Learning from Life Stories: Recruiting Nursing Home Residents for a Life Story Work Program

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Recruiting nursing home (NH) residents to participate in program evaluations is a consistent challenge. This was evident in a federally supported project to improve person-centered care of long-stay NH residents enrolled in Medicaid. Evaluators sought to examine the impact of a life story work intervention using a pre-post study design involving interviews of NH residents and surveys of their family members and staff. Other resident eligibility criteria included willingness to participate in both research and life story interviews, age 60+, a Brief Inventory Mental Status (BIMS) score of 8 or higher, English-speaking, and consent from a legal guardian, if applicable. A total of 16 NHs agreed to participate in the implementation and evaluation of the program, which developed complimentary, individualized life story booklets for residents and a companion summary for staff. Of the homes’ combined population of 1,817 residents, 569 met eligibility criteria for the research study. Non-response from legal guardians excluded 37 residents, and 174 residents approached for recruitment declined to have their names released to the researchers. During baseline interviews, 20 residents failed the BIMS, 21 were unavailable, and 79 refused when approached by a research interviewer. Ultimately, 238 resident interviews were completed at baseline. Common themes for refusals included disinterest in participating in life story work, statements that theirs was not a good life worth talking about, and doubts that quality of care would improve. Strategies for addressing such challenges included displaying sample life story materials during recruitment and providing residents additional time to consider participation.

Actor Insights on Aging and Longevity

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Data for this study originated the Oklahoma 100 Year Life Project. A total N = 7 volunteer actors (n = 5 women; n = 2 men) were recruited to participate as actors to play the role of centenarians in a living history play based on oral historical narratives. Actors participated in preliminary (prior to play performance) and post (after play performance) focus group sessions. Focus group questions addressed four key ideas: (1) Perceptions of aging and human longevity; (2) Loss and decline in aging; (3) Narrative storytelling and; (4) Personal life goal(s). Qualitative content analysis was performed to assess general thematic evidence stemming from actor perspectives. Four predominant themes emerged suggestive of adaptation in actor perceptions about human aging and longevity. These themes included: (1.) Purpose seeking (e.g., “It was interesting to see how much you can get out of life.”); (2.) Age-embodiment (e.g., “I really wanted to focus on my facial movements and the way I talked”); (3.) Creative curiosity (e.g., “It takes a little bit of creativity. . . someone who has curiosity”); and (4.) Self-actualization
(e.g., “You just think it’s not going to happen to me... and then you’re like... I am probably going to live to 100 now.”). Results have implications relative to how oral historical narratives can be used to enhance the personification of aging on stage, as well as demystify personal myths about longevity. Applications for use within educational and community settings for theatre performances will be shared.

LINKS BETWEEN POSITIVE AFFECT AND DISENGAGEMENT FROM NEGATIVE STIMULI IN YOUNGER AND OLDER ADULTS
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Older adults attend to more positive than negative content compared to younger adults; this “age-related positivity” effect is often thought of as a way older adults may be regulating their moods. However, attentional disengagement abilities decline with age, which may make positive looking more challenging for older adults in some cases. To evaluate links between early attentional processes and affect, 48 younger adult and 49 older adult participants reported levels of positive and negative affect on the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS) and completed a spatial cueing task evaluating attentional orienting and disengagement from emotional stimuli. Participants were tasked with responding to the location of a spatial target after seeing a cue (emotional image) that either appeared on the same (orienting) or opposite (disengagement) side of the screen. Multilevel modeling analyses were conducted using age and self-reported affect from the PANAS as predictors at level-2, and trial characteristics as predictors at level-1. Positive affect (PA) was unrelated to task performance for younger adults. Older adults reporting higher PA responded more slowly overall, and higher PA scores predicted similar response times to positive and negative stimuli on both trial types. Older adults reporting lower PA oriented attention more quickly to positive stimuli, but took longer to disengage from negative. These results suggest that there may be a relationship between the ability to flexibly disengage from negative content and PA for older, but not younger adults, and also highlight the importance of teasing apart specific attentional processes when evaluating positivity effects.

REMEMBER AND REMINisce: CONNECTing OUR SCIENCE TO PEOPLE’S LIVES
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A driving paradigm of science, including much of the discipline of gerontology, remains post-positivism. However, the post-positivist emphasis on experimental control, elimination of “bias,” and internal validity may create a chasm between the science and scholarship we conduct and the lives of those who engage with us in such endeavors. The purpose of this presentation (a quilt provided to the authors by an individual who completed one of our studies evaluating the efficacy of a psychosocial support program for family members of relatives living in residential long-term care and with memory loss) is to offer an opportunity for scholars and others to reflect on the connections and partnerships we establish with those who volunteer to engage in our research initiatives. In particular, the aim of this presentation is to stimulate viewers to consider how we grow our relationships with those who volunteer in our research by creating true partnerships that outlast a single project. With the emergence of participatory research methodologies, person-centered care, and social media technologies, the importance of building relationships and partnerships with communities, families, and individuals in a more equitable manner is pressing. The use of the “Remember and Reminisce” quilt as well as other materials donated by individuals to dementia care researchers provide vivid, tactile reminders from those who engage with our science that our obligations to understanding their experiences must assume a broader, longer-term perspective than the boundaries that often dictate the life-cycle of a standard project/study.

THE HISTORY OF BEAUTY AND THE AESTHETICS OF LONGEVITY
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A long standing cultural narrative is aging appearance is neither attractive nor acceptable. This has not always been the case; the aesthetics of older appearance has been appreciated other times in history. Significant numbers of older people in the public sphere, as a result of the longevity revolution, has created a sense of visibility of among older people, particularly women. The aim of this qualitative study was to explore current notions of beauty and age among the postwar generation. A diverse group of thirty-four women and men (born between 1945 -1955) from the US and the UK were interviewed with a focus on their own self-presentation and the acts of seeing and being seen. This paper explores the some of the findings from this study which asked the central question – can old people be beautiful and, if so, how is age and beauty defined? The majority of research participants answered in the affirmative and responded with clearly defined notions of age and beauty. The findings found significant gender differences; not within the central research question but in regard to their own appearance. There were also significant gender differences in terms of a ‘competitive’ or ‘cooperative’ gaze when observing other older people. This small study invites further research and points to a possible shift in the aesthetics of old age, in part, as a result of the longevity revolution. It provides an outline for further exploration of the importance of appearance, meaning, and a sense of self in old age.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN MEANINGFUL LIVED EXPERIENCES RECALLED BY CENTENARIANS
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