



# Later life learning from experience: the cross-cultural importance of ‘life reviews’ in seniors’ lifelong education and learning

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Received: 28 August 2018 / Accepted: 15 December 2018 / Published online: 16 January 2019  
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**Abstract** Lifelong education for seniors is becoming a significant policy focus because of factors relating to the global aging society phenomenon. Yet the modern ‘educational demoralisation’ that can result from informal experiential learning not being sufficiently valued or encouraged, may also apply to later life learning—typically manifest as a ‘fear of ageing’ as well as ageism. This is especially so in contexts where policymakers tend to just mainly focus on the worrying economic, health and other related challenges of growing numbers of seniors living longer in ageing societies (i.e. without sufficiently linking this to the related qualitative challenges of a meaningful and resilient life course). Conversely however, there is also growing recognition that ‘life reviews’ in later stages of the human lifecycle have an important lifelong education and learning purpose with also important cross-cultural relevance for addressing the related resiliency dilemmas facing many seniors around the world. In other words, if another key function of later life learning is the informal sharing of knowledge, stories and experience through social (and social media) networks, then it might be that developing countries have as much to offer as more developed countries when it comes to emerging models of third age (and fourth age) models of lifelong learning for seniors—if not more. On such a basis for better grounding policy in practice or actual lived human experience, the paper will thus discuss the cross-culturally universal importance of a ‘life review’ function of later life learning as also an integral requirement of the most effective ‘active ageing’ policies and practices.

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**Keywords** Later life learning · Ageing society policy · Active aging · Informal education · Life reviews · Lifecycle completion

## **Lernen aus Erfahrung. Die interkulturelle Bedeutung von Lebensrückblicken für Lernprozesse von älteren Menschen**

**Zusammenfassung** Lebenslanges Lernen für ältere Menschen gerät im Kontext eines globalen demographischen Wandels zunehmend in den Fokus der Politik. Dennoch führt eine gesellschaftliche Geringschätzung informellen und experimentellen Lernens zu einer Demoralisierung in Bezug auf Lernaktivitäten, die sich auch als Angst vor dem Altern manifestiert. Dies ist umso mehr der Fall, wenn die Politik hauptsächlich auf die negativen ökonomischen und gesundheitlichen Auswirkungen alternder Gesellschaften fokussiert, ohne dies hinreichend an ein sinnvolles und qualitatives Leben rückzukoppeln. Andererseits wird zunehmend erkannt, welchen Wert „Lebensrückblicke“ im höheren Alter für Lern- und Bildungsprozesse haben können, insbesondere dann, wenn es um kulturelle Unterschiede geht, von denen sich auf Resilienz-Erfahrungen abheben lässt. So ist auch in den Blick zu nehmen, dass der informelle Austausch von Lebensgeschichten, -erfahrungen und -modellen u.a. über soziale Medien und soziale Netzwerke auch Menschen aus Schwellen- und Entwicklungsländern einschließen sollte. Dieser Beitrag diskutiert den universellen Wert solcher Lebensrückblicke in Lernprozessen im höheren Alter für die Politik und Praxis aktiven Alterns.

**Schlüsselwörter** Lernen im höheren Alter · Alternde Gesellschaften · Aktives Altern · Informelles Lernen · Lebensrückblick

### **1 Introduction: ageing societies and later life learning at the global cross-roads**

*At nearly 80, with a scattering of medical and surgical problems, none disabling, I feel glad to be alive ... I do not think of old age an ever grimmer time that one must endure and make the best of, but as a time of leisure and freedom, freed from the factitious urgencies of earlier days, free to explore whatever I wish, and to bind the thoughts and feelings of a lifetime together* (our emphasis).

Oliver Sacks, *The joy of old age*, *New York Times Sunday Review*, July 6, 2013

The ageing society effect has been a key influence on emerging lifelong education policies globally. This has especially been so in developed countries (Aleandri and Refrigeri 2013), but also includes many developing societies or emerging economies (UNESCO 2016). Just as an ageing population has influenced the European Union's lifelong learning policy (and related policies such as the Bologna Process), likewise in countries like Japan and Korea as well as Australia and the US. However, many emerging economies and 'developing societies' (ranging from China and India to Thailand and Uruguay)—have also been impacted by the 'ageing society' global

imperative and the distinct if related 'longevity effect' (Scott 2018). The 2002 World Health Organisation (WHO 2002) *Ageing society: A policy framework* was conceived to alert the world to a demographic timebomb (Cf. also WHO 2011). Whilst this does have particular application to the developing world, general population ageing is actually taking place up to three times more quickly in developed nations typically lacking in equivalent institutional support systems for seniors.

That 'active ageing' may also be a mode of 'active learning' is indicated by how non-formal as well as informal third age learning has been a priority of the UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning (2016). Perhaps more consistent with the French rather than British model of the University of Third age (U3A) (Formosa 2014), the European Union's 'lifelong learning for all' policy aspiration (which initially deployed a 'lifecycle' rationale) appears to have developed as a 'neoliberal' ideology with even seniors lifelong learning still often referenced by notions of employability also linked to formal education institutions (Volles 2016). In contrast China's 'universities for the elderly' perhaps exemplify more the general global tendency to interpret 'active ageing' in ad hoc terms as just keeping the elderly occupied or entertained in their retirement—with 'third age learning' thus often associated with ad hoc courses of interest in community colleges, geriatric clubs, seniors centres, and related groups or activities (The longevity network, 18th July, 2017).

The typical activities or classes of U3A and related later life education models are often referred to as 'gerogogic' or even 'eldergogic' teaching and learning (e. g. Formosa 2012). This is in contrast to how the concept of pedagogy generally refers to a typical teacher-centred approach in formal education. Gerogogy thus overlaps with the notion of andragogy in adult and continuing education to refer to a more interactive approach to learners with extensive life experience already. It is typically more informal, often involves collaborative peer learning, and also views the teacher-student relation as inherently reversible. Most of all it emphasises how effective learning is or should be intrinsically motivated and grounded as much in self-reflections on lifecycle stages of change as in direct and active lifelong experience.

The need for a more integrated framework for appreciating as well as practicing seniors' lifelong education and learning is perhaps typified by how both 'health and fitness' (especially in urban or developed contexts) and traditional 'arts and crafts' dominate (especially in rural or developing country contexts) typically tend to be the more popular activities or courses for seniors (Richards et al. *in press*). But how to respond to criticism (often from local fitness clubs or cultural associations) that such activities and courses may not be really 'learning'? We think the answer lies in how a closer inspection of many U3A curriculum offerings revealed to us indicators of a more integrated rationale of informal and non-formal learning than just physical activity or entertainment for its own sake (Ratana-Ubol and Richards 2016). This reflects how although his work is associated with 'active learning' models in formal education, John Dewey (1999 [1938]) really took a wider view that informal experience is the key to learning—and 'life itself' the ultimate mode of human education. This is also why we focus below on how it might be argued that the 'life review' function is or should be a key focus of later life learning—also going hand in hand with 'personal interest' activities including health, fitness and

cultural activities. In other words, if policy frameworks are really serious about active ageing as a prescription for the ageing society effect, then the concept of later life learning needs to somehow involve the harnessing of knowledge about and interest in the lifelong experience of any and all seniors.

Thus, in this paper we propose to focus on further clarifying as well as exploring a more integrated and optimal (and also optimistic) notion of later life learning still informally grounded in lifelong experience—one that also might provide an antidote to the fear of ageing and the often depressing modern narrative of ‘formal education-work/family-retirement-just-waiting-to-die’ (Richards 2018). The first part of the paper will consider how this dominant modern narrative of the human life cycle is associated with a typical ‘demoralization’ of modern education and society that is further linked to a devaluation of the traditionally-respected life experience of seniors as community or tribal elders. The second part will discuss what may be referred to as the particularly important ‘life review’ function of an integrated approach to later life learning. A third part will further discuss a cross-culturally universal view of this as a significant focus for recovering the importance of informal experiential learning across the human life-cycle that becomes more relevant than ever in third age and fourth age stages of later life learning.

## **2 The link between modern educational demoralization and a related social devaluation of seniors or their lifecycle experience**

In many traditional societies seniors (including those retired and elderly) and their lifelong experience are typically respected within local community contexts. Therefore, it should not be surprising that growing rates of anxiety and depression afflict seniors in a modern predominantly urban society where many people lose touch with their cultural traditions, local community and even family network (as well as childhood dreams and aspirations). As indicated, the modern lifecycle narrative tends to view retired people as having no further social purpose beyond work and raising the nuclear family, and to be somewhat of a burden on society as they wait to die. Therefore, it’s not just social isolation as well as physical ill-health which are the key sources of depression in the elderly, but also a lack of meaning and purpose (e. g. Boyle et al. 2010).

Moreover, it might be reasonably argued that devaluation of life experience (especially that of seniors) in modern societies is linked to the thesis that the loss of either connection to or faith in the human lived experience is the basis for the educational demoralization of modern society as well as its formal education systems. Ecclestone (2004) has insightfully argued that a general disconnection with applied as well as lived experience is a key reason why modern formal education is increasingly suffering from a condition of ‘demoralisation’—one that not only affects society but itself is symptomatic of ‘a wider modern cultural malaise’. As she has further suggested (Ecclestone and Hayes 2009), the effective loss of a sustainable link to lived experience produces models of self which are ‘diminished’ as well as disillusioned: “A diminished human subject finds exposure to uncertainty and

adversity, including disappointment, despair and conflict simultaneously threatening to 'the integrity of the self' and inhibiting of it" (p. xi).

This modern passivity involving a loss of self-confidence as well as trust in others should be distinguished from notions of 'fatalism' often attributed to some non-western societies and non-individualistic cultural traditions. A relevant framework is needed to restore confidence in the essential learning process of converting lifelong (macro) as well as direct (micro) experience into resilient living and sustainable knowledge (Bernard 2004). This is to the extent that learning might be defined as the indirect as well as direct (i.e. informal reflection on experience as well as formally taught content) translation and possible transformation of various modes of experience into knowledge, understanding, and regular practice.

In this way the *quality of life* (the essential 'whole' of lived experience) as a regular as well as culminating perspective at the macro level of human knowledge might be better recognised as inevitably linked to the *quality of direct experience experience* involving an active mode of informal learning at a micro level. It is in terms of the common focus on addressing and trying to solve problems that both action learning/inquiry/knowledge-building models (as the basis of 'stories' of learning or problem-solving) and explicit story structures (typically as forms of *virtual* action learning cycles exemplified by the concept of 'thought experiments') might begin to be recognized as alternately micro and macro cycles of informal lifelong learning. Direct human experience involves both *receptive* and *active* (impression vs. expression, listening vs. speaking, reading vs. writing, etc.) modes of learning possibility at every stage of the human lifecycle. In this way the informal experiential learning process available to every person in the varying degrees of every cultural context represents a convergent foundation also of all modes of education including the non-formal and formal.

Kolb (1984) developed his learning cycle model of experiential learning to depict the optimal process of how active learners are able to transform direct or even indirect experience (and also the secondary-level 'experiencing' of awareness and also reflection *in* and *on* experience) into forms of human knowledge embracing both theory and practice. From this different perspective, formal notions of education tend to reinforce what are generally recognized as *surface* modes of learning compared with the *deeper* learning processes of progressive *experiential*, *action*, *reflective practice*, and *integrated* (or *transformative*) modes of an informal learning cycle grounded in (or embodied by) experience—that is, where cognitive and social aspects of learning are grounded in related processes of understanding, synthesis, and transferable application (e.g. Marton and Säljö, 1997).

As well as viewing learning and education as a continuum (i.e. education as basically 'assisted learning'), Alan Rogers' (2004) integrated lifelong learning framework also identifies informal learning from experience as the foundation of formal as well as non-formal education. To put this another way, from the point of view of every individual lifecycle grounded in the informal learning opportunities of lived experience, learning is a lifelong process involving informal, formal and non-formal modes of learning generally corresponding to unstructured, semis-structured, and structured activities and processes. In short, human experience goes beyond the behavioral reinforcement of a merely 'animal' stimulus response to experience to

involve constructive cognitive and social processes of learning transformation. This frames learner development not just in infancy and youth but all through life.

As Rogers (2005) further suggests, in many developing countries such as Thailand there is a strong non-formal education tradition in part for cultural reasons and in part because of a past need to supplement formal education opportunities in many rural and ‘less developed’ areas. In other words, in many more traditional or ‘less modernized’ non-Western societies the concept of lifelong learning is often viewed somewhat differently than in either Western or more highly developed (e.g. OECD countries). As we have discussed elsewhere in relation to the example of Thailand (Richards et al. [in press](#)), this is a perspective more inclined to take an integrated or spectrum view of the distinct formal, non-formal and also informal or experiential modes of learning. In such a view the concept of lifelong learning is actually nothing new in a generic sense of the term. Basically it is the process of people still ‘striving’ whilst ‘surviving’—adjusting to change, trying to develop themselves, aspiring to give their children better opportunities in life, and still holding to the cultural framing of the lifecycle stages of human development and lifelong learning.

As we also discuss elsewhere (e.g. Ratana-Ubol and Richards 2016), a closer inspection of U3A and related later life learning courses in international and cross-cultural contexts reveals some interesting convergences which correspond to the three basic tiers of Maslow’s (1973) hierarchy of human needs. These are physical needs, social needs, and various higher-order modes of self-actualisation as well as psychological need (including intellectual, cultural, wisdom studies and even ‘spiritual’ interests)—so also including both the related short-hands of ‘*physical, social, cognitive* modes’ and ‘*body, mind and spirit*’. For instance, as discussed above, courses which promote physical health and fitness are typically of primary interest for many, followed by survival skills for a globally changing social context (including financial and digital literacies), and then also different kinds of learning courses for intellectual, cultural and other modes of ‘psychological’ health and stimulation (e.g. history, cultural knowledge, and learning a new language).

There are thus arguably related *economic, leisure* and *wisdom* justifications for later life learning which together represent an integrated overall rationale (e.g. Thomas 2014). In addition to the residual notion in some countries that lifelong learning for seniors might somehow instill competitive employability (even as general unemployment rates rise), there are at least the survival literacies for living in an increasingly digitized as well as global knowledge economy—hence the need for courses or related support in acquiring the various financial, information search and digital communication skills needed to access services as well as generally function in a fast-changing world. Although a leisure model of lifelong learning for seniors was linked to a brief golden age for retirees in affluent societies (until recent decades) when the end of work could also mean serial opportunities to enjoy travel and other aspects of ‘the good life’, it remains still important for more substantial reasons. As Laslett (1996) proposed, retired seniors should not just wait to die after retiring from work but seek to take up opportunities for new experiences, new knowledge and new friends—as epitomized by the Australian ‘grey nomad phenomenon’ (Calma et al. 2018) to generally live life as an ‘adventure’ like a traveler.

In this way, similar notions such as John McLeish’s (1976) concept of ‘Ulyssean living in later life’ could also mean self-exploration as well as proactive life engagement with a diverse and changing world. A leisure rationale could therefore merge or develop into the wisdom justification discussed further in the next section. This is a justification more familiar to traditional societies with long traditions of respecting elders for their experience. For instance, the Hindu *sadhus* of India and Taoist sages of China exemplify traditional options for also for older people in those countries to pursue various options for later life learning as matters of interest, health, collective knowledge and/or spiritual practice (Plotkin 2006).

### **3 The life review function in later life learning: recovering the importance of informal lifelong learning from lived human experience**

With the increasing breakdown in the modern age of the conventional school-work/family-retirement life trajectory (Field et al. 2013), the growing importance of ‘active later life learning’ for good mental as well as physical health in ageing societies is also becoming become transferable to every individual and society. As mentioned, all this further reinforces the notion that lifelong education is the relevant larger framework for recognising the importance of lifelong informal or experiential learning as inevitably also the basis of formal and non-formal domains of education—as well as any reflection on or appreciation of the overall quality of any and every human life. The natural or experiential foundation for this is how the human lifecycle has psychological and cognitive as well as biological imperatives of growth and maturation grounded in social as well as personal mediations of both external change or development and internal continuity. Just as the modern education narrative is mainly focused on external notions of identity and achievement, a developmental perspective recognises how the so-called mid-life crisis signals the transition to a stage in life where ‘life reviews’ provide an important key to an effective model of active later life learning—a model also cross-culturally relevant in a fast-changing, diverse and increasingly ‘workless’ world.

As indicated in his last book *Lifecycle Completed*, Erik Erikson the author of one of the most influential models of human development and its key transitions reframed this in terms of a lifecycle model to better appreciate how humans can or should better address the later life ‘mortality crisis’. In his revised model, this can or should involve a process of ‘lifecycle completion’ that in many ways resembles Tornstam’s (2005) related notion of ‘gerotranscendence’—a view of later life ageing as a development process more internally aligned towards realisable senses of maturity, life-satisfaction and even wisdom. As epitomized by the Oliver Sacks quote above, Erikson’s notion of lifecycle completion reframes his later life psychosocial crisis stage of *integrity vs. despair*. Starting with the so-called mid-life crisis (and not with retirement from work *per se*) the second half of human life experience is viewed in terms of a transition to an ‘inward arc’ culminating in the acceptance of the inevitable stage of death. As Erikson himself put it in this his last work, ‘there gradually arises a *most critical mid-life factor*, namely, the evidence of a narrowing of choices by conditions irreversibly chosen—by fate or by oneself’ (Erikson 1998,

p. 79) [our emphasis]. From a cyclic perspective, mention of a transition from an *outward arc* of the lifecycle from birth to develop a stable adult identity is usefully contrasted with what may be rather viewed as an ‘inward arc’ of self-referenced reflectiveness, personal development and integrated knowledge-building.

This later but arguably the primary process arc of human development no longer focuses on youthful ambitions and externals, yet is rather concerned now with the inner story of the overall lifecycle process and its diverse and changing perspectives as people age with experience. Erikson’s earlier ‘ego integrity’ lens for viewing human aging is now reframed in terms of a later stage and process of self-knowledge development linked with culminating life perspectives of acceptance and equanimity. Such an adaptation of Erikson’s model is consistent with Jung’s model of four key life stages (*childhood, youth, maturity and old age*) which similarly invoked notions of the *four ages of life* influential in the West since ancient Greece as well as the *four seasons* metaphor of life course (also applied by Levinson 1978) common in many traditional cultures (Kastenbaum 1993). Plotkin’s (2006) impressive version (*childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and elderhood*) culminates in the two later life stages of ‘the master in the grove of elders’ (i. e. concerned with particular community contexts of local knowledge and wisdom) and ‘the sage in the mountain cave’ (focused rather on the universal appreciation of nature and its cycles).

In this way Erikson’s revised lifecycle model became more aligned with other comparable ‘depth psychology’ models of development such as Carl Jung’s concept of individuation, Eric Fromm’s movement from a ‘having’ to ‘being’ life perspective, and especially Viktor Frankl’s notion of the inner meaning of life potentially revealed at any age at a time of existential crisis (or brought on by what some refer to as ‘critical incidents’). In effect the existential mid-life crisis or transition also involves a related transition from surface to deep learning modes of understanding ourselves, reviewing the influence of our social contexts and appreciating anew the universal processes of nature (i. e. aspects of Tornstam’s model of embodied gerotranscendence). As Frankl (1999, p. 77) put it to explain how his positive model derived from his personal insights from the most terrible concentration camp experiences of WW2, ‘we had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that *it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us*’ (our emphasis). This advice remains just as relevant for seniors around the world today.

In his timely book *Being Mortal* penitent surgeon Gawande (2014) discusses how social change and scientific advances have transformed ‘the processes of aging and dying into medical experiences’ which tend to isolate, terrify and often deny people their basic dignity, any sense of enduring autonomy and basic quality of life. The book critiques a common dehumanizing approach to aged care in particular, the general lack of appropriate ‘palliative care’, and the ageing process more widely in modern societies. This is done in terms of a contrast with how traditional societies tend to maintain a greater respect for elders as custodians of local knowledge and tradition—and, at the same time, encourage a more intimate view of death as a natural process in the cycle of life. The experience of his own father’s death helped Gawande to appreciate that an appropriate dignity and respect for impending death is needed more than ever. Such respect for the final stage of human life is still

increasingly uncommon as modern society seeks to isolate, medicalise and strictly regulate end-of-life care often ignoring the basic psychological, social, and also lifelong learning needs of all seniors. In this way Gawande goes on in the book to make a passionate defense of the right of everyone to not only have a 'good death but a good life to the very end' (p. 245).

Life review' is an important informal lifelong learning focus all through life in the sense that from time to time everyone might benefit from reflective and mindful self-awareness beyond the present to include the past and also future (Hyland 2011). However, it has a special application for *later life learning* such that we might more accurately refer to the pivotal importance for all of a *culminating* life review. The exemplary concept of a 'structured life review' outlined by Haight and Haight (2007) is a particular model which applies the Erikson developmental framework to interpret Butler's (1963) related model of therapeutic reminiscence.

Birren and Cochran's (2001) *guided autobiography* is another significant related model. It generally encourages seniors to recall and share 'life stories' as an alternately personal and social basis for promoting mental health as well as personal enrichment and general enjoyment and satisfaction. But are life reviews simply therapy or can they be a mode of lifelong learning? Haber (2006) has addressed this question to affirm a key function of seniors' lifelong education and learning. He rightly proposes that "life review conducted for educational purposes can teach or inform others, pass on knowledge and experience to a new generation, or enhance understanding of one's own life" (p. 155). Likewise, Valliant (2002) has usefully proposed the following rationale for seniors lifelong learning: 'gusto for education in late life is highly correlated with psychological health'. This assertion was linked to a related observation that many senior lifelong learners are able to recover a 'child-like wonder in life and nature'—that is, a renewed capacity for 'learning to learn again' as well as an appreciation and acceptance of the processes of decay, death, and rebirth in nature.

The original popularizer of the life review concept Butler (1963) did apply an alternately therapeutic and educational view of the process of reminiscence or the remembering of past life events. He recognised that the process entailed two main benefits which are also relevant to a lifelong learning outcome of emergent gerotranscendence or culminating wisdom. The first is that the life review process encourages the attitude of 'letting go' as a basis for achieving an inner resolution to past memories of negative influences or bad experiences—including instances of regret, resentment, guilt, and loss. In this way one might achieve or recover a sense of equanimity applied with patience through an associated awareness of how past events or past projections of an ideal future (i.e. a reality-rhetoric gap) may have continued to affect one's life course and development.

The other key function of a life review process is to help achieve a renewed appreciation of life accomplishments—especially in relation to the key lifecycle stages. This can further assist to recover, appreciate and even celebrate more positive memories and intimate connections (especially with family and friends) from the past. Thus, as Haight & Haight have further pointed out, some related benefits of the life review process may on one hand include the reduction or eradication of depression, the overcoming of senses of loneliness or isolation, and the resolution

of past traumas—and on the other, improved links to family and friends, greater self-acceptance, and an enhanced sense of life satisfaction. Even ‘active dreaming’ techniques (Moss 2010) can be applied as part of this process. Linked to palliative care for dying seniors, culminating life reviews may assist with a peaceful and even tranquil acceptance of mortality and impending death. As Hammond (2004, p. 502) has found from fieldwork evidence, participation in lifelong learning has even been found to also help mitigate ‘the onset and progression of chronic illness and disability’.

In sum then, a key lifecycle awareness function of life reviews is needed to help people achieve a more ‘balanced’ self-evaluation and also self-perception. This can take place as a related process of correcting or at least balancing unfair negative self-images or a selective and exaggerated focus on bad memories. As a mode of experiential learning this may involve the generic lifelong learning challenge and purpose of reflective evaluation *in* and *on* experience—exemplified by a learning cycle development to strike a ‘constructive evaluation’ balance. This is also a balance between the passivity-inducing approach of overly negative or mistakes-focused criticism (i. e. typical of the general assessment strategy of modern formal education) and also the opposite tendency to uncritical positivity or inflated self-esteem—which may also set people up for negative self-fulfilling prophecies of failure or inadequacy. This corresponds to the related ‘opposite errors’ identified by Donald Schon (1983) of ‘doing without thinking’ and ‘thinking without doing’.

Also exemplifying the distinction between surface and deep lifelong learning, Butler linked life reviews with a process of positive thinking to overcome an ostensible sense of *disengagement* with life and society. This negative process is typically associated with a loss of interest in living, a growing sense of boredom, a sense of meaninglessness, and a fragmented or disconnected view of life in general as well as in relation to one’s own life. He proposed that there was a deeper level of significance even beyond the obvious health benefits of a surface ‘information’ purpose of reminiscence to recall ad hoc positive and significant memories. He thus described an ‘evaluative’ and even ‘obsessive’ deep-learning purpose of reminiscence for life pattern recognition and meaning making which might serve to rather encourage and promote ongoing *continuity* and also *adaptation*. We suggest that this might be interpreted as the inner and self-organising axis of the individual life-cycle. In short then, as a learning strategy the *life review* process involves a key function of ‘meaning making’ grounded in the lifelong process of self-knowledge.

#### **4 Life review stories and the cross-cultural importance of experiential learning for ‘lifecycle completion’**

Viewing the ageing process and impending death (i.e. an immediate ‘mortality crisis’) in terms of a larger as well as foundational ‘lifecycle completion’ crisis, opportunity and transition involves aspects of experiential learning which exemplify a larger process of achieving optimal alignment between the past and future as well as an internal and external perspective on life. In related terms of optimizing the link between an organizing sense of self and the apparent ‘fragments’ of life roles,

experiences, and human connections, the great humanist philosopher Paul Ricoeur (2009) has called this a process of actively 'living right up until death'.

In Ricoeur's (1976) humanistic anthropology of 'the capable human being', the lifelong process of self-understanding ever involves virtual (e.g. thinking, writing and talking) as well as physical and social 'actions' which open up the world to an endlessly transformative 'surplus of meaning'. One key aspect is the learning as well as psychological process of coming to terms with or achieving acceptance of impending death. This also corresponds to the related imperative of a life review process to make sense of or reconcile as well as remember and appreciate a lifetime of memories, dreams and intentions as well as perceptions and interpretations. As Ricoeur (2004) further outlines, the journey to better self-understanding at the personal as well as collective level inevitably takes places as a reciprocal relationship between *remembering* and *forgetting* navigated through ever-present tendencies for blocked, manipulated or even obligated memories. As a basis for appreciating anew the 'inner story' of how one has *survived and even thrived* despite the range of internal and external 'crises' faced throughout life, this process also represents a basis for the 'letting go' of limiting attachments, negative emotions, and any residual pretensions. It is on this basis that later life learning from experience involves a naturally affinity with what might be called wisdom studies.

The interplay between internal and external perspectives on life experience thus provides a framework for recalling and making renewed meaning in retrospect from diverse examples, instances, and stories to be shared with others and potentially passed on to a younger generation as relevant knowledge or even the wisdom of experience. The link between the life review process and the challenge of sustaining a viable sense of the meaning of life thus involves several levels. At the basic level, a life review process and model generally assists with framing the meaning or pattern of life as ongoing responses to a series of external events within the larger lifecycle context. On another level, this corresponds to an inner story linked rather to the underlying patterns of experience, behavior and self-understanding as a person either ages with 'maturity' or rather becomes 'lost'. This may be further appreciated or recognized in terms of particular cultural narratives and stereotypes or even archetypes—especially local or traditional variations of Joseph Campbell's 'hero with a thousand faces'. As Ricoeur (1991) puts it, it is through the *narrative identity* interplay of external life stories (i.e. about experienced activities and perceptions) and internal lifecycle continuity that 'we learn to become *the narrator* and the hero *of our own story*' (p. 32). In terms of Erikson's concept of the lifecycle undergoing 'completion' it thus might also involve the inner arc or trajectory of self-knowledge development. Beyond this, as epitomized by related concepts such as gerotranscendence, it may involve a renewed appreciation of the wonder of life as well as the natural ageing rhythms and life-death process of nature (i.e. the great cycle of life) and beyond this to even more universal levels of insight.

Like Ricoeur, Gergen and Gergen (1988) have distinguished between the diverse 'narratives of self' (identity 'fragments' externally reflected in particular social/normative contexts or by particular groups) and singular notions of 'self narrative'. In turn, self narrative may involve wishful thinking or some kind of personal myth or fiction on one hand, or on the other have a coherence rather from the interaction

between a particular lifecycle within a specific social or cultural context and the typical key stages of this. At the intersection of these interplays are several filters which may amplify or reinforce the stories of self: (a) particular social roles, values and stereotypes, (b) traditional myths or archetypal stories, and (c) even imaginative fictions of various kinds (realism, romance, tragedy, comedy, etc.). As Gergen and Gergen (1988) point out, the later life narratives of self in modern western countries tend to be more pessimistic and regressive than many traditional (e. g. Asian) contexts (p. 30).

The notion of each individual as both the narrator and also potential ‘hero’ or active constructor of their own lifelong learning processes in relation to larger social and cultural contexts of knowledge is a useful metaphor for linking micro cycles of experiential learning and the macro domain of the overall lifecycle. The basic narrative structure of stories set primarily in time (development) or space (journey) with Campbell’s (1990) ‘hero with a thousand faces’ *monomyth* model of human stories across different ages and cultures of humanity. Thus, the structure of problem-solving in Campbell’s monomyth model of stories (*separation, supreme ordeal/initiation, and unification/return*) generally corresponds to that identified in the dramatic model of a ‘three act’ structure (setup/background, confrontation/crisis, and resolution). This is as well as related models such as Freytag’s pyramid and Northrop Frye’s ‘four seasons’ framework of romantic or heroic innocence confronting realistic experience as the basis also of additional tragi-comic or epic modes of social and life context.

Likewise, Turner (1996) has outlined how the main function of ritual process in all traditional societies was ever typically linked to and framed by the ‘rites of passage’ (or lifecycle transitions in identity). In this view, the ritual process for lifecycle stages and related crises (especially the initiation of adolescents into adulthood) typically aims to achieve new knowledge or insights to transform either individual agents or their immediate community contexts as order is restored to the process of change and to states of either chaos or ‘disequilibrium’. Turner also adapted to a modern context Van Gennep’s description of the three-fold structure of the rites of passage as an amplification of the liminal situations of unique crises or problems encountered at both the individual and collective levels.

In relation to the constructive purposes of individual or even collective life reviews, it might be argued that the *basic story of the overall human lifecycle* is whether or to what extent a person has ‘held it together’ as they navigated the interplay of innate purposes and life ambitions in relation to specific and often changing situations. In this way, also, we have a comparatively universal basis for appreciating or self-evaluating and judging (a) that a *noble failure* can be greatly superior to merely ‘playing it safe’ or being risk-free in life, and (b) that an ‘inner process’ achievement of sustained integrity in any particular context (or what James Hillman calls emergent ‘character development’) may ultimately be more meaningful than any superficial identity or mere record of external and apparent achievement.

In this way Hillman (1999) has argued that a crucial main function of ‘later life’—generally ignored by modern society (and also by most psychological theories)—is the emergent ability to recognise of how ‘character development’ in alignment with ‘lasting values’ is or should be really a lifelong process. It is also a process

aligned with the universally cross-cultural function of the lifecycle stage of 'elderhood' (i. e. the calling of all seniors to also be experienced 'elders' in their immediate society). Hillman used an acorn metaphor to define *character* as both a unique and typical structure of personality (not identity per se) that also has important, holistic, and culminating old age functions along the lines of Erikson's notion of a 'lifecycle completed'. In similar fashion Roszak (2009) has argued that in an increasingly ruthless, materialistic and alienated 21st Century world, the 'wisdom of elders' can and should be seen as the richest resource (not just a burden) of any society and culture—with even the so-called 'baby boomers' having a responsibility to help global society become 'less materialistic and ambitious, more discriminating and compassionate'.

Later life learning has a significant social (as well as reflective) function and aspect. This includes both the diverse and various 'biographical stories' (including related 'identity fragments') and the organizing or lifecycle 'lived story' of each individual and also particular groups or communities. At the later life stage, the social function of the generally informal 'gerogogic' and 'educational gerontology' models of later life learning may encourage extracurricular discussion and chat (including in online communications or social media) involving memories of the past, projections about the future, or even present gossip. This may even involve some form of characteristic 'men's talk' or 'women's talk'—traditionally distinguished in terms of the former often more interested external action and the latter often more interested in an emotional perspective. But by and large at this stage all individuals who participate in typical later life learning activities or courses receive not just mixed-group social affirmation to combat isolation but also sufficient reinforcement as well (i. e. audience and witness functions) of both individual and collective 'lived stories'. Naturally, certain activities like dance, music, gardening, cooking, types of exercise, arts and crafts, and other hobbies as well as the writing of memoirs and composing of family histories serve to tap into and even harness again individual and collective experiential traditions and memories.

Modern society has tended to ignore, dismiss, and be increasingly suspicious or uncertain about the relevance of knowledge and (especially traditional notions of wisdom) based on direct life experience and grounded both in the body and processes of nature. However, no-one should dismiss out-of-hand the power of the lifecycle wisdom of patience, equanimity and humility. This is especially so in a world where so many people are depressed by the past, anxious for the future, and increasingly 'rushing' around in the present effectively blind or lost—and where (as indicated earlier) the global education systems have tended to become demoralized and in a permanent crisis mode. The exemplary aspects of wisdom which correspond to the deep learning and knowledge-building outcomes of the key lifecycle crises (*foundational patience, emergent knowledge, a refined capacity for discrimination, and ultimate self-understanding*) have their correlates in many traditional cultures. For instance, the structural design of Buddhist stupas, statues, and related symbolic paintings likewise epitomize the life of the Buddha and the four stages of enlightenment and corresponding aspects of wisdom—typically beginning with 'equanimity' (Snodgrass 1991).

Likewise, the well-known dictum of another great ‘axial age thinker’ Socrates—‘the examined life is worth living’ exemplifies ‘meaning of life’ insights and the development of universal wisdom. Socrates’ recognised that ‘ignorance’ (or an open mind) is ever the great human equalizer. Thus, his powerful and timelessly relevant inquiry model of the learning process was based on a related distinction between closed-mind or clever ‘arrogant ignorance’ on one hand, and on the other the open-ended humility of ‘wise ignorance’. Likening himself to a ‘mid-wife’ who assists and encourage others to think for themselves, Socrates practiced dialogical techniques of both naïve and critical questioning for optimal knowledge-building which remain relevant today as a model of either formally teaching or rather informally encouraging and practicing lifelong learning (Gross 1991). Just as he held that clever but close-minded people need humility to really develop progress, he saw that others rather need to be supported to achieve greater confidence in and awareness of their prior knowledge as well as future capacity (Richards 2010). Hence, Socrates’ elenchus method of focused inquiry still provides an exemplary contrast to dominant modern models of formal education learning as basically a transmission of information, skills and passive ‘surface’ modes of experience, learning, and development.

The discussion of the last stage above is not just relevant because of the growing problem of ageing societies and related issues such as health-care provision. There are also related ‘lifelong education’ grounds for challenging the modern school-work-retire-and-wait-to-die script—and with the new ‘plastic brain’ model (e.g. Guglielman 2012), the associated negative self-fulfilling prophecy that older people lose the capacity to learn. More significantly the widespread dismissal and ignorance of the benefits of tacit as well as explicit knowledge grounded in lifelong experience represents a great untapped resource of knowledge and experience sorely needed by a world now in perpetual crisis and by societies suffering increasing policy, decision-making and general sustainability paralysis (Richards 2018). However, perhaps the most important reason is that a ‘lifecycle completion’ framework for later life learning provides the crucial key for a new as well as recovered global perspective which recognizes that a lifecycle perspective is a solid foundation for an integrated model of future lifelong education. We have further explored the application of this framework in relation to the cross-cultural applications of an ‘eight pillars of lifelong education model’ (Richards 2017, 2018) based on the four key stages of lifelong learning from lifecycle experience (i.e. childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and elderhood).

As Ricoeur (e.g. 2009) has outlined, the functions of both ‘self-knowledge’ and ‘genuine community’ are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary aspirations. This might especially apply to a new paradigm of later life leaning in a modern society which has lost or largely forgotten traditional bonds and roles—as well as a basic respect for its seniors. The very acts of both privately recounting and socially sharing stories inevitably involves an additional and convergent function (identified by Ricoeur) of ‘mutual recognition’ in both the personal representation and the reception by others of culminating life review (and other) stories. In other words, reinventing and then spreading the word about the importance of later life learning also through the pivotal role of life reviews can help provide the kind of critical mass needed to rescue or recover a 21st Century paradigm of ‘elderhood’—and

related notions of the wisdom of human lifecycle experience applicable to both the individual and society more generally. Ricoeur recognised that the ultimate expression of this is how 'forgiveness' (especially the forgiveness of self as well as others in culminating life reviews) is 'a kind of gift'—a gift also to others but primarily to oneself (the very basis for maintaining or even recovering self-respect). As the great Stoic philosopher of antiquity Seneca also put it in his classic treatise *On the Shortness of Life* "Learning how to live takes a whole life, and, which may surprise you more, it takes a whole life to learn how to die".

## 5 Conclusion

In a fast-changing uncertain world, seniors also in developing as well as developed countries are especially affected by the related factors of ageing societies, falling birth rates, and loss of both traditional work patterns and existing community or family support structures. Seniors everywhere are increasingly vulnerable, isolated and prone to rising depression rates, all augmented by the reinforcement of a modern life narrative that learning as well as life purpose ends at either retirement or a certain age. This is linked to the related ill-informed question posed by many policy-makers—what do you do with people who you think are just waiting to die a lonely and meaningless death? As we have discussed earlier, there is clearly a connection between these related imperatives and the various 'educational demoralization' effects that result from ignoring, devaluing, losing confidence in and generally failing to harness the direct knowledge as well as lifelong learning imperatives of human informal experience.

The natural process of harnessing human lifelong experience as later life learning typically relates to an ultimate 'fourth age' lifecycle completion stage as well as an earlier 'third age' stage. Compared to how outward concerns dominate childhood, adolescence and adulthood for most people, the trajectory of these two elderhood stages may be precipitated by retirement from or loss of work, some kind of 'mid-life' crisis, and other transitional as well as ageing pretexts for undertaking 'life reviews' which might integrate and harness the experience of every individual and also collective life experience. In a way the various non-formal opportunities and typical gerogogic styles of lifelong education for seniors (typified by the U3A, seniors clubs, and various supports provided to the elderly including effective palliative care near the end) represent an emergent or foundational response to the void of modern society imperatives (and the 'retirement and wait to die' narrative associated with this). A comparison may be made with the cross-cultural contexts of how traditional societies and communities typically respected and cared for their elders as a natural right and responsibility of the human lifecycle or ageing process. This might also help us appreciate that current seniors' lifelong education models and practices are just a 're-start' and remain pretty limited overall currently—and this is why a more optimal as well as integrated approach is needed by all involved.

Thus, the 'later life learning from experience' framework proposed in this paper has been based on the implicit indicators of how an integrated approach might help to optimize health, resiliency and general life-satisfaction—as well as what Tornstam

(2005) called the natural or at least potential ‘gerotranscendence’ function of ageing for any and all seniors. In such an integrated approach, physical health and fitness is a foundational goal to ‘active ageing’, followed by activities and courses (ranging from arts, hobbies, and intellectual pursuits through to 21C financial and digital literacies) which might help to encourage interested, purposeful and also enjoyable living. Beyond this, we have discussed how a life review function (also associated with activities like memoir writing, local histories and family or personal digital albums) epitomizes how there is a natural transition from external concerns in the first part of life to a later more meaningful contemplation of the innate stages of the personal as well as general human lifecycle as part of the wider rhythms of nature, time and growth. This pivotal optimal and integrated notion for what some call ‘wisdom studies’ and others the increasingly lost but perhaps recoverable social function of traditional ‘elderhood’ is based on how such knowledge, understanding and gerotranscendental perspectives lie in the innate human lifecycle of lifelong informal experience transformed into the unavoidable imperative of lifelong learning also in the later stages of life.

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