

Original Research Article

The application and enlightenment of life review therapy in spiritual care of the elderly

Meizhu Lyu

City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 999077, China

Abstract: Population aging has become a pressing global concern, and the focus of elderly care has gradually shifted from economic support and daily assistance to spiritual comfort. Influenced by changes in intergenerational relationships and family living arrangements, the family's role in providing spiritual care for the elderly is weakening, while multiple actors—including the government, society, the market, and older adults themselves—are increasingly participating in this process. Among these, older adults are not only recipients but also important providers of spiritual care. Life review therapy has been shown to be effective in helping the elderly assume a primary role, enhance self-efficacy, reshape self-image, encourage social participation, and more. Thus, the elderly are moving from passive recipients to active agents in elderly care, proactively engaging with later life.

Keywords: aging; life review therapy; spiritual care of the elderly

1. The raising of the problem

Today, aging has become both a global issue and a focal point of concern. In 2019, the number of elderly people in China reached 253 million, accounting for 18.1% of the total population. According to the research report *Elder Fairness in China*, China's aging population is large in scale and growing rapidly, with a serious and accelerating degree of aging. It is projected that by 2030, the elderly population will account for about 25% of the total population. Clearly, the proportion of elderly people in China will continue to rise, and aging will become a major social challenge that cannot be ignored.

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the needs of the elderly can be divided into material life, daily care, health care, and spiritual and cultural life. In recent years, China's elderly support and service systems have been steadily improved, gradually meeting the elderly's needs for economic support, daily care, and health care. With the aging of those born in the 1960s, the demand for spiritual services is increasing rapidly. Spiritual care has begun to permeate the entire care process, becoming an important component of elderly care services. At present, with the accelerating pace of aging and the growing number of older adults, their spiritual needs have become more evident as material needs are increasingly satisfied. Although spiritual and cultural needs vary depending on urban or rural residence, age, health status, lifestyle, education level, and other factors, they have grown significantly compared to the past. In particular, urban elderly aged 60–65, who are relatively healthy and financially secure, demonstrate a strong desire for a high-quality spiritual and cultural life.

Both the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly* and the *National Development Plan for the Cause of the Elderly and the Construction of the Elderly Care System during the 13th Five-Year Plan* emphasize the importance of meeting the spiritual care needs of the elderly. These needs are particularly reflected in the desire for familial affection, social interaction, and a sense of self-

worth. However, due to limitations in the qualifications of elderly care service providers, services often remain confined to basic daily care and housekeeping, failing to address professional nursing and psychological support. This significantly constrains the improvement of spiritual care services.

Reflecting on the past is a fundamental personality trait of older adults. Professionals can draw on this trait to help them reinterpret life experiences marked by regret or dissatisfaction from new perspectives, thereby assisting in rebuilding self-identity and discovering new meaning in life. International studies have confirmed that life review contributes to both the physical and mental well-being of the elderly. This paper aims to summarize effective practices through research on the application of life review therapy in providing spiritual care and comfort to the elderly. It seeks to offer methodological references for the development of elderly social work and innovation in care models, while also providing valuable reference material for related fields in the future, thereby enriching the evidence base.

2. Current development situations of spiritual care services for the elderly

2.1. The connotation of spiritual care for the elderly

The so-called "spiritual care for the elderly" or "spiritual support for the elderly" refers to the collective attention paid by families, workplaces, society, and even the government to the diverse psychological and spiritual needs of older adults. Spiritual care for the elderly represents a new model of support, playing an important role in addressing the psychological needs and well-being of urban-dwelling older persons. Compared with economic support and daily care, spiritual care has relative independence and lower substitutability. Across different groups of older adults, spiritual needs are expressed in distinct ways and to varying degrees, directly linked to their health, quality of life, and overall sense of well-being. In terms of forms of expression, spiritual care includes both emotional support for the elderly—Such as kinship, friendship, and socially normative support—And the realization of self-worth among older adults.

2.2. Current situations of spiritual care of the elderly

At present, spiritual care for the elderly has made some progress in China. *Firstly, family care for the elderly.* Within families, children usually serve as the primary source of emotional support for older adults, providing spiritual sustenance. In addition, elderly individuals and their spouses often rely on one another for mutual comfort and support. However, due to changes in family structure, urban development, lifestyle transformations, and other factors, the elderly frequently occupy a marginal position in their children's emotional lives. For those who live alone without a spouse, the problem of unmet emotional needs is even more pronounced.

Secondly, community-based care for the elderly. Community spiritual care includes mutual aid among neighbors, solidarity among older adults, and companionship and emotional interaction provided by community staff to empty-nesters and isolated elderly. Nevertheless, hardware facilities for community-based spiritual care services remain seriously inadequate, and staff shortages combined with a lack of professionalism are evident. Moreover, in the process of receiving community care, older adults often remain in a vulnerable and passive position; their initiative and intrinsic motivation have not been effectively activated, and their sense of self-worth remains unrealized.

Thirdly, institutional care for the elderly. China has long advocated the principle and goal of "providing for the elderly, caring for the elderly, ensuring education for the elderly, enabling social participation, and promoting well-being in old age." However, within institutional settings, spiritual care entails high time and opportunity costs. Managers and service providers often fail to devote sufficient attention to spiritual services,

while the passive attitude of many elderly residents—Who mainly focus on emotional or recreational needs—Further complicates the situation. Overall, the quality of spiritual services remains low, and needs related to self-actualization are insufficiently stimulated.

In sum, although the spiritual needs of older adults are growing rapidly and greater attention is being directed toward spiritual care, numerous problems persist, and the current situation is far from optimistic. The most prominent issue is that the elderly remain largely passive, occupying a "recipient" role in companionship-oriented spiritual support services, without being truly motivated to pursue meaning and confidence in later life. The subjective potential of the elderly urgently requires development. How to genuinely awaken self-potential among older adults—Shifting from heavy reliance on children and external care toward focusing on the meaning of their own lives—And thereby enhance their sense of self-worth and realize greater meaning and value in life, should become a central concern in the field of spiritual care.

3. The application of life review therapy in the spiritual care of the elderly

At present, an important aspect of elderly care is to emphasize improving the quality and value of life from the spiritual perspective of older adults, thereby promoting the development of healthy aging. Life review therapy plays a significant role in enhancing the spiritual well-being of the elderly by enabling them to evaluate and reorganize life experiences through retrospective reflection. This process helps individuals analyze and reconcile unresolved conflicts from the past, thereby facilitating the discovery of new meaning in life. This paper takes a dozen elderly individuals in Fusong County, Baishan City, Jilin Province as examples and applies life review therapy to conduct practical research on spiritual care for the elderly.

3.1. Establish a connection

Through referrals from elderly acquaintances and community workers, we identified and became acquainted with the interviewees. By leveraging our identities as volunteers and university students, we gained their trust and established closer relationships. Due to physiological and psychological factors, the interviewees generally preferred to be interviewed at home or to communicate in the company of close friends. An effective ice-breaking approach is essential for successfully initiating the life review process. Practitioners primarily employed self-disclosure, actively sharing stories from their university lives to attract attention and evoke resonance by encouraging the elderly to recall their grandchildren or their own youth. Alternatively, they adopted conversational guidance and observation—Using old photographs, familiar objects, and other mementos—To direct the elderly to focus on past life stories, prompting them to share more about personal achievements, life challenges, family conflicts, and individual concerns. Once positive rapport was established, practitioners introduced life review therapy and invited the elderly to reflect on their life experiences.

3.2. Enhance self-efficacy

As elderly individuals gradually withdraw from society due to declining physical abilities and the loss of social roles, they often experience feelings of low self-esteem, reduced self-efficacy, and diminished confidence in later life. Some may even develop serious personal problems such as alcoholism or verbal aggression, yet lack the motivation to change, believing they are too old to exercise self-control. In response to this situation, practitioners apply life review therapy to help them recall "highlight moments" from their personal histories and life achievements, thereby enhancing self-confidence, improving self-efficacy, reshaping inner potential, and strengthening motivation to change. This approach encourages older adults to actively recognize their strengths and accomplishments—Particularly those related to their careers—Affirm their abilities, and further enhance

their willingness to improve their current lives and overcome negative habits. The following case of Grandpa A serves as an example.

Grandpa A lost his father at a young age, and his family long faced financial difficulties. Nevertheless, through diligence and a serious attitude toward work, he eventually became a school principal. After retirement, however, he experienced a sense of psychological loss and adopted a "muddle along" mindset; his daily life became monotonous. When asked why he no longer exercised, read the newspaper, or wrote articles daily as he had during his working years, Grandpa A expressed regret, saying that he was too old to summon the energy to exercise, and that reading was pointless since he could no longer remember what he had read.

In response, I applied life review therapy together with strength-based perspective theory to guide Grandpa A. Under this guidance, he gradually revisited glorious moments from his past: "After graduating from junior middle school, my sister, brother-in-law, and my two older brothers all encouraged me to attend senior middle school because they saw that I was diligent and had good grades. I cherished this rare opportunity to study. Besides working hard academically, I actively participated in various sports such as basketball, volleyball, table tennis, and skating—All of which I excelled in. I was also actively involved in artistic activities, especially drama and comic dialogue. My participation in these sports and cultural activities stemmed not only from personal interest but also from a subconscious desire to acquire more skills and create better conditions for my future."

While listening to this recollection, I keenly observed Grandpa A's sense of accomplishment. Using a strength-based perspective, I helped him recognize his persistent character, along with the courage and confidence he had shown in facing difficulties without giving up easily. This strengthened his self-efficacy, empowered him, and enabled him to actively acknowledge his own strengths and abilities, affirm his self-worth, and begin resolving inner conflicts.

3.3. Reconstruction

After a lifetime of ups and downs, many elderly individuals harbor lingering resentment and depression, which significantly affect their well-being and quality of life in later years. Confronted with relatively limited social and physical environments, older adults often experience homogeneous social interactions and reduced socialization. This results in shame at being unable to express themselves, a lack of confidants, and the development of internalized depression. Practitioners, though serving in a non-professional capacity, employ life review therapy to help the elderly revisit "problematic events" in their lives and directly address past contradictions. Through professional guidance, older adults can be assisted in reframing their understanding of specific events, behaviors, or life experiences, enabling them to view issues more objectively. The goal is to alleviate psychological distress, achieve internal self-empowerment, and ultimately foster healthy self-esteem, enhance self-efficacy, and strengthen the internal locus of control.

Based on prior understanding, Grandpa A had experienced turmoil before retirement when he was imprisoned for "accepting rebates" as a public official. This incident had a profound impact on his post-retirement emotional state. The following case illustrates his experience and subsequent guidance.

"I really don't like to bring up this experience; I'd feel better if I didn't mention it. But since you're curious, I'll briefly explain. In 2003, just as I was about to retire, two vice principals and I arranged one last purchase of computers for the school. Because I bought hundreds of units, a store offered me a rebate of 15,000 yuan. Honestly, 15,000 yuan wasn't much as a rebate, but I was caught upon returning. As a government official and legal representative, accepting a rebate was considered bribery and embezzlement. Had it been handled at the county level, it might have been manageable. Unfortunately, it was escalated to the municipal level. Due to quota

requirements for economic cases, officials at the city level were eager to pursue the case, and I ended up spending over three months in a detention center. It happened during the SARS outbreak that year, and for the first month or so, there was no progress in the case—Almost as if we were treated like SARS cases. The warden happened to be my former student and instructed others to look after me, so I didn't suffer any hardships during detention. Later, staff from the Prosecutor's Office informed me that the case wasn't serious but that procedures had to be followed. So, in reality, it didn't affect me too much."

Possibly out of a desire to preserve dignity and save face, Grandpa A spoke of the incident with detachment and slight evasion, yet his tense and somber expression revealed underlying negative emotions. Before visiting him, former colleagues had noted that Grandpa A once enjoyed traveling, often spending one to two months either domestically or abroad with old friends. However, he ceased traveling for two years after the incident. Following this event, he developed negative emotions, gradually marginalizing and stigmatizing himself, which adversely affected his retirement life. Therefore, practitioners actively guided Grandpa A to reframe the situation from new perspectives—Not merely focusing on superficial aspects of the event, but striving to uncover insights across different dimensions and levels. This reframing positioned the experience as both a valuable lesson in legal awareness and an opportunity for personal growth. With guidance, Grandpa A's mindset improved noticeably.

"As you mentioned, this was ultimately a meaningful experience. Not that such things are good in themselves, but it's beneficial to treat this experience as a process of tempering. During those three months, I learned a great deal—It was an educational process. This was a unique experience and now a valuable part of my life. I will travel again in the future; this won't define my life."

3.4. Review the progress

After completing the life review process, we evaluated the impact of life review therapy on older adults by examining and reflecting on the personal narratives shared by the elderly individual.

"I was indeed in pain at the time, but there were also many joyful moments. Reflecting on my past experiences, I have gained many insights, and one of the most important is this: experience is wealth! Without those difficult experiences, I would not have developed such strong determination and character, nor would I appreciate the deep sense of happiness I feel today. I am grateful to life for allowing me to grow continuously! I am grateful to my family and friends, who helped me overcome one difficulty after another and gave meaning to my life. Recalling the experiences of my youth has suddenly revitalized me! I feel as though I have returned to the past. I am now full of confidence and enthusiasm for my life." (Grandpa A)

Regarding the effects of the life review, the interviewee further stated:

Grandpa A: "I feel very good! I am old now and cannot remember many recent events, but past memories remain vivid. Usually, elderly people like me often dwell on regrets and worries about the past. Today, talking with you has made me feel truly good. Our conversation has made me realize that enjoying the present and focusing on current life are what matter most. Moreover, like many of us, the students we taught are also old now, and we have little contact with young people. Besides, few young people are willing to listen to my stories from the past. Now, having you here to listen and share your own stories with me not only satisfies my desire to express myself but also makes me feel as though I have a granddaughter sitting by my knee."

Overall, through the case intervention using life review therapy, the elderly exhibited positive changes in mindset. They developed a deeper and more affirmative understanding of their self-worth and adopted a more open-minded attitude toward past events that were once unsatisfactory. This process helps to promote improved self-efficacy among older adults, fosters a spirit of self-esteem and self-improvement, builds a solid

psychological foundation for self-sufficiency, self-reliance, and self-enjoyment in later life, and provides strong support for them to experience a positive and fulfilling old age.

4. The enlightenment of life review therapy application in the spiritual care of the elderly

Through the representative case of Grandpa A and fifteen other elderly individuals who were interviewed, we suggest that life review therapy provides the following insights for the spiritual care of older adults:

4.1. When providing life review services, it is often more effective to adopt a less formal professional stance

Older adults frequently possess strong self-esteem and may be sensitive when discussing personal matters; in such situations, an overtly professional identity can elicit distrust or even resistance. Only by genuinely integrating into the elderly community—Shifting our role from "professional guides" to "friends of the elderly"—And sincerely offering care, affirmation, and encouragement for their stories, can we help alleviate their anxiety and enable them to open up about personal struggles or negative memories.

4.2. During reminiscence, it is common for elderly individuals to recall a topic yet feel unsure how to continue

In such situations, facilitators should prepare open-ended questions that encourage elaboration on meaningful life experiences. Examples include: What was the most important aspect of your childhood? How did you meet your spouse? What was the happiest period of your life? What do you consider your greatest achievement? What is your biggest regret or disappointment? Which life experience would you most like the younger generation to understand?

4.3. When recalling and narrating past events, older adults may become thoughtful and slow their speech, or grow emotional and speak rapidly—Sometimes even switching into dialect

Practitioners should listen patiently and attentively to these recollections, as they often reveal significant values, emotions, and concerns of the participants. It is essential to respond promptly, engage interactively rather than permitting monologues, and empower the elderly in a timely manner to enhance both their motivation to express themselves and their sense of accomplishment.

References

- [1] Chen, X. (2014). Research on spiritual elderly care in urban areas. *Journal of Wuhan University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 67(4), 129–133.
- [2] Li, Q. (2012). Research on the psychological needs of urban elderly based on the theory of needs [Master's thesis, Shenyang Ligong University].
- [3] Ma, X. L. (2017). Application of life review methods in hospice care for patients with advanced cancer [Master's thesis, China Youth University of Political Studies].
- [4] Ren, J. (2018). Positive response to aging: Concepts, trends and key issues. Liaoning University Press.

- [5] Sheafor, B. W., Horejsi, C. R. (2019). Social work practice skills and guide. People's University of China Press.
- [6] Su, Z. F. (2014). Population aging and pension models. Social Sciences Academic Press.
- [7] Wang, J. X. (2019). Survey on current situations of spiritual elderly care services in urban communities [Master's thesis, Hubei Normal University].
- [8] Yi, P., Liang, C. X. (2019). Research report on aging society (2019). Social Sciences Academic Press.
- [9] Yu, L., Pu, L. L., Lin, L. H., et al. (2014). Life review impact on the quality of life of patients with advanced cancer. *Journal of Nursing*, 21(8), 67–71.