Understanding the Impact of Older Adults’ Reminiscence on Students’ Thoughts About Aging: A Preliminary Analysis

Lyn Goldberg, PhD, and Douglas F. Parham, PhD, Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders

Rationale

The rapid population growth of adults 65 years of age and older is accompanied by the need for younger adults to appreciate, understand, and reflect on the issues inherent in aging, and advocate for appropriate services to address these issues. It is important to document such reflective learning as objectively as possible. Content analysis, an accepted research approach to investigate narrative perceptions of events, appears well-suited to analyze students’ experiences as they facilitate older adults’ reminiscence (i.e., reflecting on life’s experiences).

Derived from Butler’s (1963) Life Review Theory, reminiscence has been shaped into an evidence-based, culturally-sensitive therapeutic approach that assists older adults in thinking, remembering, reasoning, and engaging in meaningful communication through: (a) sharing the richness of life-long experiences, (b) reviving old interests and developing new ones, (c) coming to terms with major life changes and end-of-life issues, and (d) celebrating major accomplishments.

Older adults reminisce more readily to people who are their juniors by at least two generations (Butler, 1980). Thus, having students spend time with older adults is mutually beneficial. However, there is a need to develop an objective method to gain insight into students’ positive and negative thoughts on aging as they work with older adults.

Purpose of the Study

To assess the reliability of coders in applying distinct categories to students’ thoughts on aging

Participants

Undergraduate students (n = 72; 10 men, 62 women; mean age = 22.1 years; range = 19.1 to 42.3) Older adult residents of an Assisted Living Facility (n = 26; 8 men, 18 women; mean age = 78.8 years; range = 65.8 to 92.5)

Procedures

As part of a Communication in Aging course, teams of 2-3 students partnered with an older adult to complete a reminiscence experience using The Time of My Life (TOML, Bristol Publications). The 210 TOML items guided older adults’ free-flowing reflections on events in their lives, both personal and societal, which the students transcribed. Students maintained written online narratives of their experiences.

Data Analysis

The students’ narratives were entered into Leximancer content analysis software (Version 3, 2008) to identify the most commonly shared key words across students. Leximancer’s multi-stage automatic processing generated a list of 126 key words, as well as related word maps, as shown in Figure 1.

Three independent coders were asked to categorize each key word into defined Constraining, Neutral, and Enabling categories. Their selections are presented in Figure 2. The coders varied in how many words they classified in each category: Table 1 shows a sample of categorized words upon which all three coders agreed.

Results

The inter-rater reliability results are presented in Figures 3, 4, and 5. For example, in Figure 3, Coder 1 classified 21 words (16 + 4 + 1) in the category “Constraining”; however, Coder 2 only agreed with that classification for only 16 of them (indicated by the blue bar containing the numeral “16”).

These figures also show each pair’s overall measure of agreement (Kappa) and the pair’s agreement within category (i.e., “sensitivity”).

Conclusions

1. This analysis is an important first step in determining the value of applying Constraining, Neutral, or Enabling categories to key words students use when writing about aging and their experiences with older adults.

2. For this initial study, there was variability in the inter-rater reliability among and within category codes. Raters’ own biases of what individual words denote can explain this disparity in agreement. Continued work on the analysis of key phrases rather than single words will be important for more accurate evaluation of students’ insights.

3. The application of Constraining, Neutral, or Enabling categories to students’ written reflections about aging can still provide important insights not only into the reminiscences of older adults, but also—and more importantly—lead to more meaningful connections and personal interactions between older and younger adults.

References

For full citations, please contact the first author at Lyn.Goldberg@wichita.edu.

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