Author’s response to reviews

Title: Crucial aspects promoting meaning and purpose in life: perceptions of nursing home residents

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Author’s response to reviews:

Manuscript Number: BGTC-D-17-00191 entitled “Crucial aspects promoting meaning and purpose in life: perceptions of nursing home residents”

Dear Editor,

Thank you for the helpful comments from you and the reviewers and for the opportunity to improve and resubmit our manuscript. We have carefully revised the manuscript in accordance with the committee’s and reviewers’ comments, as outlined below.

Reviewer reports:

Barbara Bowers (Reviewer 1): Crucial aspects promoting meaning and purpose in life: perceptions of nursing home residents

1. Using Gadamerian Hermeneutics, this study explores how 18 nursing home residents in a Norwegian nursing home find meaning and purpose in life.

Response
Correct.
2. This paper is eloquently and clearly written. I enjoyed reading it.

Response

Thank you very much. We are glad to hear that.

3. There are currently many published articles concerning quality of life for nursing home residents. While this study is not about quality of life in general, purpose and meaning are clearly related to quality of life. I think the background for this paper was very well written and quite interesting. I was wondering if the authors might help put this study in the larger perspective of quality of life research, which I assume they are aware of. It would be important to at least recognize this. I am not suggesting that they replace what is currently there with a long treatise on quality of life, but only to acknowledge it. That would be important to place this paper in the larger literature. I would also suggest using quality of life as key words so that people looking at resident quality of life, well being would find this paper. It adds quite a bit and takes a novel approach to the topic. There might also be some room to acknowledge this larger body of research and point out the novelty of this study, in the discussion section.

Response

Thank you very much. We have made some adjustments according to your recommendations.

We have therefore a) inserted quality of life as a keyword and b) connecting meaning and quality of life in the background as follows:

From: “Meaning and purpose in life among nursing home residents without dementia are significantly related to nurse–patient interaction.”

To: “Meaning and purpose in life among nursing home residents without dementia are significantly related to nurse–patient interaction or to family and friends outside the nursing home or other residents [15, 16]. Moreover, meaning is also significantly related to quality of life, and the nurse–patient interaction represents an essential resource promoting nursing home residents’ physical and emotional health and global well-being [6, 16, 17].”

Further, quality of life is now also part of the discussion:

…that aims to support well-being, quality of life and health among nursing home residents.

4. Empathetic should be changed to empathic

Response
Empathetic has been replaced by empathic (page 3, third paragraph).

5. I would suggest changing 'Nursing care and nurse patient interaction therefore act as meaning-promoting resources by facilitating positive emotions and moods.' To 'Nursing care and nurse patient interaction therefore have the potential to.' This would acknowledge that nursing care does not always do this.

Response
Thank you. We have changed the statement as follows on page 3, third paragraph:
From: “Nursing care and nurse–patient interaction therefore act as meaning-promoting resources by facilitating positive emotions and moods.”
To: “Nursing care and nurse patient interaction therefore have the potential to act as meaning-promoting resources by facilitating positive emotions and moods.”

6. You discuss the connectedness of residents to nursing staff but do not mention connectedness to family and friends outside the nursing home (until the discussion) or other residents. Tonya Roberts published a very nice paper which describes the importance of relationships and connectedness of residents to other residents.

Response
Thank you very much. We have made some adjustments according to your recommendations.
From: “Meaning and purpose in life among nursing home residents without dementia are significantly related to nurse–patient interaction.”
To: “Meaning and purpose in life among nursing home residents without dementia are significantly related to nurse–patient interaction or to family and friends outside the nursing home or other residents [15, 16]. Moreover, meaning is also significantly related to quality of life, and the nurse–patient interaction represents an essential resource promoting nursing home residents’ physical and emotional health and global well-being [6, 16, 17].”

7. I am a bit confused by your statement that 'The experience of meaning in everyday life in a nursing home is related to residents' physical and cognitive capability, a sense of belonging and feeling needed.' Are you saying that people with dementia can not experience any of these things?
Response

Thank you for making us aware of this. In this sentence, we referred to presented results from two studies. However, in our study meaning in everyday life in a nursing home is related to residents’ “Experiencing physical and mental well-being (and not cognitive capability) are crucial aspects promoting meaning and purpose in life”

8. I was hoping you would say more about self-determination. It seems a bit at odds with the preceding sections.

Response

We agree and have inserted the following on page 4, first paragraph:

“Respect for autonomy and self-determination is a central principle in nursing ethics and is strongly connected to quality of life and sense of value [25]. Further, autonomy and self-determination are important qualitative indicators of how older people perceive their lives in an institutionalized facility.”

9. The sentence that identifies previously documented experiences such as loneliness, loss and social support, depression, sadness and sense of coherence. This reads awkwardly. Some are positive attributes (sense of coherence, social support) and some are negative (sadness, depression, loss).

Response

We agree and have made some changes (page 4, second paragraph).

From: “This qualitative study exploring meaning-promoting aspects among nursing home residents is part of a larger mixed-methods project that has previously documented loneliness, loss, symptoms of depression and sadness social support [4] and symptoms of depression, sadness and sense of coherence [25] among older people with cancer living in nursing homes.”

To: This qualitative study exploring meaning-promoting aspects among nursing home residents is part of a larger mixed-methods project that has previously documented both positive attributes (sense of coherence, social support) and negative attributes (loneliness, loss, symptoms of depression and sadness) [4, 25] among older people with cancer living in nursing homes.

10. In the objective….purpose of this study was to explore aspects (of what?). Aspects suggests aspects of something. This appears again in the data analysis section.
Response

To the reviewer: In this exploratory study we wanted to investigate which aspects helped promote meaning and purpose in life among these nursing home residents. The aspects identified were 1) physical and mental well-being, 2) belonging and recognition, 3) personally treasured activities and 4) spiritual closeness and connectedness.

We have made some adjustments in this paragraph:

From: “The purpose of this study was to explore aspects that promote nursing home residents’ experience of meaning and purpose in everyday life.

To: “The aim of this study was to identify and describe crucial aspects promoting nursing home residents’ experience of meaning and purpose in everyday life.”

11. Data analysis section: I am aware that page limits are challenging and do not see anything to cut, but I would love to see more detail in the analysis section. Some examples, illustrations of what you found early, how your analysis evolved, would be great. This would help readers follow your process.

Response

Based on your recommendation, we have inserted the following sentences in the data analysis section:

“Following Gadamer’s hermeneutical methods [35], we initiated our process of data analysis and interpretation by reading each interview text to get an initial overview of each text and the texts as a whole. Then we read each text several times while noting phrases and keywords during each reading. In this phase, our preliminary analysis indicated that meaning and purpose in life could be related to “experiencing mental and bodily comfort – feeling safeguarded and cared for by the nursing home staff”, “experiencing psychosocial confirmation”, “having the opportunity of taking part in meaningful activities” and “having a spiritual meaning-promoting source”.

12. Results: I found it difficult to see the link between meaning and 'experiencing physical and mental well being' and 'Having ones personal preferences and needs met.' There is nothing in the quotes that suggests the responses are related to purpose or meaning. Preference and well being are not necessarily about purpose or meaning. Can you make the link clearer? In particular, please provide quotes to support the 'compassion and charity' of nurses' actions.

Response
To the reviewer: “Experiencing physical and mental well-being” is the overarching theme of that particular result section, and maintaining personal hygiene through the gentle assistance of care personnel, having one’s personal preferences and needs met and nurturing hope for regaining or improved health are the three aspects or components identified within this overarching theme. Each of these three aspects are presented and illustrated with a participant statement or quote.

In the interview setting we formulated such questions as: What would you say bring meaning and purpose in life into your daily life? What is important and meaningful to you? As presented in the article, we found patterns of evidence linking meaning and purpose in life to well-being. The participants did not always use the word “meaning” in their statements, but in the interview context merely responded to the researcher’s question, for example:

Researcher: What would you say bring meaning and purpose in life into your daily life?

Participant: They (the health care workers) come and help me. Care for my needs throughout the day … at night too [laughs] … it’s very nice … they take good care of me … so I can get up each morning …

In this quote, the compassion and charity of nurses' actions is visible to us, while in other statements the participants used the word “meaning” – while merely sharing their reflections (and wishes) concerning what’s meaningful for them, for example: Participant: Yes, meaning… yes and I hope my leg will get better.

We agree that “Preference and well-being are not necessarily about purpose or meaning”, and we have made the following adjustments:

From: Having one’s personal preferences and needs met

“The experience of well-being was also anchored in personal values and needs. Accordingly, experiencing well-being and meaning in daily living was related to individual preferences. Physical, interpersonal and intrapersonal factors were important:”

To: Having one’s personal wishes and needs met

“The experience of well-being was also anchored in personal wishes and needs. Accordingly, experiencing well-being and meaning in daily living was related to physical, interpersonal and intrapersonal factors experienced by the individual:”
As you can see, these aspects are anchored in the empirical data and the quote (here with additional explanation):

“Of course, I need enough sleep, to eat properly [illustrating physical aspects] … talk with my family [illustrating interpersonal aspects] … and try to avoid ugly or unpleasant thoughts [illustrating intrapersonal aspects].”

13. I'm not clear what is meant by 'impulses from society'
Response

Yes, this sentence is unclear and has been changed:

From: When on their own, opportunities to receive “impulses from society” beyond the nursing home were beneficial for finding meaning in their everyday lives.

To: When the residents were on their own, opportunities to receive impulses from outside the nursing home facility were beneficial for finding meaning in their everyday lives.

14. Can you provide a quote to show the link between well being and nurturance of patients hope. Very important.
Response

We think that the quotes do portray the hope for better physical health and well-being and have tried to make the “result formulation” more explicit – to be clearer on how the nursing home residents seemed to nurture their hope of improved physical health and well-being in the future. Thus, we have made the following adjustments:

From: “Participants’ experience of life as meaningful was also connected to their hope of improving their health – and restoring their ability to care for themselves:”

To: “Participants’ experience of life as meaningful also seemed connected to their hope of improving their health – restoring their physical well-being and the ability to care for themselves in the future:”

Moreover, we have reformulated the text after the two quotes:
From: “A positive outlook provided an opportunity to view current health issues and challenges as temporary, a catalyst of hope towards improving health and the ability to care for themselves in the future.”

To: “A positive outlook provided an opportunity to view current health issues and challenges as temporary, a meaningful catalyst of hope for better days to come.”

15. Can you provide a quote that relates to patient sense of worthiness I really did not see this in your quotes

Response

As we understand it, you are referring to the discussion, and the reason why we included the concepts of worthiness and worthlessness in our discussion is:

Based on the results of previous studies concerning worthiness and worthlessness [19, 45], we found it fruitful here to bring in – and have a briefly discussion of these concepts in our discussion of belonging and recognition.

16. I hope my suggestions will help you make this a stronger manuscript. It is a very important study. I applaud the author's work.

Response

Thank you for your valuable advice and contribution helping us improving the quality of this manuscript.

Martin Connolly (Reviewer 2): Manuscript Number: BGTC-D-17-00191

Crucial aspects promoting meaning and purpose in life: perceptions of nursing home residents

This is a potentially valuable paper in an extremely important field which until recently has been under researched. However this reviewer questions some aspects of the paper's methodology (or at least the presentation of the methodology).
Major Criticisms:

1. Page 2; line 51: The phrase 'and individuals without dementia thus represent a minority' is superfluous and should be removed.

Response
We agree and have removed this.

2. Page 5; first line: It is unclear to this reviewer why a study that seems to conclude in 2011 is only now being offered for publication. The authors need to provide some evidence that they are not simply salami slicing their data. This reviewer would suggest that they send copies of all papers published from this study (reference 34 and any others) to the editor for perusal.

In this project, 20 papers have been published: 17 papers based on quantitative data and three articles based on quantitative data supplemented by qualitative data (mixed methods).

These published papers are all available in PubMed, and an overview of these qualitative papers with mixed-methods design (qualitative data and quantitative data) has now been sent to the editor.

In two of the manuscripts, the quantitative core component consisted initially of 60 respondents with cancer diagnosis. They were all interviewed face to face with the one-item Loneliness Scale and the Social Provisions Scale, Geriatric Depression Scale and Sense of coherence Scale. The supplementary component consisted of nine qualitative research interviews about life experiences related to loneliness and psychosocial topics and about experiences related to depression – with nine respondents from the same cohort. In the third manuscript the qualitative core component comprised a qualitative interview about experiences related to pain, grief and loss. The supplementary quantitative component comprised interview from the same respondents using the SF-36 Health Survey subscales, the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale and the Social Provisions Scale.

These papers are substantially differing different from the present submitted paper with regard to research questions, the introduction part, aims, methods, analyses, results, discussion, and conclusions. In this final article in this project our aim was to explore and describe experience of meaning and purpose in life among this population. Thus, qualitative data were collected using individual research interview with 18 study participants.
3. Page 5; line 11: It is unclear to this reviewer why the interviews were only conducted at the end of the follow up period.

Response

See previous response number 2.

4. Page 5; first paragraph: The authors need to confirm that they have ethical committee approval and include the ethics committee reference number.

Response

The ethics committee approval, including the ethics committee reference number, was already included in the section on ethics approval and consent to participate.

5. Bottom of Page 5 and top of Page 6: The sentence that straddles these two pages is an opinion. How do the authors know that this is true? This is vital as it is an important part of their methodology and needs justification.

Response

This sentence is based on hermeneutic methods as described by Gadamer [35] and is therefore not only an opinion of the authors but a way of informing the readers about how we as researchers in this study are guided by the Gadamerian hermeneutical methods. We agree that this message to the readers is unclear. We have therefore made the following adjustments.

From: “We initiated our process of data analysis and interpretation by reading each interview text to get an initial overview of each text and the texts as a whole. We read each text several times while noting phrases and keywords during each reading. We identified and explored the essence of each account and developed themes and subthemes on this basis. Exploring each new interview text made those already read more understandable while adding new perspectives.”

To: “Following Gadamer’s hermeneutical methods [35], we initiated our process of data analysis and interpretation by reading each interview text to get an initial overview of each text and the texts as a whole. Then we read each text several times while noting phrases and keywords during each reading. In this phase, our preliminary analysis indicated that meaning and purpose in life could be related to “experiencing mental and bodily comfort – feeling safeguarded and cared for by the nursing home staff”, “experiencing psychosocial confirmation”, “having the opportunity of taking part in meaningful activities” and “having a spiritual meaning-promoting source”. We identified and explored the essence of each account and developed themes and subthemes on this
basis. Exploring each new interview text made those already read more understandable while adding new perspectives to our understanding.

6. The very next sentence beginning 'Lastly, we explored…..' has a meaning which eludes this reviewer. Further explanation is required.

Response

This process is also part of the hermeneutical interpretive process based on the work of Gadamer [35] (reference inserted in the previous sentence). To make this sentence clearer, we also have made the following adjustment:

From: “Lastly, we explored the data material as a whole, increasing our understanding of the substance of each interview and the interviews as a whole.”

To: “Lastly, we explored the transcribed interview text as a whole to search for increased understanding of the patterns and the meaning of the data material as a whole not identified in the individual interview texts.”

7 and 8

7. The first sentence of the next paragraph beginning 'Reading theoretical works……' again is an opinion and further explanation of the evidence to confirm this opinion is required. As it stands this sentence simply means ‘we are good at it’.

8. The next sentence beginning 'Based on our inductive-deductive…..' begs the question as to which other perspectives are there and why were these not chosen.

Response

The following reformulations have been made here:

Previous formulation: “Reading theoretical works concerning meaning, such as the existential analysis of psychiatrist Viktor Frankl [7] and the nursing theories of Starck [9] and Reed [10], increased our understanding of meaning and the promotion of meaning. Based on our inductive-deductive research process, we chose the perspectives of these theorists as a framework for our theoretical interpretation and discussion.”

New formulation: “Hermeneutical methods [35] also involve theoretical interpretation of the collected data. Reading theoretical works concerning meaning, such as the existential analysis of
psychiatrist Viktor Frankl [7] and the nursing theories of Starck [9] and Reed [10], helped increase the theoretical understanding of the data material and were chosen as a framework for our theoretical interpretation and discussion.”

9. Results section; first paragraph: There are other examples but the most obvious is on Page 9, line 19 where the authors claim that 'the results document…..'. The results may indeed document what they claim but the paper does not (in its current form)

Response

We agree, and have reformulated:

From: “The results document…”
To: “The results indicate…”

10. Page 9; lines 12-14: I am unclear what the reviewers mean by 'impulses from society'.

Response

Yes, this sentence is unclear, and we have made the following changes:

From: “When on their own, opportunities to receive “impulses from society” beyond the nursing home were beneficial for finding meaning in their everyday lives.”
To: “When the residents were on their own, opportunities to receive impulses from outside the nursing home facility were beneficial for finding meaning in their everyday lives.”

11. Page 10; line 4: In what way are the insights 'deeper’.

Yes, this is unclear, and we have reformulated this sentence:

From: “By doing so, this study provides deeper insights into a central aspect of quality of life…”
To: “By doing so, this study enabled deeper exploration of the phenomena of quality of life…”
12. Page 10; lines 9-16: This statement may be accurate but evidence around the methodology of the study and detailed results that would allow us to assess its accuracy are not provided. This has been alluded to above but one further example would be that the questions used in the questionnaire clearly need to be non-leading questions. Some reassuring examples of the questions have been given but it would be helpful if the questionnaire could be included as an appendix to the paper.

Response

Exploring the participants’ experience of meaning and purpose in life, the main questions asked were: What brings meaning into your life? When do you experience meaning in your everyday living? Based on your perception, can personal meaning be weakened or lost?

Based on participants’ answers on these questions, the researcher formulated relevant follow-up questions for further investigation of their perspectives on this subject, in accordance with hermeneutical methods (Gadamer, 2010). Examples of follow-up have now been inserted in the text. The following adjustments have been made:

From: “Examples of questions guiding the conversations were: What brings meaning into your life? When do you experience meaning in your everyday living? Based on your perception, can personal meaning be weakened or lost? Follow-up questions added depth and richness to the previously collected data.”

To: “The main questions guiding the conversations were: What brings meaning into your life? When do you experience meaning in your everyday living? Based on your perception, can personal meaning be weakened or lost? Moreover, follow-up questions added depth and richness to the previously collected data: Can you tell me more about how this aspect affects you? Can you tell me about a situation in which you experienced this? Are other aspects in this important and meaningful to you?”

Further, this sentence is also only true if the authors perceptions (which they admit are preconceived) are accurate - they have provided no evidence that they are.

Response

As described in the section on data analysis and interpretation, awareness of preconceptions is crucial in hermeneutical methods (Gadamer, 2010). In accordance with Gadamer’s methods, this study aimed to develop increased understanding of the phenomena under investigation (through subjective interpretation) and not to explain the phenomena as objective truth.

Finally regarding this sentence this author would suggest that these conclusions are not in fact new. The reviewer has little doubt that they are true but it is unclear in what way they expand what we already know about appropriate and humane treatment of individuals at whatever age and in whatever situation.
13. The results of this study offer no surprises. They are intuitively 'correct' and thus I do not doubt their accuracy. However, in the opinion of this reviewer, this paper adds little new knowledge especially in light of the fact as confirmed by most of the references quoted in the discussion section much of this is already known in the general population. Why should it be any different in the older population in nursing homes?

Response

Studies that confirm the results of previous studies are valuable, bringing more solid evidence into the phenomena investigated. Moreover, it is our view that this present study also adds nuances into the body of empirical knowledge and offers new theoretical understanding of the crucial aspects promoting meaning and purpose in life among this vulnerable group of people.

The authors need to expand and clarify the methodology particularly in a manner that demonstrates that the methodology is not 'circular'.

Response

According to Gadamer, the “hermeneutical circle” is crucial for developing new understanding. Thus, in accordance with this methodological approach, the study is circular in the hermeneutical sense of the word. We have reformulated our text in the section on data analysis and interpretation to make this clearer:

From: “We initiated our process of data analysis and interpretation by reading each interview text to get an initial overview of each text and the texts as a whole. We read each text several times while noting phrases and keywords during each reading. We identified and explored the essence of each account and developed themes and subthemes on this basis. Exploring each new interview text made those already read more understandable while adding new perspectives. Lastly, we explored the data material as a whole, increasing our understanding of the substance of each interview and the interviews as a whole.”

To: “Following Gadamer’s hermeneutical methods [35], we initiated our process of data analysis and interpretation by reading each interview text to get an initial overview of each text and the texts as a whole. Then we read each text several times while noting phrases and keywords during each reading. In this phase, our preliminary analysis indicated that meaning and purpose in life could be related to “experiencing mental and bodily comfort – feeling safeguarded and cared for by the nursing home staff”, “experiencing psychosocial confirmation”, “having the opportunity of taking part in meaningful activities” and “having a spiritual meaning-promoting source”. We identified and explored the essence of each account and developed themes and subthemes on this basis. Exploring each new interview text made those already read
more understandable while adding new perspectives to our understanding. Lastly, we explored the transcribed interview text as a whole to search for increased understanding of the patterns and the meaning of the data material as a whole not identified in the individual interview texts.”