

## Intergenerational Reminiscence in Groups of the Frail Elderly

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*A conceptual framework for understanding the meaning of intergenerational themes in reminiscence is presented. Theory and research on reminiscence and intergenerational mutuality are reviewed. Efforts of the elderly to come to terms with memories of their parents and their own children are illustrated. Implications for intervention are identified at different points of group development.*

REMINISCENCE in old age has become a subject of popular fascination and professional interest. Nowadays, children search for pictures and artifacts from their grandparents and middle-aged persons interview their older relatives to piece together a genealogy. The wish to discover and to confirm a unique personal identity through understanding the past is a powerful passion in an impersonal world which defines personhood by occupational status and credentials, and not by the miraculous span of life which begins with the bright lights of the extra-uterine world and concludes with the darkness of the grave and grieving kin.

The professional literature views reminiscence with skepticism. Reminiscence is bombarded with research questions to determine its purity and essence. For example, is the revealing of memories a sign of impaired mental functioning and the failure of the aged to have ample opportunities for everyday communication? Might reminiscence serve a positive adaptive function in old age and, for that matter, in other periods of the life cycle. We are only beginning to understand the function, process and content of memory sharing in late life.

It is clear that reminiscence in old age occurs within and between generations. A generational cohort is a bearer of a collectively unique historical experience

based on communal and temporal unities. Confirmation of the individual's memories requires both horizontal and vertical affirmation. While a younger generation may ungraciously spurn the memories of old people during a particular epoch, their very rejection means they have confronted the message of the passing generation. In turn, the older generation seeks to affirm its legacy as its membership dwindles and its contributions are dimmed by the greater energy of younger generations.

A poignant example of intragenerational and intergenerational affirmation can be found in the biblical story of the last days of Moses. Nearing his one hundred and twentieth year, Moses is asked by God to compose a poem as his final legacy to his people because he will not live to see the completion of the Exodus. The last song of Moses begins, "May my discourse come down as the rain like showers on young growth." Later he implores the "crooked and twisted generation" to "Remember the days of old, consider the years past. Ask your father, he will inform you, your elders, they will tell you."<sup>1</sup>

Recounted memories in the stories of the elderly are demands for sympathy from and compliance of the young beyond the lifetime of the old. Reminiscence gives justification to lives reaching completion. The apologies for a lifetime are a life review, a complex process with

both conscious and unconscious elements.

This paper will examine how groups may assist old people in their use of reminiscence for the purpose of life review. Emerging theory and research on intergenerational reciprocity will be discussed. A conceptual framework for thinking about reminiscence in groups and modes of intervention will be presented.

### Relevant Theory and Research

Much current interest in reminiscence stems from Robert Butler's classic paper on life review in the elderly.<sup>2</sup> Life review is a process associated with adjustment to and acceptance of aging. Butler questions the deep-seated negative views of reminiscence as non-purposive, escapist, impulsive behavior. According to Butler, life review is a universal process in which unconscious historic material is progressively revealed by the aged. These past experiences reflect unresolved conflicts, which the elderly evaluate in an effort to reintegrate them more successfully. The task of life review assumes urgency in the older person as he or she recognizes the loss of functional capacity and the prospect of death. Life review may also be triggered by incidents of vulnerability and diminishing resources.

From clinical observation, Butler notes that life review may be episodic or continuous, occurring both in the pathologically depressed and the fairly well-adjusted. Images of death in dreams and in thoughts are indicators of the life review process.

Butler and Lewis state that life review occurs in the sixties and declines after the seventies. While beneficial in most cases, life review can reawaken painful and unresolved material in the psychologically impaired elderly.<sup>3</sup>

In a related vein, Jung identifies rem-

iniscence as a behavior associated with old age.<sup>4</sup> It is deleterious if the aged merely reflect on past memories without searching for the symbolic meanings of the imagery of memories.<sup>5</sup> The quest for symbolic meanings is an interior activity that is necessary for the ongoing elaboration of the self. Jung notes that personality growth from middle age on is an effort to resolve the tensions growing out of youthful personality development.

Theory and research differ on the timing and the consequential functions of reminiscence. Erik Erikson's developmental approach fits with Butler's view of old age and life review. Erikson believes biological decline triggers a crisis for the ego.<sup>6</sup> Life cycle strengths accrued from earlier successes with developmental tasks. Ego strengths are marshalled to help the elderly face the spectre of death. The older person is able to counter despair if he or she can accept life's obstacles and personal failings with tranquility and resolve. Wisdom becomes the psychological virtue which permits the old to transfer their substance to the young, thereby relieving some of death's sting and providing a mode of transcendence in the face of bodily dissolution. For Erikson, old age like the life cycles stages that precede it, afford opportunities for enhanced ego functioning mediated by past successes and failures.

Levinson,<sup>7</sup> and Neugarten and others<sup>8</sup> believe that life review occurs in middle-age, as early as 35 to 45 years of age. Levinson postulates a "middle-life crisis" in men which imposes demands for emotional and cognitive reorientation. The recognition of the crisis arises out of the individual's perception of "limited" time and expansive life goals that are unlikely to be accomplished.

Existential writers emphasize life review as part of a human being's quest for meaning that comes from an aware-

ness of the frailty of life and the human community. Ernest Becker sees a clash between personality and biology as "an existential paradox." He writes "(a human being) is out of nature and hopelessly in it; he is dual, up in the stars and yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath grasping body . . ." <sup>9</sup> Thus, the challenge of living, all the more urgent for the old, is to search for meaning and heroically to encounter limits of life's time.

Michael Romaniuk, in reviewing empirical research on reminiscence, points out difficulties in studying the subject due to the self-conscious distorting of material by research methodology and the possible differences between internal reminiscence and material shared in a conversation. Early cumulative research findings indicate that reminiscence is quite variable in "content, frequency, form, function, outcome, affect, and eliciting stimuli." <sup>10</sup>

Reminiscences, either positive or negative, may come at any point in the life cycle. Understanding the past may be used for "entertainment, self-esteem maintenance, crisis coping, problem-solving and instruction." Some research points to life events such as widowhood, marriage, retirement as triggers for reminiscence. Most support for the beneficial consequences of reminiscence and life review comes from clinical observation. <sup>11</sup>

### **Toward a Conceptual Framework**

A systematic analysis of reminiscence and family content in groups is necessary to understand interaction, content and possible modes of intervention. In much of the theoretical discussion of reminiscence, attention is given to reminiscence as a private, internal process that has a highly individualized quality. Pincus distinguishes between the intrapersonal and interpersonal function

of reminiscence. The intrapersonal level, according to Pincus, has an adaptational function while interpersonal expression of reminiscence regulates status differences between older and younger persons. Older persons offer their cumulative experience or reminiscence to maintain their status, particularly when other resources such as wealth, physical energy and social status decline. The value of the past may, of course, diminish if the pace of social change is too rapid. <sup>12</sup>

Reminiscence has the potential for bringing the older person back in time and makes him or her the peer of the younger person through the empathetic sharing of experiences. If the encounter between young and old is symmetrical (more equal), a fruitful exchange may ensue. The young person talks about his or her present situation and the elderly person tunes in by going back to a cognate situation through reminiscence. If each party is able to communicate laterally, the potential for a reorganization of rules for thinking about each generation occurs. A young person may not see an older person in the same stereotyped way; an older person may chance an observation or a thought that will be accepted by the young, enhancing his or her self-worth in society which gives the aged numerous ageist messages.

Mutual unfamiliarity and fear of relinquishing control over interpersonal relations are intrinsic components of the exchange between young and old. The frail elderly have the most to lose in intergenerational exchanges because unlike the young who have a rich array of friendships, social contacts and accrued social validation status, the old frequently lose kin and friends. The maintenance of a sense of physical, material and emotional well-being becomes crucial. Fortunately, most elders do have an informal social support system

that fills gaps and deals with the natural dependencies of aging.<sup>13</sup>

Research indicates that a two dimensional flow of emotional and material exists between the aged, their children and other relatives.<sup>14</sup> Ethel Shanas notes the modern family still persists as the major source of assistance to the elderly despite the existence of government programs and entitlements. Patterns of assistance indicate mutual expectations. The elderly first approach their family for assistance and then seek out friends and neighbors. When all else fails, they seek out formal providers.<sup>15</sup>

Getzel, Zimmer and Sainer, and Horowitz<sup>16</sup> have reported the considerable strain in caregiving kind. Brown and Horowitz<sup>17</sup> note even caregiving children who have longstanding conflict with parents, still support the norm of mutuality and filial attachment into the late life of the parent. The norm of generational mutuality seems to be built into the very cogwheeling of generations.

For the elderly in general, the end of life is associated with tasks completed and those yet to be completed. A core theme for the very old, partially stimulated by concern about mounting dependency on others, is the maintenance of current status in the kinship system and assuring future status even after death.

From their experience in family treatment, Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark see kinship ties as "loyalty-based on the integrity of reciprocal relatedness." They write, "Even if these ties are overtly minimized or denied, a person remains deeply and unalterably committed to the repayment of benefits received and is connected to blood relatives."<sup>18</sup>

Clinical observations of old people point to their efforts to reconcile their accomplishments on behalf of their children and their own parents (long

since deceased) with the kind of care and attention they expect in old age. Consciously and unconsciously the elderly keep a ledger of deeds and earned rewards. Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark note families across three generations may make aged parents, adult parents and children objects of anger or scapegoats for hurt feelings over imagined or actual exploitation.<sup>19</sup>

An old person in a reminiscence group has an opportunity to deal with angry and hurt feelings with the support of other people who, unlike children or grandchildren, share similar knowledge and value concepts. The peer group universalizes and amplifies the concerns and shared perspectives of members.<sup>20</sup>

The sharing of personal reminiscence in a group can be seen as a process of turning intrapersonal reminiscence into interpersonal memory exchanges. Group members begin to explore, to gradually confront and to reconsider specific memories that over time form the thematic and interactional content of their experience together.

Intergenerational themes arise from three sources. First, the group members gravitate to the subject of children and grandchildren as the most concrete example of immortality. Self-worth often is equated with the achievement and the goodness of progeny. Second, when members of a reminiscence group write autobiographies or poems, the meaning of their art focuses their attention on its value to the younger generation. And finally, the group itself becomes a special world where dramatic episodes occur in which members reenact family situations.

### Group Work Implications

Reminiscence is an intrinsic aspect of socialization groups of the elderly because the group affords a significant

arena for the simultaneous contact with a younger worker (in most cases) and peers. It is the contention of this paper that the worker must listen to the underlying intergenerational messages in all reminiscence, even if they are ostensibly diversionary and recreational in intent. To disregard intergenerational themes limits the engagement of group members in handling currently perceived functional concerns. While reminiscence must not be manipulated by a curious worker for his or her own ends, it is possible to structure experiences for older persons which allow for the free will examination of the past in the service of present concerns and an uncertain future.

Reminiscence groups offer the following potential benefits for the elderly:

1. Exploration of past experiences in a hospital environment of peers which aids in solving current problems.
2. Assistance to members as they review their lives as death approaches.
3. Provision of opportunities for gaining mastery of life through influencing the younger generation by sharing their special perspectives (the wisdom function).

### Case Illustration

The following example of a reminiscence group conducted in a day hospital program of a large geriatric center\* points to the centrality of intergenerational themes as they appear and reappear in the course of the group process. The group is represented in an open, direct manner as providing an opportunity to share memories with peers and to record them for children or grandchildren. The initial expectation of reminiscence must be contracted

anew at each point group members struggle with sharing pleasant and painful memories. The worker must be sensitive to the group member's self-determination to open and close conflictual content. Extended engagement of any issues rests solely with group members and must be respected.

#### *Theme 1—Worker engagement and group reluctance*

During initial contact with the group, considerable interest is shown by members, but frequently they evince doubt about their ability to have good memories and to write them down. The worker may be challenged by members about his or her interest in their memories. Behind the elderly challenge is anger and hopelessness about their capacity to share recollections with a younger person. The focus of the worker is to express positive expectations and gently explore the sources of their reluctance.

The group described herein was conducted in a day hospital over a seven-month period based on member interest. Members numbered ten to fifteen frail men and women, aged 70 to 91. They were alert and generally well-motivated older persons. The excerpts reflect the five months. Membership policy was open-ended and flexible throughout.

The social worker suggests after a considerable period of animated sharing of memories that members might like to record their thoughts (written or taped) for their children, grandchildren or friends. The worker notes it might also be helpful to them. Her comments are met with a long silence. Finally, Mrs. Quincy asks if they can discuss this subject next week.

#### *Theme 2—Exploration of members' mixed attitudes to sharing memories with kin and others*

Group members begin to test their worker and the group about the consequences of sharing memories. Members identify strengths and obstacles in their ability to perform. They tentatively begin to explore the possibility of

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sharing their reminiscence with their families. The worker tries to alleviate the more obvious obstacles to group participation. She does not force participation but shows acceptance to evidence of resistance.

When the worker brings up the issue of recording their thoughts, Mrs. Elias says she does not like to write at all. Mrs. Warren agrees and Mrs. Allan quickly follows that she does not think it's a good idea, and questions why the group should be *compelled* to record. When the worker responds that they might wish to share it with children or grandchildren, Mrs. Raines says, "Oh, they're not interested in that. They're too busy with their own lives." Mrs. Nance responds emphatically, "That's not always true. My grandchildren frequently ask me to tell them about how things used to be when I was their age. They're very much interested."

The worker acknowledges that there are real differences in the group, and she suggests that people might need assistance because of poor eyesight or other reasons. After some discussion the worker states that they might write their memories over the weekend and that the worker would be available to help them before the next meeting. Mrs. Nance pipes in that she never wrote poetry before, but now feels she is doing quite well in a group she is attending. She says it will probably be the same here.

*Theme 3—Exploration of resistance through the mutual aid process*

As trust is deepened between the worker and the group, group members begin to support one another. Group members question the sources of resistance to sharing experiences from the past. It becomes clear that painful memories and functional impairment weigh heavily on them. The worker acknowledges their hesitancy and allows for choice in their style of participation in the group.

Mrs. Wynn says, "I don't want to write, I have nothing to write." She then tells a story from her life. Mrs. Shine says that Mrs. Wynn should write it down. Mrs. Wynne, with half a smile, asks the worker for assistance in writing the details of her story.

As the group hesitantly begins to write, Mrs. Stone says that she does not like to talk about her past or even think about it because it is so painful. She adds that she is glad to be in the group. Her comment is different from her previous ones because she says writing might be good for *other* members. Later in the meeting Mrs. Perry says to Mrs. Stone, "But if you talk and write about your feelings about the

past you will feel better. It is good to get it out. It is not that I enjoy doing it, but I feel better after I get it off my chest." Mrs. Stone nods her head.

*Theme 4—Idealized memories of production as a reaction to aging*

Group members share family recollections as they discuss the negative attributes of young people. In part this discussion of how ideal their parents were belies ambivalent feelings toward their own children. The worker must not challenge their denial and their displacement of negative feelings from their parents to the children.

The worker stimulates discussion by reading a letter in a book about an old man who feels proud of his children for their achievements, but is ashamed that he cannot ask his children for help.

Mrs. Garnet says, "Those children are terrible. How horrible it is to be ashamed of your parents. Mrs. Shane says, "They should be thankful to their parents who worked so hard to enable them to benefit from a college education." Mrs. Green adds that children benefit by the sacrifice of parents. The discussion leads to the importance of respecting one's parents.

Later Mrs. Shane tells a story of her mother who died when she was very young. Her brother and sisters had much more education than their parents and used to correct their English. Mrs. Warren asks if her parents minded the corrections. Mrs. Shane insisted they didn't mind, but they were eager to learn. Her brother and sisters were very proud of their parents.

Mrs. David shares a similar story of her veneration of parents and that she would never contradict her parents. The group begins to talk about how fine their parents were. They are lauded for having common sense instead of formal education. Group members deny that parents could feel uncomfortable with their children's accomplishments. The worker asks how should parents deal with discomfort about their children's accomplishments. Mrs. Green, self-consciously, answers that children and parents should try to talk to each other.

*Theme 4—Opening painful material from  
the past toward resolution*

During this phase the group sustains the discussion of painful interactions with children. The discussion is prompted by the reading of a story of a young man who has difficulties caring for the financial needs of children and is contemplating asking his mother to move away from the family. The young man is caught between the love for his mother and his responsibility to his children. The group now direct their anger away from the children and paradoxically, toward the mother. The worker asks why they think the mother was sent away. They say she probably treated her son badly and then avoid further discussion.

The worker asks them to think of themselves as the old women caught in the middle of competing claims. Mrs. Elias says that her son wants her to live with his family but she refused because she must be independent and maintain her friends in the day program. Mrs. Elias reiterates that her son means well but it would not be a good idea. The group picks up the theme of the importance of independence.

Mrs. Nance then begins an intensive emotional story of how her husband died several weeks ago and how in times of crisis her children and grandchildren are available. However, she is very upset about their discussion of who would take "Mom." Many were eager to take her. She felt she was on auction. No one consulted her. When the worker asks her how she felt, Mrs. Nance says, "Like a child." The group discusses how their children are often prompted by guilt toward them.

Later in the meeting Mrs. Woods discusses her recent difficulties and how her children did *not* help out. She speaks about how much it hurts her and how bitter she feels toward them. Recently, she broke her hip; her son died and her granddaughter committed suicide last month. Mrs. Woods told them about how she has a marvelous home attendant, and goes over the pain of losing two children and a grandchild. Mrs. Woods is loved by many members of the group and they are very supportive. The group expresses their anger when children do not care.

*Theme 5—Creativity as a mode of  
transcendence*

The writing of memories joins together painful and unresolved material from the past and the present. The exchanges of memories is all the more meaningful because they reflect

the cumulative discussion in the group. Written memories are claims for immortality and affirmation.

Mrs. Nance volunteers to read her reminiscence first. She wrote about the wealth of human knowledge her parents left her. They taught her the value of religious thought. She writes, "What you are is God's gift to; what you become is your gift to God." She says she tries to do the same for her own children. When she finished her presentation, the group applauds.

Mrs. Green reads her memories next. It was also about her relationship with her parents. She writes that they made many sacrifices for their children. The last person to read is Mrs. Stone. She tells how well she has been brought up and how she has grown up for the best. Now that she has her own children, she did many of the same things as her parents did, but, she adds, in a *modern* way. Her daughter is raising her grandchildren in a similar way to her upbringing. She concludes history repeats itself.

Curiously, as the meeting concludes, the group talks about how parents and children do disagree and relationships are not perfect. Mrs. Young says we ought to try to be independent. She says despite her disabilities, she keeps her apartment. The group reinforces her point. Group members make a point to tell the worker that it was a good meeting.

### Conclusion

Reminiscence groups provide the elderly with opportunities to explore powerful developmental themes. The demands of practice on the worker are considerable. The necessity to explore transferential issues in the group reflects the tensions of intergenerational relations. The working through of members' reluctance and resistances is a central concern of the worker as intergenerational topics in the past reflect current concerns. Peer group support allows for the exploration of deeply felt concerns of old people.

The reminiscence group is fueled by older persons' capacities for creative activity in late life despite their numerous protestations. It is vital for the worker not to get detoured by defensive behavior. A worker may succumb to mem-

bers' expressions of defeatism as professional failures. Writing and telling reminiscences in groups permit the elderly to deal with strong emotional issues in a controlled focused manner without the worker's heavy handed probing of sensitive intergenerational hurts.

The group modality permits expressions of altruism through the mutual aid process that is activated by the common developmental themes of historical and current kinship concerns.

Work with reminiscence groups suggests that family relationships are linchpins for the discussion of themes of loneliness, death and dependency in late life. Reminiscence groups afford the possibility of helping otherwise remote or isolated frail elderly in a variety of social settings.

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