

## **Reviewer's report**

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

**Version:** 0 **Date:** 19 Jan 2016

**Reviewer:** Thomas Meuser

### **Reviewer's report:**

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.

I 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.

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.

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, 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? 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.

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?

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.

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 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.

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?

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.

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

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.

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.

**Are the methods appropriate and well described?**

If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

**Does the work include the necessary controls?**

If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

No

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?**

If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Yes

**Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?**

If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

I am able to assess the statistics

**Quality of written English**

Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Acceptable

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