



From the Mouths of the Elderly: What can their Life Experience Teach us?

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Abstract

Reminiscing by older adults can facilitate beneficial outcomes through the preparation for the end of life, the cohesiveness of life narratives, and the creation of life meanings. Given this, and the historical challenges of communication between generations, the objective of this study was two-fold: (1) to harness the beneficial role reminiscence can play in the mental health of older adults; (2) to facilitate generational learning by documenting and thematically analyzing the experiences and knowledge of older adults. We hypothesized that our interviews, which had the stated goal of helping younger people navigate life challenges, would not only act as a catalyst for the participants to reminisce but also create a corpus of knowledge which could be later transcribed and analyzed into accessible “pearls of wisdom”. The interviews were conducted in Canada with 132 participants who were 60 to 94 years of age with six questions constructed to promote further commentary. Through the interviews, we were successful in producing a large representation of the older adults' experiences and what they believed would be beneficial for the younger generation. Due to the potential benefits for participants and larger communities, we recommend this approach be adopted for future studies.

Keywords

Reminisce, Elderly, Older Adults, Qualitative, Narrative, Knowledge, Generational, Meaning in Life, Ageing; End of Life

Introduction

This research project was precipitated by two experiences:

- a. Interacting with older adults in community centers and housing for older adults, and noticing a prevalence of loneliness on the one hand, and their accumulated knowledge which they have very little opportunity to share with others, on the other.

- b. Teaching, by the first author, of emerging adults in university [ages 18-26] and noticing, by their reactions and comments, how limited their knowledge and connection with older adults is.

When I grew up, I always heard “when you grow up you will know and understand” and seeing those two segments of the population, I realized that there is a way of getting to the knowledge that older adults accumulated over their lifetime. We also realized how

it could be transmitted to the youth and thus saving them from decades of mistakes, and on the way lightening up the loneliness felt by many older adults, especially the old-old, aged 84 and up.

According to Erikson and Butler, reminiscence and life review naturally occurs as life draws to a close [1,2]. As death looms closer during the second half of a person's life, the interpretation of one's past life takes on an increasingly large part when bestowing meaning on one's life [3]. This may enhance ego-integrity which occurs when one can see his or her life as a harmonious whole which, in retrospect, can be evaluated as having been positive. Webster found that reminiscence is more important for death acceptance in old age than in other periods of life [4]. Whitbourne observed that, during one's life, a person tends to periodically review their past and when doing so ranks and evaluates their experiences [5]. These renewed constructions are influenced by external life conditions which are considered to be affected by historical, cultural, social, and material circumstances, and by internal life conditions, which are the psychological and biological dimensions in addition to the person's expectations of the time left to live. Gerontological studies point out that psychologically healthy people achieve a positive life audit, meaning that they are cognizant of negative experiences that they underwent, but they do not evaluate them as predominant [3].

Erikson described the stages of human age-related development, addressing ego-integrity as the acceptance of life as it is and as a product of a fulfilled life [1]. While not all of us may look back and conclude that we lived fulfilling lives, life review can help in achieving acceptance and fulfillment. Some interesting research findings of reviewing one's life:

- Acceptance of one's achievements in life can prepare one to face death with a reduced, or absence of fear [6]
- Disengaging from an active lifestyle, common for most elderly, is closely associated with an increased acceptance of one's past life, based on a reinterpretation of the past [7]
- Older people judge themselves more kindly than younger people do [8]

Reminiscence is the active or passive recalling of memories from the past, basically allowing one to review one's life [9,10]. Memories are an important source of identity and self-continuity, helping individuals to project themselves into meaningful future events [11]. It has been used, over the years, with significant therapeutic effects especially in reducing stress [12,13]. Butler described such life review as "an inner experience or mental process of reviewing one's life" [2]. Re-examination of one's history may result in new understanding, insight, or resolve unanswered questions that the person may have [9]. Chin conducted a meta-analysis evaluating the efficacy of reminiscence therapy and found people who were offered this therapeutic approach reported greater increases in happiness and decreases in the depressed mood [13].

What are the benefits of reminiscing and life review for older adults?

Research has demonstrated that in older adults, life review can enhance general wellbeing in both spontaneous and structured contexts such as an intervention [12,14,15]. The positive effects range from increasing self-esteem [16], life satisfaction, and reducing loneliness, depression, dementia, and mental disorders in older adults [17-20]. Life review also helps facilitate social contact and foster a sense of belonging [21].

By telling about their past events, wants, regrets, and achievements, older people can transmit their life experiences, folk traditions, and life lessons to younger generations. Intergenerational reminiscence also offers the potential for reducing existing barriers between generations [22,23]. Life reviews, done with youngsters, may help alleviate negative perceptions of older adults, which can negatively affect the psychological and cognitive functions of older adults [24]. Further research found positive intergenerational contact can reduce stereotypes among older adults as well [25]. Intergenerational reminiscence can also provide an effective and rewarding activity that enhances positive forms of interaction between the older and younger generations [26,27].

Gaggioli et al. conducted a study on the effects of intergenerational reminiscence on the elderly's psychosocial wellbeing [28]. Findings indicate that the intervention contributed to a decrease in participants' feelings of loneliness. Additionally, elderly participants perceived intergenerational reminiscence as a highly-involving and enjoyable activity. Reminiscence was characterized by clear goals and high levels of concentration and was perceived as being related to personal wellbeing and self-realization [29,30]. Life review has been shown to increase self-esteem, self-satisfaction, sense of meaning, and purpose in life among older adults [14]. It was also associated with improvements in depressive symptoms among older adults [31]. As was mentioned above, it is intuitively apparent that reviewing positive life events would enhance one's self-understanding, self-esteem, and the feeling that one's life has been meaningful. But all of us make mistakes, by commission or by omission. What about regrets and how do they affect us?

It was suggested that the function of regret is to assist us to learn from our past mistakes. Regret should, thus, facilitate the identification and enactment of behaviors that will prevent one from making the same mistake again [32]. The term *regret* carries two different meanings. One when one feels sorry for [i.e. "When looking back on my past life, I regret that I did not complete university"], and the other is to lament or bemoan, as a way of describing feelings about given events or states [i.e. "I regret that my parents were not successful at convincing me not to get married to the one I did"] [33].

When regretful, people tend to wish to change their lives or way of behaving in an attempt to correct the mistakes which they regret [34]. However, many important life decisions, for instance in the areas of education, family planning, and career planning, typically need to be decided and acted upon in specific life stages. Therefore, in many areas of life, the opportunity for change has passed for older people. Since no change is possible in those areas for older adults, their way of dealing with regrets is externalizing responsibilities by attributing negative events to external forces [6]. How do men and women handle regrets? Research indicated that men are

inclined toward acting, while women have a tendency to affiliate [35].

What do people regret?

Landman and Manis found that most people wish they had done something differently in their lives, probably meaning that they regret these decisions [36]. Decisions relating to not having completed one's education and having made poor career choices or relationship choices were the most common [37]. Interestingly, research pointed out that people tend to regret more actions, i.e. errors of commission, than inactions or errors of omission. That may suggest that people regret making mistakes more than they may regret missing opportunities [38]. Moreover, the extent to which the unwanted outcome perseverates in memory is a positive predictor of regret intensity [38,39]. Since older adults usually do not have, by and large, an opportunity to correct mistakes that they regret from their past, they may experience "low closure", since it may not involve a changed behavior in the future [40-42], and consequently such lack of closure evokes emotions [41]. Importantly, low closure makes the past experience feel psychologically unfinished and unresolved [40,41] and is experienced as aversive [43].

"The follies which a man regrets most in his life, are those which he didn't commit when he had the opportunity" [44].

About this study:

Clearly, most older adults enjoy talking about their lives and sharing their experiences with others. It is important, however, that they be given some freedom in what they choose to talk about, since older adults are not homogeneous, and not all will want to share the same kind of stories during life reviews. As was earlier mentioned, this study aimed at connecting the younger and the older generations, in a manner that would benefit all participants. Beyond the established benefits for older adults following life reviews guided by our questions, Scott and DeBrew found that these benefits were sustained for both older adults who were interviewed and by the students [research assistants] who interviewed them [45]. The students' ideas about older adults were changed, now being more

comfortable talking with older adults. The value of life reflection as a nursing intervention has also been instilled for the student [45].

Method

Participants:

Sixty-six men and sixty-six women aged 60 to 94 (M= 77.9) from mostly low and medium socioeconomic backgrounds participated in this project. They were gathered in the snowball technique, where existing study participants recruit future participants, from community centers, public parks that older adults frequented, or their residences. Participants were read the informed consent but were not asked to sign it, due to their great concern of signing anything without a family member being present and wished to preserve their anonymity. The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the university to which the authors belong.

Interviewers:

The participants were interviewed by a total of four female undergraduate psychology students in their beginning twenties. They were particularly chosen for this study since the goal was to have older adults transmit their life experiences to the younger generation, so on various occasions, it was as if grandparents were discussing their life experiences with their grandchildren.

Procedure:

The present research, by asking of the participants several questions [outlined below] was akin to reminiscing and oral history which was defined “as a method for assessing the stories and records that aid in the understanding of previous events in history as well as the feelings surrounding such events. Although oral history research utilizes less structured approaches than other methodologies (e.g., researchers are encouraged to follow cultural norms, practices, and intuition when conducting an interview rather than relying on standardized interview techniques), asking similar questions across participant interviews generates consistency... The flexible style of oral history research offers advantages to participants, including greater openness story sharing and provides participants with greater control in setting the pace of

the interview” [46].

Since older adults are a heterogeneous group, and each has his or her own life experience, knowledge, and the way to relate it, we did not use any structured questionnaires or standardized measures to find out those ‘pearls of wisdom’ that we were after. Instead, research assistants met with older adults who volunteered, for a period that ranged from 30 to 45 or in some cases 60 minutes, and asked them six identical questions (along with some biographical questions regarding their age and marital status):

1. What have you done in life that you are glad you did?
2. What have you done in life that you regret doing?
3. What have you not done in life that you are glad you did not do? and,
4. What have you not done in life that you regret not doing?
5. What have you achieved in life and how did you manage those achievements?
6. Are there any “pearls of wisdom” you would like to share, for the benefit of the younger generation?

The interviews were recorded, with the participant’s permission, and later transcribed. Themes were, then, transcribed and analyzed to be grouped into categories by the two authors.

Analysis:

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke was utilized to analyze the data [47]. “Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this and interprets various aspects of the research topic (p. 79). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed for embedded ‘pearls’ which we saw as wise reflections on one’s life, and possibly suggestions for future generations of what to do and what to refrain from in their lives. As suggested by Braun and Clarke, themes that captured an important issue related to the research question and represented some level of

patterned response or meaning within the data set was identified [47]. As the above authors observed, the two authors of the present paper, with the assistance of two research assistants, conferred, reviewed the data, and decided what formed the various themes and how to name them. Inter-rater reliability for finding 'pearls' and for categorization of themes was 95%.

A thematic analysis typically focuses exclusively on one level [47]. Themes are identified within the surface meanings of the data, and researchers do not look for anything beyond what a participant has said or what has been written. It was opined that the analytic process involves a progression from the description, where organization according to patterns in semantic content, are summarized and then interpreted, and an attempt to theorize the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings may follow. In contrast, a thematic analysis at the latent level goes beyond the semantic content of the data and examines underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data.

Results

Theme-1: 'Need to study or learn a profession':

Preparing for the brightest future possible often included getting a university education or a professional trade. Older adults stressed how life can be more difficult without building a solid foundation in which to grow from or if needed, fall back on. The concepts of security, stability, and happiness were all present in the interviews as they encouraged younger people to prepare for the years ahead.

- a. *Perseverance and Hard Work* – Many participants shared their own career experiences as they associated long hours and hard work with success and fulfillment. Other concepts that were associated with this theme included the freedom to direct the course of one's life, how perseverance can reveal who you are to others, and how it can earn you the respect of others. Examples of these ideas in the interviews include: [Female, 76] – “You need perseverance, and once you understand what the job or game is, then go for it.”, [Female, 78] – “I'm glad that I didn't stay home and be the housewife. A lot of women do

that. I needed to get out, I couldn't stay home and do nothing.”, [Female, 83] – “While you are working, don't forget people are counting on you. And don't let older nurses pick on you for all their joe jobs so you don't have time for your patients.”, [Male, 83] – “I became a supervisor at a big glass company by working hard and putting in long hours.”

- b. *Working With Others* – Putting in the effort to get along with co-workers, being friendly, and navigating the relationships with superiors were all highlighted as important skills and attitudes to have to achieve success: [Male, 83] – “I always tried to be friendly with people at work.”, [Male, 85] – “Knowing how to deal with superiors. I made my boss look good, even though he wasn't very good” [Female, 82] – “And I got along very well with co-workers.”
- c. *Pride in Accomplishments* – The sense of personal worth that stems from participant's education and career accomplishments was apparent in the interviews. Feelings of appreciation and satisfaction were tied to the opportunities they had, as fondly remembering their work years was not uncommon. [Female, 81] – “I feel good about the fact I earned my masters degree at the University of Toronto.”, [Male, 73] – “My greatest achievement as teaching people back home how to repair a color TV, a lot of those people opened their own businesses because I taught them.”, [Male, 66] – “As a teacher being creative and enthusiastic, loving the students you teach is another achievement.”
- d. *Education and Planning for the Future* – Education was seen not only as the best preparation for an ever more competitive labor landscape but as an intrinsic good in its own right. Older adults also advised taking school seriously, having a plan that fits the reality of the future labor market, and continuing education outside of school. [Female, 94] – “I received an education in a technical school. I was successful in my career in a project institute.”, [Female, 75] – “Social life cannot be everything. Meeting classmates and friends at school during the day is fine, but it can't continue all evening and take weeks from your studies and doing homework.”,

[Male, 74] – “It is important to think in terms of where the real job prospects are when they are making decisions about what to take in university. Whether they’re going to pay a salary that they are going to be comfortable with.”

- e. *Humility* – Warnings against being too proud to take a menial job or being overly ambitious appeared in the interviews. These kinds of jobs were associated with taking what you can find and also as a possible opportunity for future advancement. [Male, 92] – “I’ve achieved a military career, but it’s not something that I even count, because I wear no medals as you can see.”, [Male, 70] – “If you cannot find a particular job, you have to do anything else. Maybe you make minimum wage but that job will give you the opportunity to talk to people.” [Male, 72] – “Don’t be too ambitious, if you find a really good job like a civil service job stay with it.”

Theme-2: ‘Marital Relationships’:

Older adults spoke about the importance of marriage and by extension, the process of deciding on the right person. There were numerous expressions of gratitude for their marriage, of love for their partner, and what they accomplished together. On the flip side of that, some participants retold their struggles of marriages gone badly and having made a mistake to marry in the first place. Advice on how to maintain a healthy marriage was also mentioned with an emphasis on honesty, compatibility, intimacy, and working as a team all being recorded.

- a. *Making a Commitment* – Older adults placed importance on committing to another person and taking relationships seriously. This included: [Male, 78] – “The idea of living with somebody is ridiculous; if you really like the person, marry them. Give them that security, become bound.” [Male, 70] – “My son said he had a girlfriend but didn’t want to marry her, and I said no, you have to marry her and be husband and wife.”
- b. *Pride in Marriage, Gratitude* – A successful marriage was a source of pride and gave some participants a sense of accomplishment. There was also a general sense of gratitude they expressed that they found the right partner. [Female, 75] – “I’m very proud that I met my

husband and had a good marriage”, [Female, 80+] – “My relationship with my husband has been really great. I was lucky because I never knew him until I met him and then one month later we were already going steady.”, [Male, 81] – “Marrying my wife was good and benefited me, I cannot forget that.”

- c. *Compatibility* – With the value older adults placed on the institution of marriage and the wide implications it has for the trajectory of a person’s life it is unsurprising they highlighted compatibility and understanding as critical considerations for a life partner. Common interests, backgrounds, expectations, and spending habits were all seen as key commonalities to a successful marriage [Female, 75] – “Sometimes it doesn’t work when two people are different. When one is a spender and the other isn’t, that can cause a lot of problems”, [Person #30, Female, 70] – “You will want a person by your side that understands you, we are not dogs, it’s important to know where you come from and stick to it.”, [Female, 77] – “Today the youth split up too easily, too young and that is the problem. Make sure you know them very well, first you might be excited from the love and the sex, but that is not the main part of life. So, make sure you know what you are doing when you meet someone you are going to marry.”
- d. *Faithful* – Having remained faithful throughout a marriage was interpreted as a personal accomplishment and an avoidance of betrayal. [Female, 75] – “I’m glad I never strayed from my husband.”, [Male, 74] – “There are many beautiful women in Spain, there is a lot of temptation. My wife was no exception and I am glad that I never cheated on her. I have seen relationships fall apart because people are weak and succumb to temptation.”, [Male, 74] – “I love my wife and I have always been true to her. I’m glad I’ve never gone astray from my Maria.”
- e. *Caring, Respect, Intimacy* – During the interview process older adults discussed their respect for their partner and how it, and intimacy were central to a successful union. Demonstrations of love were also held as important expressions: [Female, 84] – “You have to care for them, be

attracted to them, respect them. With Roy, everyone loved Roy.”, [Female, 81] – “I had a very short time in my first marriage, spent a lot of time working, and we had little time for intimacy.”, [Male, 66] – “Demonstrate your love for your partner and children often.”

- f. *Communication, Navigating Differences, and Difficulties* – The ingredients to a healthy marriage were discussed by the participants as they attempted to give actionable advice to younger generations. This included advice related to knowing one’s self, open communication, and acceptance: [Female, 72] – “Nobody is perfect, but I enjoy being his wife, he is Jewish and learned my traditions and I am Catholic and I learned his.”, [Male, 74] – “If I got married again, I would know how to deal with her. By talking to her to understand and not be selfish. Not talk about things that she is not interested in. Help with chores, help around the house. I can’t be lazy and then blame it on learning from my father.”, [Female, 66] – “In a marriage telling each other how you honestly feel and work it out without fighting, without saying things you will regret later. But expressing yourself with respect for your partner.”

Theme-3: ‘Shaping the future generation/raising kids’:

Older adults shared their accumulated knowledge and were mostly interested in making suggestions about what to do, and what not to do in relation to raising children. As well as offering various ‘pearls’ related to future generations, which gave a major role to parenting, the family, and the set of values that were transmitted from one generation to the next. The theme ‘Shaping the future generation/raising kids’ was so well represented that we were able to divide it into several subthemes, as follows:

- a. *Enhancing Family Bond* – highlighting the importance of the family, the support offered by its members, and the guidance that the family group can provide about life’s trials and tribulations. Examples of the ‘pearls’ that were included here are: [Male, 78] – “Having a close proximity and seeing children regularly helps keep a strong bond.”, [Male, 77] – “Spending

time together as a family is very important, it’s the key to develop a relationship, you just need to stay on top of it”, [Male, 81] – “Learn to be nurturing.”

- b. *Engaging in Direct Communication with Family Members* – This subtheme is related, yet distinct, from the one above. It hails the importance of actively attending to interfamilial communication and ensuring, as much as possible, that the lines of communication are open, available, and constructive. Examples of the ‘pearls’ that were included here are: [Female, 81] – “Families are missing out on intimacy, children don’t speak much, just use their gadgets”, [Male, 70] – “If their parents and the youth could communicate more together, I think that would be a big help to the youth.”, [Female, 72] – “Communication is very important, but when you are on social media, it’s an illusion because you are doing it through the phone, you are not looking at anybody. I see people at restaurants, sitting at the same table, on their cellphone texting, not talking to one another. Why go out? But I think communication with peers, parents, and spouse, is important, that’s one piece of advice I have for young people.”
- c. *Forgive and aim to understand*- Once again, due to its importance, another subtheme emerged about the need, for parents, to model for their children how to be open to other’s communication, endeavor to understand it, and when there is a need – know how to forgive. Examples of the ‘pearls’ that were included here are: [Female, 75] – “Don’t close the door on your family, even when they hurt you”, [Female, 76] – “Advising young people: don’t be so quick to judge”, [Female, 82] – “Listen to your children and don’t always think you know best. It will leave you close-minded and not able to think clearly.”
- d. *Responsible Parenting* – While some may think that a family is a collection of parents and children and that bringing children to the world and feeding them is its essence, our sample repeatedly highlighted that having a family included the responsibility of the parents not only in the present welfare of the family and the children, but also their future, and preparing

them for life. Examples of the ‘pearls’ that were included here are: [Female, 81] – “I worked very hard on raising a family and trying to make sure they could think for themselves, and I think I succeeded”, [Male, 70] – “You need to be involved, aware, but on the other hand for the kids of today there is a huge amount of know-how and challenges and opportunities that my age never had”, [Female, 80] – “I raised five daughters, I love baking and bake my own bread still. I have done a lot of knitting and coaching.”

- e. *Expressing pride in family and children* – It is important that the family not only be a central part in one’s support network, that values be transmitted to offspring, but that the family feels pride as a unit, and know that the parental system is proud of their children. Such knowledge can add power and strength to them. Examples of the ‘pearls’ that were included here are: [Male, 66] – “Raising three children that are kind, responsible and have a great relationship with each other is something we achieved”, [Female, 80] – “Caring for my children was a success of mine.”, [Female, 82] – “My children know I am very proud of them.”
- f. *Encourage your kids to dream and achieve* – One of the important roles of parents, according to our sample, is to provide their offspring with goals to achieve, and with permission to dream about how they want their lives to be, and naturally, to do what they can to realize their dreams. Examples of the ‘pearls’ that were included here are: [Male, 81] – “I tell my grandchildren, really, go for your dream. Whatever it is. And shoot for it. Because if you don't you'll be very unhappy in life, later on, as you grow up”, [Female, 75] – “I always tell my kids, whatever you want to do is fine with me, do what you want to do. Strive for it, go to school and study, whatever you want to do”, [Female, 81] – “That’s part of the mystery of life, figuring out what it is you are supposed to be doing. That’s why you need to get out of your comfort zone, it’s the best way to get to know yourself. If you limit your experience it is harder to know yourself.”

Theme-4: ‘Regrets’:

One of the more heavily populated themes during the interviews with older adults was that of regrets. This included regrets of dithering when needing to be decisive, of being impulsive when it was best to be cautious, of not furthering education, of marital trouble, and failing to be there when others needed help. Regrets were documented by many of the participants as they attempted to save younger generations from making the same mistakes they had made.

- a. *Regretting Acting or not Acting* – Older adults framed knowledge and experience as the antecedents to be able to differentiate between opportunities and unnecessary risk. They also spoke of their own mistakes and urged others to learn from their errors: [Male, 84] – “Perhaps I should have listened to my wife instead of going with my gut. Maybe she was more conservative than I was.”, [Male, 81] – “Yeah, to be very honest with you, I should have listened to my father. I really should have listened to my father. But I was too smart for my father.”, [Female, 72] – “I regret convincing my daughter to go through with a marriage proposal she got. It would have been better if she married someone she liked. Maybe someone in her college she told us she liked. But she was scared and never said anything, and this bothers me a lot.”
- b. *Undisciplined Financially* – Making smart investment choices and implementing a budget were highlighted as important to security as well as avoiding marital strife. [Male, 81] – “I did some very poor investments. It cost me a bit.”, [Male, 66] – “I wish I focused more on being fiscally responsible.”, [Male, 66] – “I should have spent more energy balancing income to expenses. Money is a huge issue in a marriage.”
- c. *Not Persevering* – The participants expressed regret over not working hard enough: [Male, 81] – “Yes, I was basically a smart ass. I mean, I went from one construction job to another, to XXXXXXX builders, from there I was vice president for XXXXX and moved to Ottawa for a couple of years. And because the president was such an idiot I resigned.”, [Female, 75] – “I regret I didn’t work harder.”

- d. *Not Pursuing Education, or More Education* – A common regret among the participants was not pursuing a university education or a trade. There were concerns expressed that in a rapidly changing business environment a person could be left behind if they had not obtained a sufficient level of education. [Female, 79] – “I didn’t finish school because my father didn’t believe in girls being educated. I wanted to be a teacher, I wish I had the strength to say no, I’m going to finish school anyway.”, [Male, 76] – “I regret that I did not go to university to get my degree, that is my one regret in life.”, [Female, 77] – “I regret not going to school long enough, I guess. I would have gotten a better job.”
- e. *Marriage and Relationship Issues* – Regrets concerning marriage were discussed with concerns about getting married too early in life, finding the right person, and going through a divorce. While marriage can be seen as a foundation for a prosperous life, a bad marriage can mean the opposite for some people. [Female, 79] – “I regret getting married as young as I did. I was brought up by a very strict father and taught that women do everything. My first husband, he never grew up, so I really had seven children”, [Male, 83] – “I regret having to divorce my first wife. It changed my life, my son’s and my ex-wife’s lives as well”, [Male, 76] – “I should have been a better husband. I didn’t keep up with my wife’s expectations. One day she told me she is leaving and the next day she left.”
- f. *Not Having More or Any Children* – The regret of not having children, or enough children was expressed by several participants. [Male, 72] – “I regret not getting married and not having children.”, [Female, 73] – “I regret that we did not have more children.”, [Female, 66] – “I regret not trying to have children sooner. I could not have children by the time I tried, hence the teaching job.”
- g. *Traveling* – Missing out on opportunities to travel due to starting a family or a career was a common regret among older adults. It was depicted as a way to learn about the world and yourself: [Female, 85] – “I regret not traveling more. I would have gone to Europe because I took Spanish in school and was always fascinated with that. Unfortunately, I was busy with work”, [Female, 79] – “I regret not having traveled more before I was married. It is a very educational experience. You learn a lot; you have to find yourself in learning what you are capable of. For a woman, in her 20s, to travel on her own is pretty brave.”, [Female, 85] – “I could have done more traveling but when you have four kids and you are working there is no time.”
- h. *Not Being With Those Who Needed Me* – Not being there to support friends and family in times of need was a regret repeatedly mentioned. Comments included concerns of being a poor communicator, an over-disciplinarian, and not physically being present in hard times. [Female, 81] – “I regret not staying with both parents when they were dying. They both died in the hospital and I was not there at their bedsides when they went. I regret not being there. My last husband, when he died, it was in the same room. But I regret also, with my first husband, I wasn’t at his side either. That still bothers me.”, [Male, 68] – “I wish I had better communication with my children. I spent a lot of time with them at games, but I was missing the point of trying to stay in their lives.”, [Male, 66] – “I was too focused on discipline with my children instead of a balance between discipline and demonstrating how much I loved them.”
- i. *Not Taking Risks, Lack of Courage* – Older adults commented on regrets where they failed to muster up the courage to meet a challenging situation. These lingering regrets took the form of limiting experiences to the familiar, not speaking up for what is important, and not being more assertive. [Male, 77] – “I regret the times I was not able to speak up when I should have. I was not able to do the things I should have if there is something bad happening, I should have stood up, but I did not.”, [Female, 81] – “Regret being a little uptight during my life about trying things and doing things. I was very shy.”, [Female, 85] – “One thing I regret is not being more outspoken. Saying what I think I deserved. Being more active in things. I did what I had to do. I had a shy side.”

Discussion

This research project aimed at engaging older adults in reviewing their lives' achievements, victories, failings, and regrets by using thematic analysis. In the process of answering our questions and thereby reminiscing on their past the themes of formal and informal education, marital/intimate relations (and their cultivation), shaping future generations, and recognizing and resolving regrets all emerged as central to understanding their own lives and hopes for the future. The results of these 132 interviews and analysis include:

Theme-1:

Need to Study or Learn a Profession, was a theme constituted by several concepts associated with vocational success and contentment. This included perseverance, diligence, and hard work, where older adults encouraged younger generations to "keep trying", be honest, prompt, and fair. The capacity to work with others, navigating the expectations of supervisors, making the boss "look good", and being friendly were all behaviors associated with career success. Along with that, education and planning for the future were seen as foundational building blocks for any successful career with the advice given to acquire a trade, explore what area of study interests you, and being adaptable. There was also contrasting commentary about the ability to be proud of one's education and career with encouragement to be humble.

Many of the participants' commentary regarding this theme displayed a common-sense understanding that having a fulfilling career was something worth striving for. While not explicitly stated by the participants, the association between a person's employment and their general flourishing is just below the surface. As Law and Akkermans have documented, there is a large body of evidence that connects a person's occupation and their health, as manifested from the physiological to the functional [48,49]. It is these types of findings that provide an empirical basis for the common practice of placing value in the wisdom of older adults.

Theme-2:

Marital Relationships included several subthemes, of which the most commented on was that of making a commitment, where older adults advised younger people to take the leap and commit to the institution of marriage. They also expressed pride and gratitude for their own experiences with marriage, having found a great partner and how it was an "achievement". Compatibility was also a repeated concept in the interviews with pleas to get to know someone before committing, being honest, and having common interests. Other important aspects of marriage for older adults were, being faithful, caring, respectful, sharing intimacy, communicating, and navigating differences. These presented themselves in exclamations of gratitude that they never undermined their bond by straying on their wives and husbands, the dangers of sacrificing closeness for a career, encouraging the demonstration of love often, the importance of communication, and taking a real interest in their partner's happiness.

The direct association between well-being and marriage has been questioned by a number of studies, Lucas and Stutzer, as well as scrutinized for its establishment in Western countries with WEIRD populations [50,51,52]. While these efforts have introduced a critical perspective to the benefits of marriage it does not undermine the research supporting the notion that marriage can increase the married couple's quality of life [53,54]. It is also important to acknowledge that the advice given by the participants in this study emphasized the importance of becoming and finding a suitable partner, which aligns with research findings that the quality of the relationship was an important determinant of well-being [55].

Theme-3:

Shaping the Future Generation/Raising Kids, encompassed actively enhancing the family bond, establishing resilient lines of communication, and inspiring intimacy between family members. It also included defining conflicts as an opportunity for resolution and forgiveness, not a catalyst for grievances or judgment, instilling values that go beyond material wants or needs, promoting prosocial

behaviors and empathy towards all fellow humans with a focus on the “golden rule”. In addition to this, there was stress placed on the importance of educating children about their own autonomy and how it relates to personal responsibility. Children’s dreams and life goals were also seen as vital and in need of encouragement and support, with the particular goal of a child seen as far less important than the act of striving for it with the support of parents to help them achieve it. This kind of support and communication between family members was also tied to deeper personal meanings where the close bond between members could provide support against loneliness and meaninglessness. Lastly, taking pride in the family’s accomplishments, and one’s own parenting successes were highlighted as the family unit should be a constant source of strength and joy.

This theme placed the family at the foundation of an individual’s growth and envisioned it as a touchstone that could always provide strength, a sense of comfort, and a place in the world. Older adults’ concerns here are largely for the next generation and how their own accrued knowledge could facilitate future success. This interpretation of one’s past life in ways that provide guidance to others is also associated with generating life meaning for older adults. This process of meaning-making is consistent with Hofer, Busch, Au, Šolcová, Tavel, & Wong’s, research, which, in a cross-cultural study, focused on how reminiscence is used to prepare for death and teach others. Both of these “reminiscence functions” were found to motivate generative behaviors associated with meaning-making across all of the cultural samples [59].

Theme-4:

Regrets turned out to be one of the more popular themes as older adults discussed their own mistakes and advised others on how to avoid similar outcomes, which is consistent with findings by Landman and Manis who observed that most people wished they had taken a different path in life [36]. These regrets were commonly expressed in the mentions of missing out on opportunities, juxtaposed with impulsively acting without doing due diligence. Advice related to these concerns was to wait until you have more experience before making large life decisions and to listen and

learn from your parents and grandparents. Being undisciplined financially was another common concept, as older adults commented on taking too big a financial gamble on certain investments and the lack of budgeting. Further, the participants spoke of regret of not possessing enough courage to try something new, traveling, or being assertive, all consistent with the desire to make changes when regretful of the past [34]. Other regrets included not working hard enough or avoiding education, with not pursuing higher learning as the single largest regret for the participants.

The next most mentioned regret was not being there when others needed them. This was articulated in comments about moving away from family, not possessing enough patience, pulling back when illness presented itself in a loved one, and concentrating too much on discipline and not listening to children. There were also regrets, exclusively from females, of getting married too early or at all, while men exclusively remarked they wished they had been a better partner or had not strayed. A common thread running through this theme was the regret of lost possibilities as the participants did not spend the required time or effort investing in them in order to realize their potential. With regrets and their association with a lack of closure, people can feel that the past remains unresolved, meaning these emotions could have contributed to the popularity of this theme [40,41].

Conclusion

We believe our study has contributed to reminisce research by facilitating and documenting several beneficial processes that have been highlighted in previous studies mentioned above. These include the establishment/re-establishment of life narratives, preparing for the end of life, and production of life meanings - all of which have been associated with elderly flourishing [12,14,15]. We also believe, through the interview process and thematic analysis, this study created a resource of guidance and actionable advice focused on navigating life challenges for younger generations. With these dual objectives met, it is reasonable to forward our study as a framework for future research which would emphasize the production of tangible benefits mentioned above, e.g. better

outcomes for older adults and the preservation and dissemination of knowledge. To this end, since these studies only conducted interviews in the Westernized county of Canada, future studies could be conducted outside these communities so the extent of this approach's generalizability can be examined. That said, due to previous studies and our own research, we do believe this approach to research to be widely generalizable to many elderly populations, and a net benefit to participants and the wider communities. We also believe that further analysis, including comparisons and variations across gender and age groups while it may add value to these findings, would require deploying an entirely new coding regimen. The time demands this would place on the team would be onerous while also creating concerns the manuscript would become cumbersome and possibly distractingly long.

Conflict of Interest

All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript. The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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