Using Older Adults' Life Review in Marriage Preparation: Report from a Pilot Project

James J. Magee
College of New Rochelle, jmagee11@verizon.net

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.cnr.edu/facpubs
Part of the Catholic Studies Commons, and the Gerontology Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ CNR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CNR. For more information, please contact lfazzino@cnr.edu.
ABSTRACT. This article examines how four guidelines for sharing reminiscences with kin soon to be married enhanced the self-understanding of older adults while helping kin to recognize patterns they are bringing into the marriage. The first guideline is to tape record or videotape the meeting with kin. The second is that the kin be physically present to question and elaborate upon the reviewers’ memories. The third is that the reviewers avoid discussions about relationships involving generations younger than their own. The final guideline is that the reviewers have facilitators reconvene the original groups to hear their accounts of the meeting with the younger kin. The reviewers share what occurred; the members note the differences between reviewers’ current and original interpretations of their reminiscences; the reviewers then take from the meeting the cumulative insights from both their memories and the feedback of their group. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Kinship, life review, marriage preparation, reminiscence

James J. Magee, PhD, is Professor of Gerontology, Graduate School, College of New Rochelle, New Rochelle, NY 10805 (E-mail: jmageej11@juno.com). Activities, Adaptation & Aging, Vol. 29(2) 2005 Available online at http://www.haworthpress.com/web/AAA © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved. Digital Object Identifier: 10.1300/J016v29n02_01
INTRODUCTION

Life review is a form of reminiscence. Reminiscence occurs when a person recalls long forgotten incidents, dwelling on them and recapturing the emotions that originally accompanied them, often while trying to convey these felt experiences to a listener. These recollections are usually clear and vivid, accompanied by pleasant or uncomfortable emotions varying in intensity. They may focus upon any period of the life cycle and any aspect of a person's life.

Life review increases dramatically in middle age and continues unabated among older adults. In life review individuals reflect upon their personal history and accept responsibility for it. It is a process in which reviewers gradually reconstruct and assess their past, using their current values to weigh behavior that memories progressively return to consciousness. It need not, however, be a coherent progression of memories. Usually it proceeds circuitously through reverie, dreams, diary or journal entries, correspondence, and story-telling. A critical evaluation of life experiences with the goal of integrating them in an acceptance of oneself here and now is the unifying theme throughout these recollections (Garland, 2001).

Life review has manifold benefits. It focuses the attention of older adults upon the continuity of their identity over the life cycle. It eases their readiness to take responsibility for their life story by locating it within the cultural and familial contexts that conditioned its progression. It moves reviewers to savor the satisfactions they derived in the past while forgiving themselves for the harm they did and the good they did not do. It draws upon their capacity to find in their memories resources for anticipating their needs and planning for the most satisfying ways of meeting them (Haight & Webster, 1995).

This article shows how older adults have enhanced these benefits for themselves while generatively reaching out to share their reminiscences with family members engaged to be married. For the past five years I have facilitated reminiscence groups in an assisted living facility. During that time, ten groups, each composed of five members, have met for nine, ninety-minute sessions. During the ninth meeting, the participants discuss their willingness to contact kin engaged to be married, offer them a gift of memories pertinent to their upcoming marriage, and then to talk about this meeting with their reminiscence group. This last step enables them to weigh feedback from their colleagues as they further interpret their own life review. So far eight group members have carried out this project.
This article examines four guidelines which the reminiscence group members follow when they meet with their kin-to-be-married. These guidelines ensure that the reminiscences include principles of family systems that are likely to play out in the impending marriage. The examples presented in this article, for instance, illustrate such principles as toxic issues, those islands of sensitivity, e.g., autonomy, income, religion, ethnicity, and health, that precipitate anxiety and lock kin into triangles of persecutors, victims, and rescuers. They show how the driven reciprocity between emotional pursuing and distancing compounds anxiety by precluding negotiations with mutual respect; how patterns of over-functioning and dependency impede openness and collegiality; how sibling relationships endure through the life span (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). In brief, these guidelines draw upon memories that enhance the self-understanding of the older adult while helping the engaged kin to recognize the “familial luggage” they are carrying into their marriage.

**Tape Recording or Videotaping**

The first guideline is that the older adult tape record or videotape the meeting with kin. The reviewer and the engaged relative will each keep a copy. This recording is

- a catalyst to which the reviewer can refer to evoke associated memories, and to alter or elaborate upon details of the memories already shared. It captures lapses in memory, slips of the tongue, and undercurrent and expressed emotions, all of which affect the objectivity of the reviewer.

- a family heirloom, a resource for other kin and generations to come. It records both the responses and questions of those meeting with the reviewer and the reviewer’s answers to these questions. (Lawton, 2001)

The first example concerns Lois, an eighty-two year old widowed homemaker who made good use of the videotaping. Knowing that Lois’s health would not allow her to attend her wedding, her granddaughter had sent her an invitation out of courtesy. She replied and offered the videotape as a wedding present. At their meeting, Lois began with her narrative, and then responded to questions.

Lois wanted to convey the emphasis that her family placed on matters of health. Ever since Lois’s grandfather, as the town’s longest living veteran of the Grand Army of the Republic, had presided over the Main
Street Victory Parade, her older relatives regularly blamed other kin who died "prematurely" for "bringing it on through their own fault." Similarly, her grandmother, an Irish immigrant, used to intone the humorous, but telling, point that "back home we had to shoot a man to start a cemetery!"

Lois's mother had suffered rheumatic fever as a student in teacher training school, but, denying the risks involved, insisted on taking the physical education courses. When she did die at age fifty-two, the only sentiments the grieving family expressed were "how well," "how rested," and "how attractive" she looked in the coffin. Once Lois's father turned sixty, he developed high blood pressure and would wake up at night with blood flowing from his nose. He simply wiped it off and returned to sleep. Moreover, because he was badly troubled with varicose veins and arthritis, he went up and down stairs on his backside, yet still traveled by trolley to work daily. Finally, Lois recalled how her father had discovered her in the bathroom teaching her fourteen-year-old sister how to smoke, and in a rage about this threat to her sister's health refused to speak to Lois for ten years.

The tape recording was informative in several additional ways. It showed Lois's granddaughter remarking how her forebears had, in fact, identified longevity with ethnicity, so that marrying "your own kind," was no less emphasized than health (O'Brien, 2001). Her questions led Lois to admit that her parents had sought medical attention for their conditions, though belatedly. Her mother took Digitalis daily, and her father would limp around the block, exercising in the privacy of the evening. Finally, in response to questions about her father's ten years' rejection, Lois admitted, "Well, it was quite a while, in any case."

Participants

The second guideline is that, for all the reasons noted above, the engaged parties and any other kin accompanying them be physically present. These additional relatives can elaborate upon the reviewer's memories if they have heard them before, and speak from their own experiences with older family members. Often they have insightful anecdotes about the ways in which the patterns of relationships play out when the extended family gathers. When fiancés participate as well, the questions from such "outsiders" have the benefit of requiring the reviewer to convey explicitly many family assumptions that would otherwise remain unexpressed.
The second example concerns Mitchell, a seventy-seven year old widower and retired physician. His reputation was that medicine was his life and that family members had to schedule appointments to see him. As an older adult, decrements from pulmonary conditions continued to isolate him from the family. So, his niece felt honored to receive his invitation to meet, and, together with her fiancé, presented him with many questions never put to him before. He started his narrative with memories of his immigrant grandfather from Hungary who had become a police officer over here. When he discovered he had to pay a bribe to be promoted, he resigned and thereafter worked for himself as a grocer. His niece, however, inquired about her great-great-grandfather’s life in Hungary. She learned that he emigrated even though he would have inherited the farm because he “wanted more.” In the United States he fused ambition and integrity, exchanging salary for self-employment. Mitchell laughed at the realization he had done no less.

He reminisced about his father who was a competitive cyclist. Not only was his father inaccessible to the family while he practiced for hours, but he was gone on weekends for the races. When Mitchell’s mother initially turned to him for a compensatory relationship, he felt “suffocated” and distanced into his studies. His mother became enmeshed with his sister, instead, once he identified medicine as his goal as early as high school. When the fiancé inquired whether the relationship between Mitchell’s parents was “good enough,” he speculated that each child had moved out of state for “breathing room” once an adult. By then his father had developed back spasms, abandoned cycling, and became closer to his wife in his later years than ever before (Koffman, 2000).

Focusing Exclusively on Older Generations

The third guideline stipulates that reminiscences should focus exclusively upon the relationships of reviewers with siblings and cousins in their own generation, with parents and grandparents, and with other relatives from these older generations. By omitting reminiscences about reviewers’ relationships with members of the generations following their own, especially those in which they have been players, they minimize levels of anxiety and self-interest which could skew their narration. Reviewers are, of course, often the last living source of such information about family ancestors (Cicirelli, 1995).
This “upward” focus, in fact, may encourage the engaged party to join reviewers in several valuable and pleasurable tasks. Together they may

- travel to ancestral family residences, schools, parishes, and neighborhoods.
- visit members of the extended family, trade reminiscences, and record the folklore associated with family artifacts, such as, uniforms, awards, certificates, tools, pictures, and scrapbooks (Kotre, 1995)
- relate the reviewers’ lives to salient events in national and international history, such as, immigration, warfare, ongoing discrimination, economic depression, and natural disasters.

The third example concerns Eustace, an eighty-eight year old widow, proud to be the only female school assistant superintendent her community has ever had. Her granddaughter knew that Eustace could not attend her wedding out of state, and so had booked a room for the week so they could drive around together. When they visited Eustace’s childhood home, the current owners invited them in and sought memories about every room. At the doorway to the room of Eustace’s sister Daphne, she rolled her eyes and recalled that a doctor had told her sister when she was eighteen that she had a heart condition. Daphne repeatedly brought this diagnosis to the family’s attention and assumed a semi-invalid life style. She protested she could not have boyfriends or employment because of her heart, and her brothers financially supported her for her lifetime. Eustace emphasized that Daphne was the antithesis of herself.

They visited the shipyards where Eustace worked for three summers. Though she was a secretary, she was so mechanically proficient that she was often helping shipside. She claimed that her younger brother took his cue from her and earned an engineering degree. They traveled to the house Eustace had most recently lived in, and where her mother had died. “I was so much like my mother, meticulous, neat, popular, with high standards of performance,” she explained, and reminisced that Daphne was like her father who developed phobias as he approached retirement. He gave up driving, resisted being alone in a room, peeked out windows, and refused to answer the doorbell or the telephone.

Note that Eustace neither raised nor encouraged comments about relationships in generations younger than her own. Her ultimate goal in reminiscing with her granddaughter was to understand her own atti-
attitudes and behavior as deeply as possible. As seen above, the self-esteem invested in sibling relationships emotionally colored recollections. Were the reviewers speaking as parents and grandparents, this skewing would probably occur even more intensively. A relatively dispassionate understanding of behavior requires reviewers to reflect upon memories and anecdotes about interactions between and within their parents’ and grandparents’ generations. This shift in focus “upwards” emphasizes the “scripted” or programmed quality of these relationships and the lesson that self-acceptance to some extent means embracing a self in large part prescribed by the family’s scripting (Price, 1995).

**Reconvening the Reminiscence Group**

The final guideline is that the older adult have the reminiscence group facilitator reconvene the original group to hear the account of the meeting with the younger kin. The agenda here is threefold:

- for the reviewer to share new or reconsidered interpretations of the patterns of relationships in the family;
- for the members to tell the reviewer the differences they recognize between what her/his interpretations and emotional tone are now and what they had originally been;
- for the reviewer to glean cumulative insights from their own recollections and from the group. In the end, the project benefits the reviewers every bit as much as it does the younger generation.

The fourth example concerns Beatrice, a ninety-one year old widow eager to encourage her grandniece to maintain easy, open communication with her fiancé. Her own grandmother and mother had soured their marriages by unilateral decisions that their husbands confronted after the fact. Her grandmother, for instance, arranged for each of her three brothers to board with her for six months after they emigrated to America. When her husband, a fire chief, discovered each one in his home, he moved into the firehouse for the six months’ duration. When the third brother finally asked her why she did not talk to her husband beforehand about her plans, she replied, “What, and have two fights!”

Her mother had made several unilateral decisions about Beatrice’s education. When Beatrice’s grades remained just above failing after two years of high school, her mother sent her, without consulting her husband, to a boarding academy in a neighboring state. Then, when she
was graduating, her mother picked out a finishing school for her and even the courses she would take there.

Beatrice was herself the opposite extreme of these women. Her husband was the one who made unilateral decisions in their relationship. She accommodated him, for instance, when he insisted on her making him an entrée different from the one she was serving guests. On his deathbed, when he demanded that she virtually carry him to the car so that he could eat at his favorite clam bar, she acquiesced, drove through the snow, and had a waiter serve him at the car.

Her grandniece remarked that she understood now how she came to be so feisty herself. “Extremes of assertiveness and compliance are two sides of the same coin. The fare for a marriage, though, is openness to one another. One characteristic that attracted me to my fiancé is his own commitment to our talking through our decisions.”

Beatrice reported all this to her reassembled colleagues. She observed that she had not appreciated how significantly her forebears’ assertiveness had determined her own mousiness. Several others replied that she seems to “hold her own appropriately” in relating to fellow residents. Perhaps the extremes of her behavior were less pronounced outside of the marriage. Later, she realized that given her tendency to acquiesce, even moderate assertiveness could feel pushy to her. She needed to trust much more her analysis of how best to handle a situation rather than her feelings about how to do it—no easy task.

CONCLUSION

This project need not be limited to reminiscence groups meeting in resident facilities. Community settings such as senior centers, Y’s, and libraries can correlate this model with educational and family systems themes found in literature, films, art, and history. The success of this project resides, of course, upon the commitment of the sponsoring facility, the comfortable and challenging give-and-take of group members, and the expansive spirit of the older adults who meet with their kin. Even more significant is the older adults’ fidelity in observing the four guidelines presented above. For these guidelines invariably evoke memories that enhance the self-understanding of the reviewers while helping the engaged kin to recognize what they are bringing to their marriage. The engaged parties need only show up.
REFERENCES


RECEIVED: 01/04
REVISED: 04/04
ACCEPTED: 10/04