UNDERSTANDING LIFE AT THE OLD FOLK'S HOME

Sharifah Meriam Syed Akil, Salhah Abdullah
Islamic Science University Malaysia

Abstract

Recent medical advancements, and improvements in hygiene and food supply have led to the people of Malaysia having longer life expectancy. In such a situation, many elderly people in Malaysia, especially, wish to spend their later years healthy, and wish to achieve great accomplishments in their lives. However, dramatic increases in life expectancy over the past years have created a number of challenges for society as it's members age. Generally, people reach retirement in relatively good health, with several years of life still ahead of them. Ageing persons may face a number of losses such as professional, physical, cognitive and emotional. In addition, older adults are often viewed among others, as irritable, boring, grumpy, weak, mournful, and most importantly cognitively impaired. These negative stereotypes may possess an influential power to shape older people's general functioning. This shows that an extended lifespan has not guaranteed an increase in the quality, meaning and purpose of life for older adults. How individual overcomes the challenges in life in the process of ageing depends on how he or she finds meaning in his or her life to attain internal wellness and maturity with age. Generally, it is believed that activity, rehabilitation and socialising are important factors for the wellbeing of older people. However, to achieve wisdom and maturity, there should be opportunities for reflection and spirituality and to encourage discussions about the past and the future in order to connect with individual's own life story. Thus, this study intended to explore the experiences of old people in pursuing and handling life at old age. In the study, twenty (20) old age people between 65 and 70 years old were interviewed from an old folk's home in Klang Valley, Selangor, Malaysia. Using gerotranscendence theory and Islamic perspectives, the discussion was based on three dimensions: the self, cosmic dimension and social and personal relationships. The results were analysed using content analysis. The findings showed most participants described improved knowledge about themselves, acceptance and appreciation of life, decreased social norms, focused more on religiosity and the life after. This study provides a better understanding of how people experience old age and to help old people more effectively and efficiently make adjustment to ageing.

Keywords*:* ageing, reflection, old folk's home, wellness, spirituality, quality life.

1.   Introduction

Population aging is a global phenomena which has major consequences and implications for all facets of human life. Aging is more pronounced in the developed countries and less obvious in the developing countries. However, in Asia the population of the elderly was said to be 16.3 percent in 1995, but it will increase to 22.9 percent in 2025 (UN:1994). In the case of Malaysia, the population is approximately 28,964.3 million (Department of Statistic, Malaysia 2012). Out of this total, the citizen aged 60 years and older shows a total of 1,475.3 million and this represents 5.1 percent of the population. By 2020, it is estimated to increase to approximately 9 percent or 3.2 million (Ministry of Welfare, Malaysia, 1999). The United Nation's World Health Organization (WHO) in it's latest statement on 7 November 2014, has warned that the explosion in the world's ageing population presents herculean challenges for health systems, especially in poorer countries. As people live longer, the need to care for long term, age-related health problems will grow. A large percentage of the global burden of illness is concentrated in people aged over 60. Much of this takes in the form of long-term illness such as cancer, respiratory disease, arthritis and mental and neurological disorders. According to WHO (2014), the number of people with dementia, for instance, is expected to rise from 44 million now to 135 million by 2050. The ageing phenomena will require a deep and fundamental reforms of health and social care systems. It is generally thought that activity, rehabilitation and socialising are important factors for the wellbeing of the people. However, it is also believed that there should also be opportunities for reflection and spirituality, and to encourage discussions about the past and future so that older people can connect with their own life story to help them effectively and efficiently deal with life challenges such as losses. This is sometimes called Life Review process, which was first described by Butler in 1963 as a progressive revisiting, re-examining and integration of the individual's past. The individual may come to attribute new, different and possibly more benevolent meanings to past events during the course of life review, based on what he/she experiences in the present. Frankl (1963) and Maslow (1968) saw existential meaning, or personal meaning, as a universal human need. This will contribute to life adjustment in ageing.

2.   Literature Review

Over the years, various theories about ageing have been developed. Among others include the Psychodynamic theory, Cognitive theory, Activity theory, Disengagement theory, Psychososial theory, Existential and Interactionist theory and Gerotranscendence theory. These theories explore different aspects of ageing. In this study focus was made on life –review theory or gerotranscendence (Tornstam, 1989) which shows that ageing is not necessarily a negative downward spiral as predicted by some theories (Disengagement theory), but can be a positive change. A significant body of research has demonstrated that life-review can help individuals to integrate losses, resolve unfinished business accumulated over the course of a lifetime and contribute to adjustment to ageing. (Butler, 1963, 1971, 1974; Coleman, 1986; Cook, 1991; Hetu, 1989, 2000, 2003; Watt & Cappeliez, 2000; Watt & Wong, 1991). Moody (2003) emphasized on the concept of "conscious ageing" which supports values of autonomy, individuality, expressiveness, and self-transcendence. Conscious ageing is a spiritual process that draws its inspiration from religion, art, life-long learning, reflected in the field of transpersonal psychology and wisdom traditions in the great world religions. This phenomena has long been discussed in the holy Quran, surah Ghafir: verse 67:

"It is He Who has Created you from dust, Then from a sperm-drop, Then from a leech-like clot; then does He get you out (into the light). As a child: then lets you (grow and) reach your age of full strength; then Lets you become old,- Though of you there are Some who die before;- And lets you reach A term appointment; In order that ye may understand."

It is a transformation from materialistic point of view to a more cosmic understanding of life. From Islamic perspectives, one has to believe that with every difficulty a person faced, there will be a relief from God Almighty, but they have to repent. In surah Al-Inshirah: verse 5-7, it is reminded repeatedly that:

"So, verily with every difficulty, there is relief. Verily with every difficulty, there is relief."

When people feel that God Almighty is so close to them, though burdened with problems, they will immediately get peace by reading the Quran, dhikr, pray and see the natural beauty of God's creation. This will lead to increased progression towards wellness and maturity with age. In surah al-Fathir: verse 37 it is stated:

"Therein will they cry Aloud (for assistance) 'Our Lord! Bring us out'.

Hearts of those who believe it will always be calm and serene because they remember God Almighty. No matter whether they are in trouble, they immediately recognise and look back on mistakes made so that it can be changed. Surah al-Baqarah verse 222 stated:

"Surely, God Almight loves those who repent and loves those who purify himself."

The Prophet SAW:

"Every son of Adam has mistakes (sins). And the best of the guilty are those who repent." (Reported by at-Tarmidzi)

Another concept which is related to the study is the theory of Successful Ageing which involves the ability to maintain a low risk of disease and disease-related disability; high mental and physical functions; and active engagement with life (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). They suggested that individuals are responsible for their own ageing process, and that most physical and mental health problems can be avoided by using preventive measures. Wong (2000) developed the existential-spiritual model of ageing which include religiosity, personal meaning, optimism, commitment and coping and he believed that personal meaning is the best predictor of happiness. Wong (1989) has described four strategies to increase personal meaning: The first strategy is Life Review, second is engagement, which generates a sense of choice and initiative, third, optimism, which requires that the older person nourish their dreams and become active in feasible projects, and fourth, is religious beliefs and practices and spiritual well-being. Thus, this suggests that one way to achieve personal growth, maturity and wisdom in old age is through Life-Review. When a person is able to understand the meaning of life, they may try to live more fully and to choose more consciously how they want to proceed with their lives.

The Present Study

The present study sought to qualitatively explore experiences of ageing in older people living in old-folks home based on the Life-Review or Gerotranscendance theory. Islamic perspectives will also become the platform for the discussion. The study will examine the strengths the participants developed over the years and the losses they accumulated, help them to adapt to the new way of thinking and a new way of life.

Method

Twenty (20) old aged people from an old folk's home were identified to participate in this study. They were residents in the old folk's home with a range of age between 65 and 70 years. All were Muslims, ten (10) females and ten (10) males. The respondents were selected on the basis that they have no diagnosis of dementia, or other cognitive problems. Ten (10) participants were widower, five (5) were divorced and five (5) were singles. A semi-structured interview was used and content analysis was utilized to analyse the data. The study was focussed on three themes, specifically the self, cosmic dimensions and social and personal relationships. Exploration of each of the three dimensions allowed participants to revisit past experiences, explore their impact, and to discover or re-discover the values related to their present experiences. Under the cosmic dimension, factors on time and childhood connectivity, connection with past generations, life and death acceptance and mystery in life were discussed. Under the dimension of self, focus was made on self-development, self-centredness, self-transcendence and ego integrity. Under social and personal relationships, factors on importance of relationships, roles in life, modern asceticism and everyday wisdom became the main focus of the discussion.

Procedure

Data collection for this research were carried out over the course of 20 individual meetings with the participants in an old folk's home. The participants were randomly identified. Three sessions of the interview were conducted within three days. The meeting started with a brief guided relaxation technique to create a mental space for memory processes by focusing attention and putting aside distracting thoughts and preoccupations. Participants were instructed to close their eyes, creating silence and maintaining slow and regular breathing. Focus was also made on their positive thought and emotions about themselves and the past memories. Semi-structured interviews were then used to gain insight into the meaning that participants attributed to their experience.

Results

During the exploration each participant came to realize that the strengths they identified were actually values which helped them to face many challenges in the past, which could be used during old age or the existing situation.

The self

Each participant has different ways in remembering his or her life experiences and confronts his or her behaviour differently and in different situations. Old people involved become more aware of their different sides of their personality, sometimes good and sometimes bad and they are able to analyse past behaviour. Many participants came to realize that the strengths they identified in their past experience were actually values which had helped them to face many challenges in the past, and also during old age. Five participants identified their generosity, compassion, and sense of humour as qualities which helped survived their marriage and managed their feelings of loneliness at present age. One participant shared the following experience:

"When I was small, I helped my parents in a farm feeding cows and goats. I enjoyed doing the work and I love animals. When I recall all this today, I feel grateful and I was taught to respect nature. When the animals died, I felt very sad and this taught me that human beings and animals will die at one point. It is important to live happily while one is alive and nobody will live forever. I am happy living in this home."

This participant could identify his strengths, recall past experience associated with emotions and joy or sadness. He feels at peace with his strengths and values and he is using them to adapt himself during old age.

A number of participants became less self-centred as they got older because at this age they were no longer doing any work. Six female participants especially, talked about their experiences looking after the wellbeing of their parents, spouses and children in the past. They had less time to think about themselves because priority had been given to others who needed more attention. At old age they felt more self-centred.

Body and appearance

Unlike males, old age females were more concern about their body and appearance. To them cleanliness and tidiness were very important. It was very important to wash their body and hair frequently, to take care of their hands, nails and feet and to have new clothes. But, they were not particular what clothes to wear and what make-up to use and they needed assistance from the staff. For males, they had a more relaxed attitude and did not care much about grooming. One female participant shared:

"Since young I had to do all house chores and my husband was very particular about cleanliness. He wanted me to look pretty all the time. Now he is dead and I feel he is still besides me."

Cosmic dimension

In this dimension, participants were asked to share their past experiences during childhood or younger days, how they connect themselves with past generations, their feelings of joy and security and perceptions of life and death.

Majority of the participants spent a lot of time thinking about their younger lives, recalling happy and bitter moments with their families and loved one. One male participant recalled his happy moments together with his family during festive seasons. When his wife passed away, the happy memory helped him to live longer and to accept his fate, although sometimes he felt a bit lonely. This shows that reminiscing also awakened memories of people who had died.

From Islamic perspective, it is already mentioned in surah Ath-Thalaq verse 2-3:

"And establish the evidence For the sake of Allah. Such is the admonition given to him who believes in Allah and the Last Day."

Ten male participants also talked about positive memories of job assignments when they were younger; remembering how it was when they were able to work, their helpful colleagues and friends, and their contributions. They were very proud of themselves when they achieved something in their lives, such as, they were able to fight in a war. One participant shared his experience:

"I was respected by my colleagues and friends for being 'a brave man' in defending my country. I had shot a number of communists during war time. I myself could not believe that I could be such a hero. Until now I still feel satisfied for what I had done. Having life experience like this, I'm aware of the shifting conditions that life brings."

Most participants discussed about their connections with past generations. Earlier when they were young, they could not understand why certain things they did they could not get approval from their parents. When they reached old age, they developed a new understanding of their parents' thoughts, values and life styles. They could see themselves in their parents' behaviour. They became more matured and able to accept lives at later age.

In terms of feelings of joy and security, most participants felt happy anything that brought joy to their lives. At old age they showed no interest in earning money, career, doing house work and raising children but their remembrance of early lives just enough to make them happy. All participants felt secured living at old folks' home because they were well taken care of and they were free to do things that will bring joy to their lives.

Almost all participants explained that they were not afraid of dying because to them anything that lives in this world will die. They heard of their friends' deaths and they always pray for longer life. But, as mentioned in surah Al-Ankabut verse 57:

"Every soul shall have a taste of death in the end to Us shall ye be brought back."

One participant mentioned that:

"When I heard many of my friends passed away, I began to deepen my relationship with God (Allah). Prayer allowed me to cope and enjoy the present moment without constantly worrying about my death and it gave me hope about other things."

This shows that reframing and reminiscence allowed for the discovery of new meaning in life and a solution to an existing situations.

Social and personal relationships

In the context of social and personal relationships, all participants felt leaving in old folks' home have aroused loneliness and a few felt isolated. Only two participants chosed to be alone because of personal choice. One male participant shared his feelings:

"Before, people always came to me and talked to me. But, when I experienced impaired vision and hearing, people shied away. I felt very sad but because my tolerancy is high based on my past experience I managed to accept the situation."

All participants were less eager to express their thoughts during old age even though, before, they had been more open minded and freely expressed their opinions. In most matters, other people would decide for them because they felt less important to care about who make decision. They valued more about others than about themselves. Many participants felt that wealth was less important at this stage because what they wanted was a happy life before they die. One female participant stated that:

"Old age is a period which brings me closer to eternity. I have to live in accordance to my values. Living with my values and spirituality daily allows me to give more meaning to my life."

Another participant shared:

"I know that God loves me and I feel very close to Him. Experiencing His presence brings me joy and feel important to love myself."

This shows that living in congruence with one's values and possessing inner peace and freedom can be described as important sources of meaning in life.

It is also mentioned in surah Al-Ahqaaf, verse 15 in the holy Quran:

"We have enjoined on man kindness to his parents: In pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth. The carrying of the (child) to his weaning is (a period of) thirty months. At length, when he reaches the age of full strength and attains forty years, he says, "O my Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for Thy favour which Thou has bestowed upon me, and upon both my parents, and that I may work righteousness such as Thou mayest approve and be gracious to me in my issue. Truly have I turned to Thee and truly do I bow (to Thee) in Islam."

Discussion

The findings showed that older people had better knowledge about themselves, less self-centred, less concerned about appearance than they were when they were young. They appreciated life based on their past experiences which gave them meaning and maturity of thoughts and this enabled them to face many challenges in their lives. There was a sense of connection with their past lives and this also made them accepted and appreciated life at old age. The importance of personal meaning in the ageing process is pivotal (Malette & Pencer, 2003). They also suggested that personal meaning and personal growth are strongly linked across the lifespan. The participants involved showed less fear when approaching death and they had to make preparation for that. Almost all participants turned to religiosity as a platform to redeem their wrong doings and to get blessings from God in preparation for their lives hereafter.

Participants enjoyed the little things in life and thought a lot about their childhood, which gave them joy. Reflections about the past have helped them to shape the person's ego and understand between the self and the roles one plays. When they talked about getting older, they reflected on what they had confronted during their lifetime and they became less self-centred. This shows that they are able to accept the negative and positive aspects of their behaviour and personality.

Issues of death and meaning of life are important to old people. Participants showed less fear in approaching death during the ageing process and they were prepared for death. This could be considered as part of gerotranscendence. Despite weakness and disease, older people established ways of handling life situations, death and dying. For example, spending time alone may lead to feelings of loneliness, but some participants felt an inner peace when they were alone. Spending time alone was sometimes due to physical condition. This should be understood by the caregiver or professionals. Wadensten (2005) found that old people need to be alone to reflect and rest.

In the Quran, surah Al-Ahqaf verse 15, it is also stated that:

"At length, when he reaches The age of full strength And attains forty years, He says, 'O my Lord! Grant me that I may be Grateful for Thy favour Which Thou hast bestowed Upon me, and upon both My parents, and that I May work righteousness Such as Thou mayest approve; And be gracious to me In my issues, Truly have I turned to Thee And truly do I submit (To Thee) in Islam."

It is also found that people were more tolerant of social relationships with increased age. However, when reflecting on their openness in social relationships, a few felt connected with past generations. This is an important dimension to life and according to Tornstam (2000), it is a positive sign of being a whole person and not a sign of loneliness or illness.

At old age people are not interested in material wealth anymore. As long as they find happiness and feel healthy, they do not bother so much on how much they have and some of them gave away their possessions to their families and others. This shows that they have come to a stage where they could reformulate their social needs and no need to follow the social norms expected of them. Ageing may come as a relief for some people in that they are not forced to live up to others' expectations and thus have more relaxed attitude towards accepting themselves and their mistakes (Tornstam, 1997)

Generally, it is believed that activity, rehabilitation and socialising with others are important factors for older people's wellbeing. But, it is necessary to include opportunities for reflection and spirituality to help in achieving wisdom and maturity.

Conclusion

The results indicated that a process of life review can help older people develop their self-knowledge, find new sources of meaning in life. They may reconcile with certain past event that they have gone through. This however, will help them in their personal growth and can help them in their adjustment to retirement. 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." Most of the participants came to realize, via reframing, 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. Hence, the study found that life review or gerotanscendence promotes the compassionate re-definition of self. Despite its limitations, the current study does suggest that life review can be used as a means towards a better self-understanding in the later life. Gerotranscendence should be considered as part of the normal ageing process and not of something wrong that must be corrected.

References

Al-Quran. Verses Al-Ghafir:67, Al Insyirah:5-7, Al-Fathir:37, Al-Thalaq:2-3,
          AlAnkabuut:57, AlAhqaaf:15.

Atchley, R.C. (2003). Why most people cope well with retirement. In J.L. Ronch & J.A. Goldfield
          (Eds). *Mental wellness in aging:Strengths based approaches* (pp123-138), Winnipeg:
          Health Professions Press.

Birren, J. E (1964). *The psychology of aging*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Butler, R.N. (1974) Successful aging and the role of Life Review. *Journal of the American
          Geractrics society*, 22,529-535.

Butler,R.N. (1963) Life Review: An interpretation of reminiscence in the aged. *Psychiatry*, 4, 1-8.

Coleman, P.G.(1986). *Aging and reminiscing processes: Social and clinical implications.* New
          York: John Willey.

Cook, E.A. (1991) The effects of reminiscence on psychological measures of ego integrity in
          elderly nursing home residents. *Archives of psychiatric nursing,* 5, 292-298.

Cumming,E.& Henry, W.E. (1961). *Growing old: the process of disengagement*. New York: Basic
          Books.

Frankl, V.E. (1963*). Man's search for meaning,* New York: Washington Square Press.

Hsieh H., Shannon S. (2005) Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research..* 15,9, 1277-1288.

Tornstam L. (1989) Gero-transcendence: a reformulation of the disengagement theory. *Aging* 1,1,55-63.

Malette, J. & Pencer,I. (2003)Existential Meaning, life review, and project creating in an older cancerous adult. *Science Pastorales,* 22(1),47-64.

Maslow, A.B. (1968) *Toward a Psychology of being.* New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Moody, H.R. (2003)Conscious Aging: A strategy for positive change in later life. In J.L. Ronch & J.A Goldfield (Eds) *Mental Wellness in aging: Strength based approaches* (pp. 139-160) Winnipeg: Health Professions Press.

Rowe, J.W. & Khan, R.L. (1998*) Successful aging.* New York: Pantheon Books.

Staudinger, U.M. (2001) Life reflection: a social cognitive analysis of Life Review. *Review of General Psychology*, 5, 148-160.

Wadensten B. (2005) Introducing older people to the theory of gerotranscendence. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. 52,4,381388.

Watt, L. & Cappeliez,P. (2000) Integrative and Instrumental reminiscence therapies for depression in older adults: Intervention strategies and treatment of effectiveness. *Aging and Mental Health*, 4, 166-177.

Watt, L. & Wong, P.T.P. (1991) A taxonomy of reminiscence and therapeutic implications. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work,* 16, 37-57.

Wong, P.T.P. (2000) Meaning in life and meaning in death in successful aging. In A. Tomer (Eds)*Death attitudes and the older adult* (pp.23-35) New York: Brunner/Mazel Publisher.