meaning in the ageing process, and numerous other authors (Brat, 2000; Frankl, 1963, 1967, 1969, 1988; Kimble and Ellor, 2000; Malette and Pencer, 2003; Monbourquette and Lussier-Russel, 2003) have more recently suggested that personal meaning and personal growth are strongly and intimately linked across the lifespan. Traditionally, but especially in recent decades, one of the major tasks of retirement and ageing consists in discovering new bases for meaning (Brat, 2000; Kimble & Ellor, 2000; Leclerc, Couture & Roy, 2003). The ageing individual is frequently required or invited to shift his/her sources of meaning, to experience them differently, and often to choose activities where being predominates over doing. Consistent with this, Längle (2001, 2004) speaks of ageing as an existential challenge in which one has the choice to redefine one's being-in-the-world by attributing meanings to the joys, accomplishments, and losses of one's life.

Although such meaning-making is typically done more or less effectively as part of a spontaneous process, a number of approaches exist to help the individual more effectively and efficiently deal with life challenges such as losses. One such process is Life Review (hereafter LR), which has evolved significantly since it was first described by Butler in 1963 as a progressive revisiting, re-examination and (hopefully serene) integration of the individual's past. Differentiating among the different forms, names and shades of LR is beyond the scope of the current study. The reader is invited to consult Malette & Pencer (2003) for a more detailed description of the process. For the purposes of this study, however, we wish to highlight the fact that LR not only involves a remembering of past events, but a review and "re-reading" or re-framing of these events. Thus, the individual may come to attribute new, different and possibly more benevolent meanings to past events during the course of LR, based on what he/she experiences in the present. The focus is not to dwell on the past, but to revisit and integrate it in order to live more fully in the present and prepare for the future. A significant body of research has demonstrated that LR can help individuals to integrate losses, resolve "unfinished business" accumulated over the course of a lifetime, and significantly contribute to adjustment to ageing (Birren, 1964; Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Butler, 1963, 1971, 1974; Coleman, 1986; Cook, 1991; Héту, 1989, 2000, 2003; Kaminsky, 1984; Lavallée & Denis, 1996; Lewis, 1971; Magee, 2000; Monbourquette & Lussier-Russel, 2003; Roche, 2000; Romaniuk, 1981; Staudinger, 2001; Watt & Cappellez, 2000; Watt & Wong, 1991).

Three constructs which are key to this study, retirement, ageing and existential/personal meaning, will now be defined and elucidated.

Retirement

When retirement was officially institutionalized at the end of the nineteenth century, it referred to a monetary allocation compensating individuals no longer able to work. The age of 65 was arbitrarily chosen as the retirement age at a time when life expectancy was 37 years of age (Friedan, 1995). Since then, longevity has significantly increased, but most people still choose to retire at 65 or even earlier (Blanchard de Ravinel & de Ravinel, 2003; Friedan, 1995).

The Webster dictionary defines retirement as a "withdrawal from one's position or occupation or from active working life." Although not erroneous, this definition does not capture the full complexity of the experience. According to Cavanaugh, chair of APA's Committee on Aging

(CONA), “retirement relates more to a self-definition process than a specific point in time” (cited in Greer, 2004, p.10). Thus, retirement may actually involve a re-definition of the self based on something other than one’s occupation and job-related competencies. Further, it implies major changes in daily routines, relationships, work role, and identity (Blanchard de Ravinel & de Ravinel, 2003; Hogue-Charlebois & Paré, 1998; Houde, 2003; Jonsson, Borell & Sadlo, 2000; Price, 2000; Schlossberg, 2004). It is a period of transition during which one leaves a known way of doing and being, often enters unknown territory, and may experience significant feelings of loss and associated grieving. The retiring individual may also be subjected to ageist stigma.

By contrast, many possibilities, both personal and professional, open themselves to retiring adults (Dittman, 2004). In this sense, retirement has the potential to be less of a “withdrawal from” than a “release to.” Blanchard de Ravinel & de Ravinel (2003), Hogue-Charlebois & Paré (1998), Jonsson et al. (2000) and Schlossberg (2004) all suggest that retirement can be a liberation, an opportunity to finally realize projects kept on the proverbial backburner during one’s active professional life. These projects may have to be adjusted in light of age-related challenges, but that does not rob them of their intrinsic value. Jonsson et al. (2000) found that most of the retirees they studied felt a need to commit themselves to a regular activity such as sports, reading, volunteering or consulting. Sharing one’s experience in the context of mentoring is another example of committed activity (Blanchard de Ravinel & de Ravinel, 2003). According to Schlossberg (2004), independent of the nature of the activity chosen is the need to feel appreciated and valued for contributing to the well-being of oneself and of others.

Retirement, like other transitions, prompts many individuals to become at least temporarily introspective. At such times, they may question their values, past professional and personal accomplishments, current life situation, and how to live the rest of their lives. There may be an increased sense of urgency compared to other transitional periods, given an increasing awareness of one’s mortality (Nadeau, 2003). The proximity of death leads many individuals to try to live more fully and to choose more consciously how they want to live their lives.

Ageing

Conceptualizations of ageing have evolved significantly over the years. For instance, Cumming and Henry’s (1961) theory of disengagement stipulated that a good adjustment to ageing involved self-renunciation and acceptance of one’s helplessness. Later, other approaches declaimed such theories as encouraging self-abnegation and conformity to societal pressures exhorting the older adult to disappear from the world. For example, Rosow (1974) and Williamson (2002) both emphasized the active role of older adults in determining the trajectory of their own ageing via the selection of new activities and roles. Atchley (2003) postulated that idea patterns (e.g., attitudes, values, beliefs) and previous lifestyle represent infrastructures of continuity which facilitate adaptation to the personal and professional changes inherent in retirement and ageing.

Rowe and Kahn’s (1987) theory of Successful Ageing (SA) has generated a significant body of research as well as much controversy. The authors define SA as involving (a) “the ability to maintain a low risk of disease and disease-related disability; (b) high mental and physical functions; and (c) active engagement with life” (Rowe & Kahn, 1998, p.38). They put forward that individuals are responsible for their own ageing process, and that most physical and mental

health problems can be avoided by using preventative measures. Wong (1989, 2000) argued that Rowe and Kahn's definition of SA is restrictive and might devalue those who cannot meet the three SA criteria. In response to this, he developed the existential-spiritual model of ageing, based on research conducted with the Ontario Project on Successful Ageing. This model expands Rowe and Kahn's (1998) definition of SA to include religiosity, personal meaning, optimism, commitment, and coping. Wong (2000) found that personal meaning was the best predictor of happiness, perceived well-being, absence of psychopathology and depression in the older adult. From these results, he drew the conclusion that SA is "80% attitude, and 20% everything else" (Wong, 2000, p.26).

Aguerre and Bouffard (2003) were also critical of Rowe and Kahn's definition of SA. They argued that a definition of SA should be multifaceted and include spirituality, sexuality, and emotional openness. They identified three means to promote SA: forgiveness towards oneself and the other, mindfulness-based stress reduction programs, and LR.

Other writers have argued that conceptualizing ageing through a lens of "success" is a limited view which reflects cultural ideals (Moody, 2003) and an over-valuing of vigor and activity (Leder, 2004). Instead of SA, they propose the concept of Conscious Ageing (CA) as the last chance to become what one could have been or was meant to be. These authors conceive of ageing as a developmental phase somewhat akin to a rite of passage or a personal journey or transformation. CA supports values of autonomy, individuality, expressiveness, and self-transcendence. Additionally, CA involves transcending patterns of ego-defence acquired during youth and solidified during mid-life. Moody (2003) writes: "Conscious ageing is a spiritual process that draws its inspiration from religion, art, lifelong learning... reflected in the field of transpersonal psychology and wisdom traditions in the great world religions" (p.139). Taking the concept of CA even further, Tornstam (1997) coined the term gero-transcendence, which refers to connecting with the universe and implies redefining time, death and the self. Moody (2003) suggests that the increased spiritual awareness involved in CA, akin to the Jungian concept of individuation, is a path toward greater wisdom. Thus CA, more than SA, emphasizes the potential for growth in the older adult. Moody (2003) himself admits that it is a difficult path to follow and that it may not appeal to most individuals, for whom the SA model is a better fit. Nevertheless, Moody (2003) suggests that one way to achieve personal growth, and possibly CA, is through LR.

Existential/Personal Meaning

Frankl (1963) and Maslow (1968) saw existential meaning, or personal meaning, as a universal human need. According to Frankl (1988), three major sources of meaning include meaningful work or good deeds, authentic encounters with others, and the attitude one chooses to adopt when faced with an uncontrollable situation. According to Brat (2000), LR can facilitate the finding of such sources of meaning. Related to this, Blanchard de Ravinel & de Ravinel (2003), Hogue-Charlebois & Paré (1998) and Missinne (2003) suggest that the most fundamental sources of meaning pertain to how to love oneself and others. These authors also suggest that LR can help the older adult in his/her search for existential meaning.

Wong (1999a) suggests that personal meaning meets two of four existential needs related to life satisfaction and well-being, those of feeling significant and attributing meaning to events. He

defines personal meaning as “an individually constructed cognitive system, that is grounded in values and is capable of endowing life with personal significance and satisfaction” (Wong, 1989, p. 517). Additionally, he identifies numerous sources of personal meaning, including work, social status and activity. When these sources begin to decline, many older people are faced with the question: “why continue to live?.” Health and life satisfaction may depend on and also affect the way that the individual responds to this question. Wong (1989) has described four strategies to increase personal meaning: (a) LR; (b) engagement, which generates a sense of choice and initiative; (c) optimism, which requires that the older person nourish their dreams and become active in feasible projects; and (d) religious beliefs and practices and spiritual well-being.

Finding meaning in life amidst hardship can be a difficult, if not at times an insurmountable challenge. A number of authors have argued, however, that even if the individual is powerless to change their life situation, they are always free to choose the attitude with which to face their suffering and death, and to extract from this some personal meaning (Brat, 2000; Frankl, 1963, 1967, 1968, 1988; Missinne, 2000; Wong, 1999b). Hope is inextricably linked to this form of freedom, which allows the individual to transcend the present and the inevitable, even if only by changing their attitude toward it (Kimble, 2000). Frankl (1988) considered that the deepest form of meaning accessible to an older person is the freedom to choose their response to the ultimate challenge, suffering and death. In a similar vein, Kushner (1987) suggested that what is most frightening is not death, but the fear that one’s life had no significance.

The Present Study

The present study sought to qualitatively explore a number of questions using LRs conducted with older, retired adults. Specifically, given that LR contributes to the adjustment to ageing, can it also facilitate the retirement process, which is part of ageing? To our knowledge, the present study is unique in the sense that it researches the qualitative link between LR and retirement. The same methodology was used to explore the questions of how older adults experience retirement through the supplementary years. Additionally, we wished to examine how, if at all, the strengths these participants developed over the years and the losses they accumulated help them to adapt to the new way of life and being associated with retirement.

Method

Participants

Seven older adults (six women and one man) volunteered for the study. The participants were all retired and unemployed, and their mean age was 70.7 years (with a range between 65 and 75 years). All were Caucasian and Francophone; although the LRs were conducted exclusively in French, participants could also speak English and had lived in bilingual environments for much of their lives. Two of the participants were currently married, one was a widower, two were divorced, and two were nuns. Two of the participants had completed high school, and the remainder had post-secondary education; five had a current annual family income of less than \$35,000 (Canadian), while the remaining two made over \$60,000. In terms of religious affiliation, all participants were Roman Catholic. Five of them reported attending religious services more than once a month, but two did not attend any religious service. A variety of illnesses, including diabetes, cancer, heart attack and arthritis, were reported by the participants. Participants were not paid for their participation and were treated in accordance with the ethical

principles used in research with humans (Sales & Folkman, 2000). The research protocol was reviewed and approved by an ethics committee.

Measures

The French version of the Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90-R; Derogatis, 1994), a 90-item, self-report measure of current psychological distress, was used in this study to assess general emotional functioning in participants. The measure yields scores on 9 symptom dimensions (somatization, obsession-compulsion, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobic anxiety, paranoia and psychoticism), and generates 3 indices: the Global Severity Index (GSI), the Positive Symptom Distress Index (PSDI), and the Positive Symptom Total (PST). According to Derogatis (1994), the GSI is most indicative of overall distress since it combines information on the number of reported symptoms and the intensity of the perceived distress.

Procedure

The present research was part of a larger project on LR which included the exploration of several themes (e.g., review of family of origin, turning points in life, personal accomplishments, strengths). Data collection for this larger project occurred over the course of 16 individual meetings with the participants in their homes. LRs were conducted by six graduate students in counselling, and the first author. Each student received exhaustive training in LR before meeting his or her participant. The current study focused on three of the aforementioned themes, specifically Strengths, Retirement, and Goals and Mission in life. These themes were explored in meetings 9 to 14, inclusively. Themes were chosen based on recent quantitative and qualitative clinical research (Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Héту, 1989, 2000; Malette & Pencer, 2003; Monbourquette & Lussier-Russel, 2003; Pelaez & Rothman, 1994; Rybarczyk & Bellg, 1997; Zuccoloto, 1993).

LR consisted of six audio-recorded, one-hour meetings which started with a brief guided relaxation period, called “centering on memories.” This procedure involved relaxing and creating a mental space for memory processes by focusing attention and putting aside distracting thoughts and preoccupations. Participants were instructed to (a) close their eyes, creating silence and focusing on maintaining slow, regular breathing; (b) focus on the memory (event from the past) they wanted to discuss; (c) create an image associated with the event from the past; and (d) focus on the thought and/or the emotion which best took into account how they felt about the memory. Semi-structured interviews were then used to gain insight into the meaning that participants attributed to their experience. Examples of the questions used in these interviews are included in Appendix A.

Participants were recruited via an advertisement describing the study posted on bulletin boards at a local university and in community centres. Potential participants were first screened for psychopathology/distress using the SCL-90-R. One individual with a GSI over the clinical cutoff was judged to be suffering significant clinical distress and was referred for psychotherapy rather than for participating in the study. Screening was deemed necessary to establish whether it was appropriate for an individual to embark on a LR process. Other administrations of the SCL-90-R, at meetings 8, 15, and 16, were conducted to monitor participants’ psychological

well-being. This was considered an important ethical measure, given the slight possibility that exploration of a life theme could trigger psychological distress or crisis.

Content analysis was conducted using L'Écuyer's (1990) Closed Model, which stipulates the use of pre-existing categories. In the present study, two sets of such categories were used, specifically Héту's (2000) LR Stages and Categories and Watt and Wong's (1991) Reminiscing Types. Each audio-taped meeting was transcribed and read twice by the entire research team, composed of six graduate students in counselling and the first author.

Tables 1 and 2 present Héту's (2000) Stages and Categories, respectively. The five Stages describe the process of LR, whereas the seven Categories pertain to how the person relates to their past. Thus, Stages are more related to the mechanics of LR whereas Categories relate to what people experience during LR. Watt and Wong's Types appear in Table 3.

Table 1
Héту's (2000) Stages of LR

Stage	Function
Priming	Evoking the past, using a question or a recent event
Immersion	Recalling past events and their associated affect, and reviewing them in detail.
Reaction	Recalling not only past events and their associated affect, but also reacting emotionally to them
Reframing	Using a new frame of interpretation to review past events, and possibly finding new meaning
Integration	Reconciling with oneself, one's life, one's past.

Table 2
Hétu's (2000) Categories of LR

Category	Function
Priming	Recalling an event without exploring the context or associated affect.
Defensive	Putting aside difficult past events or minimizing their impact (LR is not blocked, but is slowed down).
Blocked	Avoidance of the past, and/or struggling with "unfinished business" or obsessiveness
Ongoing	Going to and fro between the stages of immersion and reaction
Consolidated	Experiencing a certain peace regarding the past concomitant with a need to review certain events which are no longer troubling.
Ceilinged	Reaching a certain level of peace due to relating to the past, due to the conclusion that all that could be done was done.
Terminated	Integrating one's past and one's losses peacefully (full integration).

Table 3
Watt and Wong’s (1991) Types of Reminiscence

Type	Function
Obsessive	Ruminating over upsetting events from the past.
Escapist	Finding refuge in “the good old times” to escape the present
Narrative	Story telling
Instructive or transmissive	Sharing instructive stories, life lessons
Instrumental	Identifying coping and problem-solving strategies used in the past; applying those to current life situation, favouring self-control/efficacy
Integrative	Re-evaluating past events; solving past conflicts (“unfinished business”); reconciling ideals with reality; identifying a pattern of continuity between past and present; finding meaning and worth in life as it is lived

Exploration of each of the three themes (Strengths, Retirement, and Goals and Mission in life) allowed participants to revisit past experiences, explore their impact, and to discover or re-discover the origin of certain values related to these experiences. After each reading, the themes described by each participant were linked to one of the pre-existing categories. The graduate student raters presented their categorization prior to that of the first author in order to prevent or at least minimize her influence on the students. Disagreements were discussed until there was consensus among the raters.

Results

During exploration of the Strengths theme, each participant came to realize that the strengths they identified were actually values which had helped them to face many challenges in the past, which could also be used during the retirement period. For instance, a participant identified her generosity, compassion, solidarity and sense of humour as qualities which helped survive a difficult divorce, raise her children alone, and adapt to retirement. In her own words, “Despite these new challenges, I am proud to be able to face life” (please note that the original statements were in French and were translated in English by the authors). Another participant shared the following after being asked to identify her strengths (priming).

I love animals. I was born on a farm. At an early age, I was taught how to feed cows and take care of their calves. I also became aware that those animals that I loved dearly eventually ended up being sold as meat. That made me sad at the time (immersion). Even today, as I recall all of this, I feel grateful that I was taught to respect nature, and take care of it, but I still feel a little sad about those animals. It is sad to know that something you love dies in such a way (reaction)

(ongoing). However, that kind of experience taught me that although every being, human and animal, dies at one point, it remains important to live fully while one is alive! (consolidate) This is what I am trying to do as a retiree: I continue to be a nature lover. I do not eat as much as I used to and I do not eat everything I want, nor do I walk as frequently. Instead of focusing on what I can and I cannot do, I try to focus on how those activities make me feel, and they make me feel good! (integration) (terminated).

Such resilience was typical of the four participants who went through the Stages of priming, immersion, reaction and integration, and who fit into the priming, ongoing, consolidated, and terminated Categories. Those participants could easily identify their strengths, recall past events and experience associated emotions of joy or sadness. Further, they reported feeling at peace with their strengths and values, and how they were using them to better adapt to their retirement and ageing.

The remaining participants identified their strengths, but felt unable to use them currently. For example, one retiree identified her initiative, perseverance, prayers and relationship with God as strengths and values which had previously given her great confidence. However, she added that she worried significantly about her future, as her “sense of initiative when on missionary work has no outlet in [her] present community.” As LR progressed, she came to reframe her strengths to adapt to her current situation, by volunteering to work pastorally with youth. She reported that using her initiative in this new way allowed her to share her life experience (transmissive reminiscence) and deepen her relationship with God (instrumental reminiscence). Another participant shared:

I realize now that prayer allowed me in the past to cope and enjoy the present moment without constantly worrying about the future of my marriage, about money. And, prayers still help me today to cope with what I cannot change (a difficult marriage), and they give me hope about other things, such as studying. Why not, it is never too late, is it?

Upon that realization, he found the confidence to return to graduate school. Thus, for these participants also, reframing and instrumental reminiscence allowed for the discovery of new meaning and a solution to an existential impasse. However, their review of their strengths did not reach integration and peaked at the emotional level. For example, they struggled with unfinished business related to love relationships. At an intellectual level, they reported being at peace with themselves since they had done all they could to resolve a past situation. It is noteworthy that what they called “the past situation” was still very much alive for them.

With regard to the Retirement theme, it became evident that whether retirement was voluntary or involuntary was unrelated to the LR process. With one exception, all of the participants eventually reached the Stage and Type of integration, and the Category of termination. The remaining participant appreciated the extra leisure time she now had, but felt a sense of loss with regard to her personal value. She also felt “lonely and empty”, as she no longer had a significant other in her life. It is noteworthy that having “extra time” was reported as being a mixed blessing. Some participants felt that although they had more time for enjoyable activities, they

did not necessarily have the energy or the mobility to do what they wanted. The other participants also went through the Stage of reframing, in which they came to give a new meaning to retirement. All of them described finding the onset of their retirement as a difficult period of transition and change lasting two weeks to a year (depending on the participant). As one participant said: "the end of active life was also the end of a way of being and doing where I was always on the go, did not have much time just to be with myself."

In relation to their retirement, most participants went through LR Stages of priming, immersion, reaction, reframing and integration. Interestingly, they described having experienced either of the following trajectories of Categories: priming, blocked, beginning anew, ongoing, consolidated and terminated, or priming, ongoing, ceilinged, beginning anew, ongoing, consolidated and terminated.

Participants were prompted to take a second look at their strengths and values, and to apply them to their retirement. In response to this, one participant commented that "retirement is a continuation of life, it is not a withdrawal from life." In other words, retirement is not a specific point in time (Greer, 2004), it is more akin to a life process that requires time and adjustment to new challenges. This adjustment sometimes involved finding ways to navigate around diminished capacities. For example, another participant learned to consciously use her strengths (determination and courage) to ask for help from people she trusted, which allowed her to adjust to her ageing and retirement without feeling guilty.

Because of my sense of humour and optimistic view on life, I give the impression that I am more autonomous than I actually am. When I was working, I was the one in charge of everything. Even at home, it was the same thing. Also, I had a housekeeper. When I retired, I thought I would do the cleaning all by myself, proud as I was! (she smiles) (immersion and reaction; ongoing). I should probably ask for some help, but I hesitate. People have always seen me as an autonomous woman, and I like that. I am not sure if I want to change such an image (ceilinged) . – I want to go to the museum next week, but that does not agree with my knees... – Asked how her strengths could help her now , she replied: Perhaps I should ask for some help (reframing; beginning anew).

A week later, the same participant said:

It took all the courage I have to call my former housekeeper and ask her to come back (ongoing). She was happy to hear from me and she is coming to clean the house tomorrow. Plus, I was so determined to go to see the exhibition, that I pushed my pride aside and used all my courage to ask a member of my choir to come with me (consolidated). We had a great time. I am so proud of myself. I am more than what I cannot do! (instrumental and integrative reminiscence; terminated).

According to Aguerre and Bouffard (2003), non-controlling help tends not to undermine feelings of autonomy and competency. The same participant said: "I now realize that life is not only about doing, but also about being, about acquiring new knowledge about myself."

LR was either blocked or ceilinged to the extent that participants adhered to a definition of retirement along the lines of Rowe and Kahn's (1998) three criteria of SA. Such participants tended to express such sentiments as "I should be more active", "I am supposed to have more money at this point", or "If I did not have this disease, I could...."

Other participants described their retirement as their time, a period of internal freedom and reflection. Such results seem to support Nadeau's hypothesis (2003) on the possibility of people becoming more introspective in periods of transition, and the jungian-like concept of increased spiritual awareness characterizing CA (Moody, 2003). One commented:

The only responsibility I have towards my children now is to love them. Living my retirement means giving priority to thinking about certain personal and interpersonal experiences, and to adapt to the new circumstances of my life.

Another participant stated:

Retirement is a period which brings me closer to eternity, to another life. It reminds me of the importance of living in accordance to my values. I am not eternal. But living out my values and spirituality daily allows me to give meaning to my retirement and therefore to my life.

Another participant, by identifying helping and love as a core value during LR, came to experience retirement as:

The beginning of my new life, the chance to be and to do something I have always longed for. As a young man, I wanted to be a priest, but my family could not afford to send me to school. Now, I am studying theology. I have the sense that I am now finally becoming what I was meant to be.

In exploring the final theme, Goals and Mission, participants identified sources of meaning in their life and explored how these could facilitate adaptation to ageing and retirement. The sources of meaning revealed by the LR process were remarkably similar across participants. Loving and being loved was the major source of meaning expressed by all the participants. Although having positive relationships with oneself and others was greatly valued, being in a loving relationship with a spouse or God was identified as the most helpful source of meaning in retirement and ageing. One participant said:

I feel happy with what I have accomplished in my professional life, my children are well educated, I have great friends who welcome me as I am, but I was never loved by my ex-spouse and that still makes me feel sad (immersion, reaction). I realize now that even though I am more at peace with the person I have become, I always wanted to be loved by a man, and it has not happened.

Another participant shared:

Being loved by God is pivotal. Experiencing His presence brings me to be a witness on earth and to continue His work..

Yet another added:

To feel loved helps me to remain true to myself, to feel important and to love myself.

Additionally, living in congruence with one's values and possessing inner peace and freedom were described as important sources of meaning. One participant commented: Although I feel blessed to be loved by my spouse, my inner freedom has allowed me to live and respect who I am. His love has contributed to my inner freedom, to the person I have become, but it was my responsibility to welcome the love he gave me (consolidated) so that I could love myself enough to respect who I am and who I wanted to become. (integration; terminated) (integrative reminiscence)

Finally, two participants identified their involvement in creative projects as important sources of meaning in the past and in retirement. One participant was able to realize a youthful dream adapted to his current reality as an older person, to study theology and pursue a master's degree in pastoral counselling. Another participant felt "blessed" to share her religious and spiritual experiences with youths in pastoral groups.

Discussion

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.

– Marcel Proust

The results indicated that a process of Life Review can help older individuals develop their self-knowledge, find new sources of meaning in life, and even reconcile with certain past events. Such a process can aid individuals in their personal growth and can help them in their adjustment to retirement. In keeping with this, Cossette & Pepin (2001, p.67) state that ..”growth through loss during ageing is centred on an experience of transcendence, such that growth becomes above all a spiritual challenge.” Spiritual growth also appears to be associated with a passage from a focus on “having” to a focus on “being” (Bergeron, 2002; Laforest, 2002). Most of the participants came to realize, via reframing and/or instrumental reminiscence, that their identity is not limited to what they currently do or even what they did in their active working life. Many were at peace with this new awareness, which brought them even further towards an integrated and terminated review of many events in their past and current life. In that sense, our study found that LR promotes the compassionate re-definition of self. Héту (1989, 2003) compares LR to a healing process, stating that it can facilitate the development of serenity, and reconciliation with past events. Our results also seem to buttress Moody's (2003) hypothesis that one of the possible ways to reach CA is through LR. Further, the way participants described their experience of being retired was more in keeping with Moody's (2003) concept of CA rather than Rowe and Kahn's (1998) SA.

It is noteworthy that the sources of meaning identified and used by participants in their adjustment correspond closely to Frankl's (1988) three major sources of meaning. Further, the results confirm the hypotheses of Blanchard de Ravinel & de Ravinel (2003), Hogue-Charlebois & Paré (1998) and Missine (2003) stipulating that the most important source of meaning is self-love and other-love, and that LR can facilitate the search for meaning. Similarly, they also support Schlossberg's (2004) thinking on the need to be appreciated and valued by oneself and a significant other.

In the context of CA, the search for meaning may be likened to a spiritual journey. According to Hamel (1999), there are two main possible paths to take on this quest: personal growth, and transpersonal growth. We would suggest that the participants whose life review ceilinged at an emotional level were in the personal growth trajectory. They could not fully transcend the hurt and sorrow associated with difficult interpersonal relationships they had experienced, despite their considerable intellectual understanding of what had happened. Participants who used integrative reminiscence, or who were in integration or terminated, seemed to follow the path of transpersonal growth and CA. The transpersonal trajectory implies both identifying and actively actualizing fundamental values in daily life. It also implies a deep knowledge of the self which allows the individual to transcend losses and hurts, and to be more fully in the present moment. In this way, it appears that self-transcendence can lead to serenity. LR appears to be one possible effective way of facilitating transpersonal growth and CA in some older retired adults. These findings support the notion that LR can facilitate the retirement process, as well as CA for certain older adults.

We are aware that the present study has a number of limitations. Most importantly, the sample size was quite small. To offset this, the qualitative analysis was thorough and in-depth; each of the three themes was explored intensively with participants and analysed carefully. The purpose of the study was not to yield representative results, but to explore the issues qualitatively to yield a richness of data. Second, the decision to screen out individuals presenting with a clinical profile limits the generalizability of the results. Thus, while this study tells us much about how older individuals successfully cope with retirement and ageing, it can say little about those retirees who fare poorly. Atchley (2003) has stated that most people cope well with retirement. Third, being aware of the limitations of closed models in content analysis, we were vigilant for possible emerging Stages, Categories or types of LR. Based on our findings, we propose that a new LR Category may be useful and appropriate, that of emotional ceiling versus intellectual termination and integration. That is, we observed cases in which LR ceilinged at the emotional level, but was integrated or terminated at the intellectual level.

A next possible step for this research would be to analyze the LR meetings with a content analysis model using emerging categories. The same LR methodology could be used with a population of older adults who present a clinical profile. Despite its limitations, the current study does suggest that LR can be used as a means towards a better self-understanding during a period of transition such as retirement.

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Appendix A

Questions Used to Explore Themes, by Session Number

Sessions 9 and 10, theme: My Strengths

- What are the strengths and strategies that I recognize in myself?
- How did they help me in the past? How do they help me now?

Sessions 11 and 12, theme: My Retirement

- Did I choose to retire?
- What does the word “retirement” mean to me?
- What does it mean to me to be at this point in life and in my life?

Sessions 13 and 14, theme: My Goals and My Mission in Life

- What are the goals in my life today?
- Are these goals important to me?
- Have my goals changed throughout my life? If so, how?
- Which principles have guided my life? Are they the same today?
- Which conclusions or observations do I come to regarding my life?