

## **Author's response to reviews**

**Title:** Life review in advanced age: qualitative research on the 'start in life' of 90-year-olds in the Lothian Birth Cohort 1921

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### **Author's response to reviews:**

Reviewer #1

The positives: Overall the paper is organized and well written.

Overall: too long

- In particular, substantial edits to the introduction and results section, specifically, the "start in life narratives" is called for to abbreviate the paper.
- Duplication of content in tables and text, such as info on demographics, is not necessary and adds to the long length.
- Also, the extensive description of the LBC1921 cohort should be abbreviated and readers referred to prior studies/articles where this cohort is described.

Background (i.e. 'introduction')

This was 1341 and is now 1210 words.

Material justifying qualitative research was shortened

Methods/Design

The cohort description is shortened, with readers being referred to Table 1.

Results and Discussion:

Narratives: Five narratives (1503 words) have been reduced to three (908 words)

Themes: reduced from 3,081 words to 2,628 words, mainly through cutting out quotes/examples; a little restructuring was also done, to add clarity.

The overall length, excluding abstract, references and tables was 8,791 words and is now 7,773 words.

Background: reference the Harvard study

- A review of findings from a prior longitudinal study of healthy aging, the Harvard study of adult development, is not included in the intro and is highly relevant to this study.

We have now cited a paper from the Harvard study, Landes, Ardel, Vaillant and Waldinger (2014) on childhood adversity, midlife generativity and later life well-being

Background: risk and resilience not defined or described

Also, the authors mention relevance of the study to understanding risk and resilience. Neither of these factors is defined or described in the literature review.

Text in the introduction has been changed to clarify how the terms risk and resilience are used in the paper. Notably, this sentence extract: ‘...those aspects of childhood that place individuals at risk of negative outcomes later on and conversely, those which help them become resilient adults and older people.’

Background: childhood attachment should be clarified

- The other concept that warrants attention in the intro and discussion is childhood attachment.

The range of concepts that might be considered relevant to the life course is extensive; clearly, not all can be included, especially given space limitations. With respect to the present study we don’t believe that a focus on attachment is warranted in this research paper. Attachment is a complex concept and the most satisfactory research in the field focuses on infancy and early childhood, whereas our material is mainly from later childhood. Although family structure and parental death are discussed in our paper, attachment theory isn’t the right theoretical orientation for us to use. Theories based on the concepts of risk and resilience are more predominant in longitudinal studies.

Methods: how was validity and reliability ensured?

The sample is described in detail, but description of qualitative analysis does not include information on methods used to ensure validity and reliability. For example, how many people coded the data? Was there complete agreement between coders?

A more extensive justification has been made of open coding (an interpretive approach, usually not involving inter-rater reliability) as opposed to fixed coding, referencing Braun and Clarke (2006).

Results and discussion: significance of findings needs stronger argument and clearer description

Given the mission of the journal, which is related to the health and healthcare of older adults, the significance of the findings could be more clearly described and a stronger argument made for the relevance of the results.

The conclusion section has been rewritten.

Also, specific links between the findings and relationship to previous research findings about risk, resilience, and attachment would be helpful.

This field is a large one, especially if one looks at the wide range of topics thrown up in the participant descriptions of school and family circumstances. The decisions made for this article in relation to research literature has largely been to relate findings to the fewer longitudinal studies that link childhood circumstances to the later years.

#### Reviewer #2

The positives: This is a well-written and thoughtful article concerning how reminiscences of early life experiences (school, family) may relate to longevity and resilience in a well-defined, longitudinal cohort of older adults from Scotland. I coordinate a Life Review Project and teach a graduate level course on life review interviewing, so I was especially eager to review this work. While I find much value in this article as presented, I find some serious shortcomings as well. I think this work is important and the field would benefit from its eventual publication. Please accept my remarks as constructive criticisms from a generally favorable reviewer.

#### Positive and negative:

While much is known about the 1921LBC cohort, this work represents a subset of long-term survivors who were capable of responding in writing (or dictation) to questions about their early life experiences. I appreciate knowing the historical context for their responses, and data presented about the full cohort are helpful for understanding the presented themes. The authors do a reasonable job of acknowledging limitations of their approach (e.g., with respect to inter-rater reliability; positive response bias). The article is an enjoyable read, but it falls short as a true research piece in the opinion of this reviewer.

No doubt there can be extensive debate about what exactly represents 'research'. For example, Ernest Rutherford is quoted as saying that "all science is either physics or stamp collecting". Inasmuch as we present carefully described data, set out the methods by which they were

collected and analysed and then draw inferences from this process, we would contend that this is a true research piece. It's a qualitative research study, carried out in an appropriate manner.

Also, the reviewer may have misunderstood the sample, which is appropriately described in the methods section. Our sample is not a subset of those from LBC 1921 cohort who were capable of writing or dictation. As described, all but three of those who were assessed at age 90 completed the Life Review (126/129)

Overall: title and framing as 'life review'

...disagree with the titling of this work and its framing as a form of "life review." As I understand life review and teach it based on the work of many others in this field, life review is an intentional process of looking back on one's full life story to build understanding, acceptance and integration in the present. This project was a relatively narrow, questionnaire-based qualitative study. At most, I would label this effort as a form of primed or targeted reminiscence. I recommend choosing a new title and reframing this work as a common qualitative study.

We beg to disagree with reviewer Meuser on this particular point.

Gerben J. Westerhof in his article on life review and life story work in the online Encyclopedia of Adulthood and Ageing (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118521373.wbeaa209/pdf>) defines life review as 'a process of evaluating one's personal memories'.

In his own piece titled 'Life Review in Aging: a Primer' (published online at [http://www.umsl.edu/gerontology/Faculty%20and%20Staff/files\\_faculty/Life\\_Review\\_TM\\_Meuser\\_2015.pdf](http://www.umsl.edu/gerontology/Faculty%20and%20Staff/files_faculty/Life_Review_TM_Meuser_2015.pdf)) Meuser himself describes life review as a process of self-exploration, 'framing one's life in the past, present and future' and identifying what matters, hopes for the future and legacy.

Our Life Review questionnaire was developed from examining life review literature. Although it is a brief questionnaire, it should not be seen merely as eliciting reminiscence. The questions asked participants to evaluate their start in life, to identify happiest times, proudest moments and life challenges, as well as to tell of their lives today in terms of what is challenging and what brings happiness. They were also asked to give advice to younger people, another evaluative process. Because Life review processes were elicited by questionnaire, sometimes responses were quite brief; in other cases there were much lengthier responses, often with a narrative link through the different questions. Whether responses were brief or not, the psychological processes underlying life review, which involve evaluation, were elicited by the questionnaire, rather than purely reminiscence. Therefore, given this purposeful process we do not think it appropriate to choose a new title or reframe the work.

Overall: too long

First, the article is very long.

- It reads more like a book chapter or monograph than a typical journal piece, even when compared with other qualitative work.
- The introduction spends too much time making the case for qualitative research

We have taken this point very seriously: see above, first reviewer's comments, for a description of how the article has been shortened. Note that the section on making the case for qualitative research has been shortened.

Background: reference other qualitative studies referring to longevity and resilience

...and not enough time discussing other qualitative studies in late life that shed light on themes of longevity and resilience. What have others found in this regard? [results and discussion: How do results from prior work compare with findings in this study?] The introduction does not allow an uninformed reader to link this work sufficiently with other similar studies. I suggest reframing the introduction with these comments in mind.

As mentioned in relation to Reviewer #1's comments, we have chosen in this article to relate findings to the fewer longitudinal studies that link childhood circumstances to the later years. We have also now referenced the Harvard studies.

Methods: present the interview protocol as a table with extra detail and assess whether using long responses skews the data

I appreciate that the interview protocol is presented in the text, but I see it working better as a table to which response statistics may be added. You provide word counts and associated statistics for total responses to your question. Why not to individual questions? That would be more useful to me, as the reader, to understand your effort. You mention some individuals giving one word "yes" or "no" responses. Other respondents provided long answers. I would like to see a table showing how these break down by question. My sense is that you relied heavily on a subset of details responses for developing your themes. Just how skewed are your findings in this regard?

This comment perhaps arises from some misunderstanding of the analytic process. Certainly the three narratives presented were constructed from those who wrote more lengthy responses, but they illustrated the general themes emerging from the data. Quotes throughout the thematic analysis section were taken from responses of any length. It was pointed out that some participants gave very brief responses to a couple of questions that could be answered in a yes/no fashion, but such responses were indicative of a positive or negative orientation to the question and as such, contributed to the overall weighting of responses. Short responses did not skew the findings in this study and a table of word counts would not be particularly informative; the

overall word counts are included to inform about the extent of the corpus of data under examination rather than some proxy for content richness.

Methods: provide extra detail on reviewers of data

The qualitative method is described in some detail, but key elements are missing. How many individuals reviewed the data and through how many iterations? Were the reviewers trained ahead of time to approach the data in a specific manner? Were reviews done individually followed by group meetings to unify coding schemes? I suggest adding a flowchart with data to describe your qualitative process.

The process of coding has now been better explained. We don't think a flowchart best describes the interpretive nature of open coding.

Results and discussion: Results too long with too many quotations

The results section is interesting to read, but overly long. Too many quotations are used. Listing themes in italics was helpful to me as I read it, but I lost track of connection among these as I moved through the narrative. I suggest adding a table describing key themes with a single representative quotation for each.

The results section has been considerably shortened and signposting has been improved, so we feel that a table is unnecessary.

Results and discussion: compare this to prior studies [refer back to literature issue in 'intro']

How do results from prior work compare with findings in this study?

See earlier response to a similar point.

Results and discussion: positive response bias in 'best in you' question

The emphasis on "best in you" in your primary questions is interesting. I liked this phrasing on first reading, but grew to like it less as I read the detailed responses. There is a positive response bias in your data, in my opinion, and possibly primed by how you asked your questions. It may be that this could not be avoided. Had you asked these same questions to similar-aged adults for whom you had no relationships (e.g., an age/gender matched control group), you could piece this apart somewhat. This would have been a huge undertaking and I am not suggesting you do it now.

In our conclusions we refer to research on the well-established phenomenon of positive response bias amongst elderly people in relation to questions about their early lives. Asking whether school and family brought out the best perhaps could be considered as priming in the positive direction, but in this life review questionnaire we wanted participants to reflect on early influence and these questions generated a useful range of responses. In fact, those who had

something negative to say were more likely to elaborate in their responses, which is probably also a characteristic phenomenon.

Results and discussion: statistical testing of the % comparisons

You make a point to mention that you can extract quantitative data from questionnaire responses, and present some percentage comparisons. Why not run Chi Squares or other difference tests and report findings in your narrative and discussion?

This Life Review study is primarily a qualitative study and this paper focuses on describing its findings about 'start in life'. A future paper may describe links between the qualitative 'start in life' data and other quantitative findings from the Lothian Birth Cohort. However, the Reviewer has emphasised the need to shorten the paper and adding a completely new focus would certainly not help with this regard.

Results and discussion: more detail on gender differences or leave out

You make it a point to discuss Male-Female differences in your results, but you fail to make explicit conclusions about these differences in your discussion. Either put more effort into analyzing and discussing these differences, or leave them out. If you choose the former, I suggest modifying Table 1 to include total percentages as well as male vs. female.

A paragraph on gender differences has been included in the conclusions.

Results and discussion: Round percentages to whole numbers

Please consider rounding all percentages for subgroups to how [whole] numbers. What 78.6% of subjects mean in a sample of 126, really?

In published articles on the Lothian Birth Cohort percentages have usually been expressed up to one decimal point which is appropriate for a three-figure denominator.

Conclusions: Beef up conclusions

My biggest concern about this article is the lack of a punchline. What are the essential qualitative findings? Is it really surprising that survivors in your resilient cohort recall their school and family lives positively 8 decades later? I expected to see the Conclusions section lead off with a critical summary of findings linked with other like works. The present draft doesn't do this.

As mentioned, the conclusions section has been revised, with a stronger emphasis up front on the study's findings.

Conclusions: Don't emphasise shortcomings so much

While I appreciate your willingness to be self-critical and offer shortcomings of this work, doing so in the first paragraph of your Conclusions section negates the value of what you have accomplished. I would leave shortcomings for later on.

This is a matter of style where we have adopted a 'caveat emptor' approach. It seems to us that the discussion of coding systems and how to interpret the findings (e.g., shortcomings, such as the 'rosy glow' effect) leads naturally into considering the findings in relation to other literature, so we have not made any changes to the order of this part of the conclusions.