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The Existential Obituary Writing Technique for Emerging Adults: Thematic and Content Analyses

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Writing one's own obituary is a technique rooted in the theoretical/philosophical principles of existential-humanistic psychology that has long been endorsed by existential-humanistic psychologists for its value in promoting second-order change (existential liberation) and self-cultivation. These processes are pertinent for emerging adults, for whom a principal developmental task is self-authorship (transitioning out of uncritically following external formulas learned in childhood and toward making internally based decisions to meet the demands of complex work roles and interpersonal intimacy as adults). To date, literature on obituary writing has been limited to a half-dozen sources, none of which offer formal investigations of its process mechanisms/dynamics. This study provides research support for the technique's theoretical underpinnings and contextualizes its effectiveness as demonstrated in extant case studies in order to preserve its integrity in the current evidence-based practice zeitgeist. In this study, 22 emerging adults in a college course completed obituaries and reflections on the lived experience thereof. Thematic and summative content analyses were used to assess the thematic content included in the obituaries and the process by which the participants made sense of the act of writing them. Findings suggest that, in this sample, consistent with extant theorizing and informal observations, the experience of completing one's own obituary begins with emotional discomfort followed by a transformative shift in the direction of a greater sense of acceptance, appreciation, and awe toward the possibilities of living the life one envisions. Finally, connections with and contributions to the emerging adulthood literature and suggestions for further inquiry are discussed.

Keywords: obituary writing, emerging adulthood, second-order change (existential liberation), self-authorship, thematic analysis

The most deeply meaningful and vital occasions of our lives are often those that unrelentingly force us to confront contingency,

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responsibility, absurdity, loneliness, and that ultimate and inexorable end of our familiar being to which we each must give the name, “my death.”—Jim Bugental (1973–1974, p. 163)

Authentic living is contingent upon actively maintaining an awareness of one’s death. Reflecting on death provides opportunities to (a) clarify one’s values, worldview, and beliefs; (b) overcome self-preoccupation by consciously questioning one’s habitual proclivities; (c) develop a greater sense of compassion and interdependence by recognizing death’s universality; and (d) appreciate the preciousness and the fragility of life. Taken together, these contribute to a greater propensity to take one’s life less for granted and/or as something to be gotten through and instead to engage in it fully and responsibly (Ostaseski, 2017).

The Obituary Writing Technique

Writing one’s own obituary is a technique rooted in the theoretical/philosophical principles of existential-humanistic psychology and has long been endorsed by existential-humanistic psychologists (Bugental, 1973–1974; Schneider, 2008) for its value as a therapeutic tool both in the context of conventional counseling and for facilitating personal growth in general. Clients or students (either in an individual or group setting) are asked to write their own obituary, either in session or for homework. During debriefing, clients/students engage in dialogue with their therapist, instructor, or facilitator (and, if applicable, group) regarding the experience of writing and subsequently discussing the obituary.

Promoting Second-Order Change (Existential Liberation)

Consistent with existential-humanistic therapy’s focus upon transformation of self and existential liberation (Schneider & Krug, 2017), obituary writing may be classified as a strategy that promotes *second-order change*—that is, a deep restructuring of self that results in long-term, core-level shifts in and expansions of one’s perspective of oneself, one’s lifeworld, and one’s concerns (Bland, 2013; 2019; Fraser & Solovey, 2007; Hanna, Giordano, Dupuy, & Puhakka, 1995; Murray, 2002). Second-order change entails actively creating a new way of being by identifying and remediating underacknowledged and underactualized capacities within oneself to bring life domains into balance and to commit to a more promising future despite the inevitability of limitations beyond one’s control (Schneider & Krug, 2017). Accordingly, the process of growth becomes self-reinforcing (Maslow, 1999) and can prevent mental health symptoms, addictive, compulsive, and disruptive behavior patterns, and physical diseases (Bland, 2013; Maté, 2003, 2010).

Promoting Self-Cultivation via Existential Learning

Obituary writing is intended to promote individuals’ ability to experience themselves as alive in the here-and-now (in the short term) and to awaken the plausibility of their living more fully and in accordance with their values (in the long term). Bugental (1973–1974) observed that the exercise (a) provides a safe platform for clients/students to sit with uncomfortable emotions and openly address difficult topics; (b) prompts clients/students to appraise and potentially reconsider their involvement in superficial activities that distract from those difficult topics and emotions (i.e., experiential avoidance); (c) inspires hope, fulfillment, renewal, and refreshed perspectives on their lives and experi-

ences; and (d) promotes attunement to their values, life goals, and relationships as well as a sense of responsibility to commit to necessary changes.

Inviting individuals to directly confront the reality of their mortality provides an opportunity for existential learning, in which “something about a person’s life circumstances [is] changed such that [one] cannot go on as before” (DeRobertis, 2017, p. 43). In turn, a sense of revitalizing intentionality (May, 1969; Schneider & Krug, 2017) is sparked which spurs a process of self-transcendence and self-cultivation that employs the creative imagination to shape one’s developmental trajectory (DeRobertis, 2017; DeRobertis & Bland, 2019).

Promoting Self-Authorship for Emerging Adults

The second-order change and self-cultivation processes are particularly relevant for emerging adults, for whom a principal developmental task is *self-authorship* (Baxter Magolda & Taylor, 2016). This entails a continuous recursive process of transitioning out of uncritically following external formulas learned during childhood and toward making internally based decisions to meet the demands of complex work roles and interpersonal intimacy as adults.

Extant Literature

Searches of EBSCO and Google Scholar databases in November 2019 showed that, to date, literature on the obituary writing technique has been limited to a half-dozen sources, most of which have concentrated on endorsing the value and intended outcome of the technique (Bugental, 1973–1974; Ihanus, 2005; LaBelle, 1987; Oppawsky, 2002) and on offering procedural instructions (Bugental, 1973–1974; Schneider, 2008). Two articles have offered case illustrations as idiographic evidence of the technique’s effectiveness (LaBelle, 1987; Oppawsky, 2002). Moreover, Shneidman (1972) explored the content of obituaries written by college students.

Obituary writing provides an opportunity to view oneself objectively by being placed in a position in which one must face one’s finiteness (Shneidman, 1972). In addition, the reflective process of obituary writing is conducive to enhancing openness to experience and to change. Underdeveloped areas of experience are not only expressed but also explored, and primary and secondary processes integrated, as one communicates with one’s “internal supervisor” (Ihanus, 2005, p. 72). This promotes greater sensitivity to one’s body, identity, and areas for personal and professional development as well as self-esteem and self-efficacy. “Self-revision is built on juxtaposing one’s body of the past and one’s ‘potentiality-for-Being,’ coming toward oneself, in the present of writing” (Ihanus, 2005, p. 71).

Bugental (1973–1974) provided basic theoretical considerations and procedural instructions for the technique as part of a collection of strategies for confronting one’s mortality in a personal growth group context, which were slightly expanded in an appendix in Schneider’s (2008) *Existential-Integrative Psychotherapy* textbook. Bugental proposed that the exercise brings attention to how much of one’s day-to-day pursuits are relatively meaningless, especially when one engages in compulsive activity as a means of experiential avoidance. Accordingly, he observed that his group participants reported “finding refreshed perspectives on their own lives and especially on their values and choices about their relationships and activities” (p. 162).

Narrative case studies have demonstrated the technique’s effectiveness with clients in various settings and phases of the life span. First, LaBelle (1987) reflected on the case of

an adolescent male who completed the exercise in a residential treatment facility and concluded that it prompts adolescents to actively imagine what they want out of life. This can be particularly empowering for those who have not previously considered life goals or realized that they even have options for fashioning their lives in the first place. Second, in talking about an elderly widow who completed obituary writing as part of individual bereavement therapy, Oppawsky (2002) focused on how, for older adults, the technique can help individuals make meaning of past or present circumstances or events and therefore disrupt dysfunctional behaviors, beget self-discovery, help clients recognize new options, and thus foster motivation for change. Further, obituary writing can be useful for middle-aged and older adults as a tool for life review and reassessment (LaBelle, 1987), it can be implemented at various phases of the therapeutic process (LaBelle, 1987; Oppawsky, 2002), and it is applicable to all social classes (LaBelle, 1987).

Finally, Shneidman (1972) analyzed and reported typical themes in obituaries written by over 100 college students who were enrolled in a course on the topic of death, the findings of which will be discussed later in this article in relation to those of the current study. However, his contextual focus was not so much to explore obituary writing specifically as a technique but rather with the more general intent of challenging the notion pervasive in U.S. society that discussing death is “ghoulish” (p. 267).

Purpose of This Study

During the new millennium, existential-humanistic psychologists have made calls for more research (beyond philosophical argument alone) to support existential-humanistic theorizing and therapeutic techniques (Criswell, 2003; DeRobertis, 2016; Fischer, 2003; Wong, 2017b) in the interest of keeping the existential-humanistic movement alive and relevant for new generations and not becoming relegated to the status of a historical relic (DeRobertis, 2013). Despite therapists’ use of the obituary writing technique for several decades and its occasional inclusion in workbooks and websites offering therapeutic and self-development activities (Stanford Graduate School of Business, n.d.; Valentine, 2017), research on the technique remains wanting beyond the pair of case studies summarized above. To date, there has been no formal investigation of its process mechanisms and dynamics. Therefore, this study helps fill that void by providing research support for the technique’s theoretical underpinnings and contextualizing its effectiveness as demonstrated in the extant literature in the interest of preserving its integrity in the current evidence-based practice zeitgeist.

Method

Data Collection

This research evolved out of a class assignment completed by students enrolled in my upper-division undergraduate psychology course at a mid-Atlantic state university. Although this assignment was not originally intended as research, I found the students’ responses worthy of dissemination insofar as they ultimately provided meaningful insight regarding the process mechanisms/dynamics of the obituary writing technique (as discussed above). The students’ responses also reflected a description by existential-humanistic psychologist Kirk Schneider (personal communication, April 2017) of his own clients’ responses to the exercise which affirmed the relevance of the findings. Accord-

ingly, I sought and received approval from my institution's Institutional Review Board as well as informed consent from the individual students to analyze and publish their responses in de-identified form. To prevent coercion, informed consent was sought after the semester had concluded and grades had been submitted. All but one of the students consented for their assignments to be used as research data. The exception was a student who did not respond to the request for informed consent; accordingly, that student's assignment simply was not included in the analyses.

During the ninth week of a 16-week semester, I was traveling and could not teach class. Rather than merely cancel class, the obituary writing exercise and a reflective journal on that experience were given as a homework assignment in lieu of meeting for class. The assignment was adapted from Bugental (1973–1974) and Schneider (2008). Instructions were printed on a double-sided sheet of paper, which was folded and placed in an envelope I presented to each student at the conclusion of the class meeting prior to the missed day of class. The students were asked to not open the envelope or view the contents until they were ready to devote an hour to completing the assignment alone in a distraction-free setting.

The front side of the instructions read as follows:

One of these days—it could be tomorrow, 3 years from now, 30 years from now, or 63 years from now—you will die. Someone, somewhere, will open a newspaper or browse the web (or whatever is around at that time) and find and read your obituary. What do you want it to say about you?

Part 1

Please go to a quiet, private room. Turn off all potential distractions (phones, computers, music, etc.). Take 5 min (no more or less than that, please). Imagine that you are someone who knows you quite well, and it is that person's task to write the obituary of a person who has just died (that person being you).

Part 2

Now take 20 min (no more than that, please). Write a bit about the life of the person who has died—not just what they did, but mostly something of the meaning of their life. What did that person do with the fact of having been alive? What did that person's life all add up to, as best as you can say in a few words?

Please keep the obituary to no less than three fourths of a page but no more than 1 page (double spaced).

Go to the next page. However, please wait until you gave completed Parts 1 and 2.

The instructions for the reflection portion of the assignment were printed on the back:

Part 3

Now, take another 25–30 min. Write a 2-page reflection on the experience of writing your obituary. Please do not overthink your responses. Just write down the first things that come to mind.

- What feelings did it bring up for you?
- Did your feelings shift as you completed the exercise? If so, how?
- What bodily sensations did you experience as you completed the exercise?
- Behaviorally, what did you find yourself doing as you completed the exercise?
- What thoughts did it bring up?
- Any memories and/or visions of the future?
- How easy or hard was it to come up with what to say?
- To say it all in 20 min? To get it all in three fourths to 1 page?
- In what ways did you find this exercise affirming?

- In what ways do you see yourself differently having completed the exercise?
- What adjustments or changes do you see yourself wanting or needing to make in your life based on having completed this exercise? What plans do you have to accomplish that life goal?

Participants

After removing two assignments completed by (a) the aforementioned student who did not respond to the request for informed consent and (b) a student who, at 35 years old, was beyond the age range for emerging adulthood (18 to 25 years; Arnett, 2000), the final N was 22 students, all in their early 20s. Twenty (91%) of the students were third- and fourth-year psychology majors, and two students (9%) were third- and fourth-year psychology minors (one majoring in English and one in sociology/criminology). Eighteen (82%) of the students were female, and four (18%) were male. The majority were White ($n = 17, 77\%$), plus two (9%) Black, two (9%) Latinx, and one (5%) multiracial.

Interestingly, several ($n = 6, 27\%$) of the students identified in their assignments that they previously had been diagnosed with and/or treated for mental health conditions. These included anxiety ($n = 1, 5\%$), depression ($n = 3, 14\%$), and substance abuse ($n = 2, 9\%$).

Thematic Analysis

The purpose of this research was not to prove or disprove hypotheses but rather to generate qualitative data that addresses the principal research questions of (a) what thematic content the students included in their obituaries and (b) how the students made sense of the act of writing their obituary by reflecting on the lived experience of having done so. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to highlight meaningful patterns (Clarke & Braun, 2014; Joffe, 2012) that appeared in the students' obituaries and reflections, which, taken together, formulate a logical story (Tuckett, 2005) that maintains fidelity to the students' lived experiences and subjective realities (Joffe, 2012).

Deductive and inductive thematic analyses. The students' obituaries and reflections were analyzed separately. For both sets of writing, thematic analysis was used deductively—that is, situating the analysis in relation to extant literature (Aronson, 1995; Braun, Clarke, & Rance, 2014)—with existential-humanistic theorizing serving as a guiding framework for initially organizing the data. Specifically, emphasis was given to how the students' writing reflected existential-humanistic literature on values, developmental processes, and on self-growth via confronting one's mortality. In addition, the content of the students' obituaries was compared with that reported in Shneidman's (1972) aforementioned research.

Thereafter, consistent with Joffe's (2012) observation that, realistically, one concurrently uses deductive and inductive analyses, themes were inductively demarcated. Coding and analysis were principally conducted at the semantic and essentialist levels (i.e., taking the students' words at face value; Braun & Clarke, 2006), though occasionally latent meanings (i.e., those derived by "examining *underlying* ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations," Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84) were highlighted. These included, for example, some of the dialectics in the students' narratives.

Procedure. My initial exposure to the data involved reviewing the assignments during the semester they were completed. At that point, being in "teacher mode," my focus was providing relevant feedback to the individual students' narratives via Track Changes (the journals having been submitted as Word documents). Several months later, the comments were removed, and each assignment was reread with fresh eyes in "researcher

mode.” (This constituted the first phase of Braun & Clarke’s [2006] steps to thematic analysis, *familiarizing yourself with the data.*) During yet another reading, I provided initial codes based on how the students’ writing corresponded to the specific questions in the assignment. Next, I extracted (i.e., copied and pasted) portions of the individual assignments into a new, composite Word document and reflexively coded material that illustrated existential theorizing and/or that reflected or challenged extant literature on the technique. I also reviewed the Track Changes comments that had been removed and worked in relevant interpretative comments for the latent themes. (This constituted the second phase, *generating initial codes.*)

From there, I maneuvered and reorganized the material in accordance with the initial coding and began collating the coded data into potential themes. (This constituted the third phase, *searching for themes.*) Next, extraneous writing was removed, some data were occasionally recoded, some themes were consolidated into broader overarching categories in cases where there was substantial overlap (i.e., “splicing and linking,” Joffe & Yardley, 2004, p. 61), and some information was split into separate themes when conceptual elaboration was in order. Throughout this phase, a recursive and “organic” (Braun et al., 2014, p. 190) process of coding and deriving themes from the data was used in lieu of a predetermined coding system until I believed that the themes both stood well on their own and cogently addressed the research questions (Clarke & Braun, 2014). (This constituted the fourth phase, *reviewing themes.*)

Once the themes were thoroughly reviewed and finalized, they were mapped in relation to each other to form a coherent sequential narrative and provided labels and definitions that triangulated them with the extant literature (Clarke & Braun, 2014). (This constituted the fifth phase, *defining and naming themes.*) Finally, parallels and occasional discrepancies between the students’ writing and extant literature were formally explained and discussed. (This constituted the sixth phase, *producing the report.*)

Content Analysis

Summative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) also was used to quantitatively report how often themes or subthemes occurred in the data. However, given that themes of equal relevance may be discussed in disproportionate quantity, it is important to bear in mind that thematic analysis intentionally focuses more on “the ‘keyness’ of a theme” and its importance in relation to the research questions irrespective of the number of times it is discussed (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Thus, given the highly individualized nature of the obituary writing exercise, readers are encouraged to attend more to the thematic content and the variations within and less on the frequencies—which, with some clearly demarcated exceptions, are provided principally for the sake of offering a descriptive portrait rather than making points about prevalence.

Findings, Part 1: Obituary Content

Voice and Time Perspective

Over four fifths of the students ($n = 18$, 82%) framed their obituaries in neutral third person. However, some wrote from the perspective of a friend ($n = 3$, 14%) or of a niece ($n = 1$, 5%). Almost two thirds of the students ($n = 14$, 64%) did not specify the time of their death. Only four students (18%) spoke from the distant future (specifying between 78 and 101 years old as their age of death), two students (9%) designated the day they

completed the assignment as the time of their death, and another two students (9%) said they had died the previous week.

Biographical Elements

Students who included biographical information tended to focus on the past (i.e., factual histories) or on what they envisioned for themselves in the future. Only two students (9%) used a combination of both.

Factual histories. Some students ($n = 2, 9\%$) included names of members of their families-of-origin and of places they had lived ($n = 2, 9\%$), as well as educational and/or work accomplishments as of the time they wrote the obituary ($n = 6, 27\%$). Over a third of the students included descriptions of significant formative experiences, including a “secure and supportive upbringing” ($n = 1, 5\%$), a difficult childhood ($n = 5, 22\%$), and encountering friends’ self-harm or suicide during adolescence ($n = 2, 9\%$).

Imagined future. Almost half of the students envisaged educational and/or vocational accomplishments they hoped to achieve ($n = 10, 45\%$), and some went so far as to sequentially map out a career trajectory ($n = 2, 9\%$). Furthermore, three students (14%) specified places they wished to eventually live, and over a quarter ($n = 6, 27\%$) included future family (i.e., partners and/or children), some complete with names.

Principal Foci

Career. Almost two thirds of the students ($n = 14, 64\%$) concentrated on the careers they were working toward as students, often speaking as if those goals already had been accomplished. Three students (14%) discussed having overcome academic struggles as students. For context, several students in the sample were first-generation college students.

Perseverance. Nearly a third ($n = 7, 32\%$) of the students focused on their perseverance. For example, Student 18 “always worked hard and did whatever it took to make ends meet and make it through every trial and tribulation she was met with.” Similarly, Student 6, a first-generation college student, described herself as “a hard worker who . . . pushed through to pass classes and pursue the dream of graduating college. . . . Each day she was taking another step toward [her] goals.”

Dialectical tensions. Almost half of the students ($n = 10, 45\%$) included contradictory statements that seemingly reflected their negotiating dialectical existence tensions (Wahl, 2003). For example, on one hand, Student 15 “wasn’t the type of woman that sought confirmation or validation”; on the other hand, she “had a difficult time loving and believing in herself, and that is most likely why she kept pushing herself: to prove that she is good enough” (Wahl’s *acceptance/affirmation vs. rejection*). Moreover, although Student 10 “had a lot of boundaries to keep herself healthy and rested” and “she said no to good things,” she nonetheless “still exhausted herself” by “always [having] something to do, some place to drive to, somewhere to be involved at” (Wahl’s *engagement vs. stasis*). Occasionally, the students arrived at a resolution of their dilemmas. Whereas Student 2’s “biggest struggle was that she did not know what her purpose in life consisted of,” she still was eager to “put her own dent in the world.” Toward the end of her obituary, she concluded that along the way she had failed to recognize that “she already had a purpose in life as a daughter, friend, and aunt” (Wahl’s *meaning vs. meaninglessness*; see also Yalom, 1980).

Areas for growth. Some students more explicitly acknowledged their growing edges. For example, over a third of the students ($n = 8, 36\%$) voiced their recognition that they “sometimes put others['] needs before [their] own” (Student 11) and “would often

stress over whether everyone was happy around [them] instead of making sure [they were] happy” (Student 6), “even when [doing so] had a negative impact on [their] physical and mental health” (Student 13). Likewise, two students (9%) discussed their tendencies to procrastinate, and one student (5%) addressed her battle with perfectionism: “Her most important rule in life was one that she herself had trouble with: that it’s ok to make mistakes” (Student 5).

Resilience and giving back. Over a quarter of the students ($n = 6, 27\%$) focused on the obstacles and adversities they had overcome and how these provided motivation for them to give back in turn. For example, Student 8 “had to deal with the struggles of adapting to [a different] culture, not being a proficient student, lack of family resources, and the challenge of having a family member with a mental disability.” However, “despite those trials, [he] was able to have a successful career” in which he “created programs and provided counseling to the families dealing with the separation of family for immigrants and for families dealing with mental illnesses” as a means of fulfilling his “drive to help others in similar situations” as his own. Similarly, Student 1 reflected that having come “from a hard childhood and being told that he would never achieve his dream simply lit a fire under him to try harder and teach other [sic] to do the same because it will all workout [sic] in the long run.”

Openness to experience and commitment to continuous improvement. Almost a quarter of the students ($n = 5, 23\%$) emphasized their openness to experience and their commitment to continuous improvement. For example, “Even when things didn’t turn out the way she expected, she channeled the disappointment into a growth opportunity” (Student 9) and “Every step of life she took she realized that it was more important to be present rather than to be perfect” (Student 18).

Beyond status. Two of the students (9%) highlighted their striving toward intrinsic values and social interest (Adler, 1931/1998). For example, after reflecting on being fortunate to have experienced a “secure and supportive upbringing,” Student 7 declared that she “did not want money, notoriety, or really even to be noticed, but she wanted and aimed to be a good person” via her involvement in social justice efforts.

Findings, Part 2: Reflections on the Experience of Completing One’s Own Obituary

Affective Aspects

In this sample, the experience of completing one’s own obituary typically involved a trajectory that began with emotional discomfort followed by a transformative shift in the direction of a greater sense of acceptance, appreciation, and awe toward the possibilities of living the life one envisions.

Death anxiety and urgency. For almost a quarter of the students ($n = 5, 23\%$), the experience provoked death anxiety. Student 2 wrote, “I was not at ease. Death is something most people are not comfortable thinking about, let alone having to write about. I am one of those people.” Furthermore, two students (9%) described the experience as humbling, and over a quarter of the students ($n = 6, 27\%$) said that it provoked a sense of urgency as to whether they had lived out their goals and values. For Student 1, writing the obituary “opened [his] eyes to the fact that everything [he] always wanted to do with [his] life so far has not happened.”

Emotional discomfort. The majority of the students reported experiencing emotional discomfort as they began the exercise—including feeling (a) fearful, nervous, or

startled ($n = 6, 27\%$); (b) sad or solemn ($n = 10, 45\%$); (c) confused ($n = 2, 9\%$); (d) disconnected and detached ($n = 1, 5\%$); and/or (e) awkward/taken aback ($n = 2, 9\%$). Three students (14%) found it difficult to concentrate and/or keep up with their thoughts as they commenced writing their obituaries. Conversely, over a third of the students ($n = 8, 36\%$) “didn’t even know where to begin” (Student 6) and “kept blanking on what to say” (Student 18). Four students (18%) said they were able to overcome these issues by stepping back and assuming another person’s perspective.

Furthermore, two students (9%) expressed sadness and three students guilt (14%) specifically about the prospect of leaving their family and friends behind, which was often accompanied by a sense of empathy: “I felt upset to think about what I would put them through or the pain they would experience” (Student 20). Other students discussed feeling self-conscious and embarrassed about completing the exercise. For example, two students (9%) described the experience as “somewhat vain” in that “it’s not . . . often you are asked to write about what your life means . . . to the world” (Student 18), whereas Student 6 “started getting sad also about the fact that [she does not] completely know how people see [her].”

Some found the constraints of the task daunting. Almost a third of the students ($n = 7, 32\%$) found it difficult to sum up their lives on a single page, and two students (9%) were unhappy about having excluded close relationships and/or significant endeavors and accomplishments. Furthermore, over a quarter of the students ($n = 6, 27\%$) “racked [their] brains thinking about what [they] want [their] entire life to look like in just 20 minutes” (Student 9).

On the other hand, not everyone found the experience unsettling. For example, Student 5 found the obituary “surprisingly easy to write” from beginning to end and reflected, “Normally when I write about myself, I can’t help but feel arrogant. However, because the piece was written thorough another point of view, the conceited feelings weren’t there.” Further, some reported having little trouble with the space ($n = 2, 9\%$) or time ($n = 4, 18\%$) limits.

Transformative shift. Over four fifths of the students reported either directly ($n = 15, 68\%$) or tacitly ($n = 3, 14\%$) that, following their initial uneasy reaction, they underwent a transformative emotional shift as the experience unfolded:

Student 7: “Often in the moment, I feel as though I can be negative or doubt my abilities. However, when I looked back on my life thus far, I was extremely kind to myself and was very positive about my experiences as well as who I am as a person. . . . Even though I may not be exactly where I want to be and often have mundane days, I have a life thus far that fills me with joy and gratitude.”

Student 19: “It feels motivating to write of all these wonderful things that could manifest over the course of time. It gives my life substance and meaning.”

Student 4: “I was smiling thinking of what being alive meant to me and hoping that whoever has to write this knows how I truly feel.”

Student 8: “While I was writing this my heart felt light and it is the same feeling I get when I am nervous about a potentially positive opportunity.”

Positive aftereffect. Most of the students explained that completing the exercise left them feeling (a) relaxed ($n = 3, 14\%$); (b) “calm and confident” (Student 13, $n = 1, 5\%$); (c) “peaceful” (Student 10, $n = 1, 5\%$); (d) a sense of pride in their accomplishments ($n = 2, 9\%$); (e) hopeful, excited, and/or optimistic about the future ($n = 9, 41\%$; e.g., “I still . . . have time to do meaningful work with my life,” Student 12); (f) “empowered” (Student 15, $n = 1, 5\%$); and (g) “wise if maybe a little naïve” (Student 5, $n = 1, 5\%$).

Awakening. Some students reported mixed and/or contradictory emotions. For example, two students (9%) felt a combination of satisfaction and dissatisfaction insofar as the exercise spurred an awareness that they could do more to live out their potential and thus “made [them] realize what [they] truly want to get out of life” (Student 11).

Affirmation, acceptance, and awe. Some of the students said that the activity helped them (a) overcome self-doubt and better appreciate themselves ($n = 3$, 14%); (b) embrace their shadow (e.g., “accept some of the things I don’t love about myself,” Student 9, $n = 1$, 5%); and (c) enhance their sense of temporality (e.g., consider “the broad picture, not just the experiences I’ve had” with “a thought of creativity and wonder,” Student 22, $n = 2$, 9%).

Somatic Aspects

This trajectory was accompanied by shifts in bodily sensations. Some students reported that initially being asked to think about dying caused them to feel tense ($n = 3$, 14%), numb ($n = 1$, 5%), and/or nauseous ($n = 1$, 5%); for their heart to beat rapidly ($n = 1$, 5%); or to tear up upon identifying “who I was survived by” (Student 21, $n = 1$, 5%).

Conversely, with the transformative shift also came repose ($n = 3$, 14%). For example, Student 21 recalled, “When I finished, I felt some relief and my body didn’t seem so tense. I had written everything that I wanted to say at that moment.” For Student 4, it “felt like a weight was lifted of [sic] [her] shoulders [to have gotten] things out.” For Student 19, the act of writing “the things [she envisioned] about [her] personal life” also brought tears and “chills.”

Behavioral Aspects

The tension experienced by the students prompted, for some, restless behaviors including fidgeting ($n = 2$, 9%), shaking one’s leg and/or tapping one’s foot or fingers ($n = 4$, 18%), biting one’s nails ($n = 1$, 5%), playing with one’s hair ($n = 1$, 5%), and/or grasping one’s face ($n = 1$, 5%). In addition, two students (9%) found themselves frequently rewording their writing, and Student 2 reported often “looking at the clock to see when the time would be up.”

For others, the tension gave the students pause. Four students (18%) sat perfectly still. Student 16 found the experience “surprisingly quiet.” Two students (9%) frequently gazed into space as they thought “deeply about what it really is that [they] want to be remembered for” (Student 8) and “the meaning of [their lives]” (Student 15), and Student 21 glanced “at the walls . . . to see the pictures of [her] family to imagine what [her] parents would say about [her].”

With the transformative shift and accompanying repose, two students (9%) said they found themselves smiling. This was “because [they] felt fulfilled by . . . writing about all the positive aspects in [their lives] and sharing them with someone else” (Student 4). Likewise, Student 10 felt content with her obituary and therefore disinclined to “rework the writing.”

Cognitive Aspects

Completing the obituary conjured up memories of childhood ($n = 6$, 27%), of family ($n = 2$, 9%), of friends ($n = 3$, 14%), of simpler times ($n = 1$, 5%), of one’s transition into college ($n = 1$, 5%), and of a person whose loss a student had not adequately grieved ($n = 1$, 5%). It also sparked a variety of thoughts that served as points of departure for self-awareness.

Facing the unknown. For three students (14%), the uncertainty of the task triggered a sense of self-doubt. Student 3 “felt [herself] questioning if [she] was doing it correctly.”

Two students (9%) remarked that it was hard to come up with to say, “mainly because [they] don’t envision [themselves] dying anytime soon” (Student 9).

Facing the future. Accordingly, almost a third of the students ($n = 7$, 32%) said that the experience piqued curiosity about their future. For Student 17, “questions came up such as: How will [she] die? When will it happen and how old will [she] be? Who from [her] family will still be here and left to grieve [her] absence?” Others said that it made them ponder who they will marry and what being adult will be like.

Clarification of values. Two students (9%) reported that the assignment made them “think about what is most important to [them] in life” (Student 9) which, prior, they “never took the time to think about” (Student 22). For example, Student 22 remarked that she “did not understand how impactful [one of her hobbies] had been on [her] life.”

Intentionality and responsibility. Almost two thirds of the students ($n = 14$, 64%) reported that, by providing a friendly reminder of life’s transitoriness, the experience prompted a greater sense of revitalizing intentionality (May, 1969; Schneider & Krug, 2017) and responsibility for their lives. For example,

Student 9: “It also made me want to live my life more purposefully. I really do want to see life struggles as growth opportunities and become better rather than allowing myself to become bitter. I also want to be intentional about my priorities in life.”

Student 6: “I need to work harder and faster towards the dreams I want so that I can accomplish them because you never know when the end [will] come. . . . I think that now I will definitely watch what I do and make sure that everything I do will be something that adds meaning to my life.”

Student 12: “I am beginning to realize that there is not an infinite amount of time. . . . I have also had to accept the reality of having to make choices in life and face the consequences of those choices.”

Student 14: “I realize I need to plan more to make my life what I want it to be.”

Similarly, almost two fifths of the students ($n = 4$, 18%) discussed how the experience put them in touch with their sense of calling, their desire to leave behind a legacy, and the steps they need to take to make that happen:

Student 13: “I . . . thought about what I want my life to mean and what I want to leave behind.”

Student 16: “From this point on I want to make better choices on how to accomplish my goal. . . . This involves [involving myself in tasks that] can be tedious and boring but [are] necessary to better understand what I need to do to accomplish my goal.”

One student (5%) mentioned that the experience sparked a greater sense of intrinsic motivation:

Student 5: “I would love to write something that becomes a masterpiece. However, in order to do so I would have to . . . write a lot more. I have a habit of not doing it if I don’t have a reason. It would be nice if somewhere down the line, I learn how to write for my sole enjoyment and no other reason.”

Finally, almost a third of the students ($n = 7$, 32%) described how it motivated them to drop facades/personas/imagos and to allow themselves to be vulnerable so their real self (Horney, 1950; Rogers, 1959) could emerge:

Student 8: “It made me think about [whether] I have truly been portraying the person that I want to be remembered for and what needs to change about myself to become the man I want to be.”

Student 15: “This exercise was affirming to me because I got to see myself the way I hope another person sees me. These qualities are what I hope that I show the world. I also realized how much of a front I put up a lot of . . . times. When I am around my family or close friends, I am a different person than when I am around people I’m not as close to. I think I do this as a strategy to protect myself in this little bubble. If I don’t let anyone else in, I can’t get hurt. Through this exercise, I realized that I should start showing my . . . intelligence and my personality to other people, not just my close friends and family.”

Appreciation. The experience also helped many students develop a greater sense of appreciation. For half the students ($n = 11$, 50%), it “got [them] thinking about what [they] have actually accomplished so far” (Student 11), especially personal qualities and/or achievements they had taken for granted. To illustrate, Student 12 reflected, “Life keeps everyone so busy and can leave people to looking down a narrow tunnel of their goals and aspirations without seeing their positive aspects of themselves in their peripheral vision.” Accordingly, some of the students wrote about how the assignment helped put challenges from the past into perspective, including histories of self-harm ($n = 2$, 9%), indecisiveness ($n = 1$, 5%), and frequent relocation during childhood with a parent in the military ($n = 1$, 5%).

Three students (14%) articulated a sense of resilience and a recognition of the value of struggle. Student 15 noted that she found herself “to be a strong and empowered young woman because [she had] overcome so much in [her] past. [She] wouldn’t be who [she is] or where [she is] today if it weren’t for overcoming all of the challenges [she has] faced in [her] life.”

Two students (9%) reconsidered making social comparisons. For example, *Student 4* said, “There will always be people . . . who have more than us and less than us, so it is important to show gratitude for the people, life, and experiences we *do* have” (emphasis added). Conversely, *Student 18* “had no regrets or things that [she] thought of that would make [her] want a ‘re-do.’”

The assignment also helped two students (9%) take others less for granted. Student 9 mentioned that she “wants to show the people [she] loves how much they mean to [her] and invest [her] time and energy into loving others” and that “it can be easy for [her] to get caught up in the day-to-day responsibilities and to-do lists that [she] can forget about the things that are most important to [her] in life.”

Enhancing consciousness, confidence, and self-efficacy. May (1967) defined *consciousness* as the ongoing dialectic between experiencing oneself objectively and subjectively, which provides creative capacities for authentic choice, freedom, and social responsibility. Almost a quarter of the students ($n = 5$, 23%) discussed how they found it helpful to put their lives in perspective by writing about themselves from the standpoint of another person. Accordingly, Student 10 said, “I am reminded of life’s value, and I feel encouraged about my progress. I feel slightly renewed, like I just received the message ‘you’re doing fine, you’re on the right track’ and actually believed it.”

About a third of the students ($n = 7$, 32%) discussed how the exercise prompted a stronger sense of confidence, self-efficacy, and empowerment. For Student 12, it also provided a point of departure to refer back to during moments of hesitation: “I believe that in times of strife where I feel an utter lack of self-confidence and self-doubt in my performance as a student or a person in general, I believe that I should think about this exercise and think about the lives of those I have touched already.”

Goals for Growth

Many of the students identified insightful goals for personal growth.

Overcoming procrastination. Two students (9%) discussed how the assignment motivated them to work toward overcoming procrastination. For example, Student 1 wrote, “It made me really start to want to get my life together and start to do what I set out to do in the past but never began to even attempt.”

Improving self-care. Student 11 identified a specific strategy for improving self-care: “I plan on eating better, exercising more, and even taking time off from school to mend personal relationships with family and friends. In this time off from school I also hope to volunteer and explore other jobs I could have while in school as well as when I graduate. Overall I want to build connections and live a healthier life.”

Horney’s neurotic triad. Horney (1945) identified three basic interpersonal personas that individuals employ to cope with existential (basic) anxiety. Some of the students’ reflections suggested self-awareness of having assumed one of these defensive patterns and identified plans to better allow their authentic self to unfold. First, three students (14%) who exemplified Horney’s *movement away from* others (characterized by emotional and interpersonal detachment) discussed plans to better connect with the world. For example, Student 4 said, “Maybe I do need to start showing my emotions and being more emotional with my friends and family.”

Second, another three students (14%) typified Horney’s *movement toward* others (characterized by dependency and people-pleasing). The assignment “made [them] realize [that they] often times care about others[’] needs before [their] own” (Student 11), and they aimed to “focus on [themselves] more, not on the entire world” (Student 22).

Third, Student 14 epitomized Horney’s *movement against* others (characterized by aggression and/or competitiveness). Having identified as hyper-ambitious and even anticipating dying of a heart attack in her obituary, she insightfully reflected, “I did not realize before how much of a driven person I am.”

Beyond experiential avoidance. Student 17 noted that the exercise prompted a better understanding of the value of difficult emotional experiences and of better embracing the daimonic (May, 1969; Shumaker, 2017): “From here I think it would be beneficial for me to assess the more negative aspects and address those in my future. [This] made me more aware of that fact that one day I will die, which I will also use as I shape my own future.”

Discussion

Applied to both the students’ obituary content and reflections on their experience, the content analysis revealed several common elements as well as a reasonable degree of variation in how they dealt with, resolved, and gained insight from normative anxiety associated with the obituary writing experience. In addition, several relevant themes emerged that (a) reflect extant literature on the technique and its theoretical/philosophical underpinnings and (b) challenge the finality of Shneidman’s (1972) analysis of college students’ obituary content.

Obituary Content

With some exceptions, most of the students wrote their obituaries in neutral third person. Some included factual biographical information, while others discussed accom-

plishments they hoped to achieve in the future; only two students included a combination of both. Many students highlighted relevant concerns centered around (a) relationships and other-directedness and/or (b) perseverance and its application in their career development. As emerging adults, these two themes are consistent with Erikson's (1963) evocation of Freud's *lieben und arbeiten* (to love and to work) as the principal developmental tasks involved in negotiating Erikson's (1959/1994, 1963) *intimacy versus isolation* and which are echoed in Baxter Magolda and Taylor's (2016) conceptualization of self-authorship (as described in the introduction). These themes also set the stage for individuals' successful cultivation of care and wisdom later as adults (Erikson, 1959/1994, 1963; see also Lawford & Ramey, 2015; McAdams, 2013).

Comparison with Shneidman's sample. Content-wise, the obituaries by the students in this sample generally contrasted with those in Shneidman's (1972) sample. First, whereas 97% of Shneidman's students wrote their obituaries from the perspective of the distant future, less than one fifth ($n = 4$, 18%) of the students in this sample did so. Instead, the majority wrote from the perspective of the present with a realistic eye toward their next steps.

That said, Shneidman found that his students "exaggerated sentimental fantasies, romanticized themselves, and emphasized personal and private anamnestic details rather than biographical and objective data" (pp. 265–266). In contrast, the students in this study typically acknowledged their areas for growth, either explicitly or implicitly, and it was rare that they overstated their achievements. Rather, they concentrated on improvements they needed to make in their lives—including negotiating Wahl's (2003) existence tensions as well as overcoming people-pleasing, procrastination, and perfectionism—to make those accomplishments happen.

Connections with resilience and self-actualization literatures. Some of the students discussed having overcome adversities and how doing so motivated them to give back in turn. This sense of hope for a brighter future in conjunction with desire to altruistically make a difference reflects empirically supported qualities of resilience (Southwick & Charney, 2018).

Other students emphasized their openness to experience, their commitment to continuous improvement in personal growth, and their investment in social justice and cultivating a culture of kindness as an alternative to status (Prinstein, 2017). Taken together, these suggest qualities of self-actualization as an ongoing process of paradoxically being guided by more idiosyncratic and intrinsic aims while also becoming more self-transcendent (Maslow, 1987, 1999; see also Bland & DeRobertis, 2017).

Reflections on the Experience

Connections with Shneidman and Schneider. Like Shneidman's (1972) students, the majority of the students in this study reported feeling initially unnerved by the obituary writing experience—which they attributed to (a) death anxiety; (b) a sense of urgency about whether they had lived out their goals and values; (c) sadness and guilt about leaving loved ones behind; and (d) confusion, detachment, and awkwardness. Their emotional discomfort was sometimes accompanied by tension (somatically) and by restlessness or pause (behaviorally).

However, most of the students also reported having encountered a transformative emotional shift and sense of repose as the experience unfolded, which they found affirming and motivating. This shift echoes Kirk Schneider's description of his own clients' experiences with obituary writing (personal communication, April 2017 and June

2019). It also suggests that the exercise provided a safe platform for the students (a) to concretely experience the symbolic death of the familiar dependency of youth and heroically face the self-responsibility of adulthood and (b) to vitalize their current experience in a way that can inspire others (Campbell, 1988).

That said, cognitively, the exercise aroused a variety of thoughts ranging from memories of the past to self-doubt (which, when appropriately heeded, can be empowering; Arons, 2020) to curiosity about the future to a clearer understanding of one's values. Consistent with Bühler's (1961) focus on active responsibility and commitment in self-determination, many students explained that the experience prompted senses of revitalizing intentionality (May, 1969; Schneider & Krug, 2017), of calling and intrinsic motivation, and of striving toward fulfillment of qualities of *being* beyond the conditioned self (Horney, 1945, 1950; Rogers, 1959). All these attributes contribute to the fulfillment of Baxter Magolda and Taylor's (2016) developmental task of self-authorship during emerging adulthood.

Connections with resilience and self-actualization literatures. Echoing the resilience literature (Southwick & Charney, 2018), some students articulated a sense of gratitude for difficult experiences that ultimately stimulated growth and empowerment. Further, the overall tone of the reflections conveyed an air of future-directedness and ability to "struggle well" that Walsh (2016, p. 5) suggested is the genuine hallmark of resilience. Others expressed appreciation for the significant people in their lives and an intention to overcome taking things for granted.

Most of the students left the exercise with a greater sense of confidence and self-efficacy, which some attributed to having written about themselves from the standpoint of another person. Some discussed how the exercise helped put them in better touch with their values and/or their life narratives which they had not previously considered particularly deliberately, and it provided a reference point to which they could later return for inspiration. Finally, several students identified personal growth goals including overcoming procrastination, improving self-care, surrendering interpersonal defenses and working toward authenticity, and tempering experiential avoidance—all characteristics of self-actualizing people (Maslow, 1987, 1999).

Additional Comparisons With Extant Obituary Writing Literature

Taken together, the findings of this study resembled Bugental's (1973–1974; see also Ihanus, 2005; Shneidman, 1972) observations about the technique as summarized in the literature review above. These include (a) providing a safe platform for sitting with uncomfortable emotions and addressing one's mortality; (b) prompting reconsideration of one's involvement in superficial activities; (c) inspiring hope, fulfillment, and renewal; and (d) promoting attunement to one's values, life goals, and relationships as well as commitment to making necessary changes. Further, the findings were congruent with LaBelle's (1987) observation that the technique can be empowering for young people with concerns about self-efficacy and/or who have not considered their life narratives and the degree of situated freedom they have therein.

Promoting Second-Order Change (Existential Liberation) and Self-Cultivation

This awakened potential for personal growth also reflects the intent behind the obituary writing technique for promoting second-order change (parallel with the construct of existential liberation; Schneider & Krug, 2017). By way of a dialectic, dialogical

process with the objective world (i.e., individuals seeing themselves objectively as others see them; May, 1983), identity (Schneider & Krug, 2017) and wisdom (Webster, 2010) are actively created. Such a transformative experience is “ideally suited” (Shumaker, 2017, p. 1) for young people who are progressing through a developmental stage characterized by the paradox of, on one hand, encountering a greater range of possibilities for oneself and, on the other hand, grappling with the precarity of one’s future (Schwartz, 2016).

Moreover, Baxter Magolda and Taylor (2016) suggested that college educators should intentionally help students develop self-authorship in order to successfully navigate adult life. By jumpstarting their employment of the creative imagination as a guide for identifying goals to responsibly shape their life trajectory (Bühler, 1961; DeRobertis, 2017; DeRobertis & Bland, 2019), the obituary writing exercise shows promise for the possibility of the students engaging in a longer-term process of self-cultivation.

Promoting Existential Learning via Confronting Death Anxiety

Death anxiety should be addressed directly by emerging adults, for whom the phenomenon underlies various forms of distress and diagnosable psychopathology and is universal irrespective of one’s worldview, belief system, or demographics (Pashak et al., 2018). “The possibility of death jars [one] loose from the treadmill of time” (May, 1953, p. 271) insofar as it provides a vivid and life-affirming reminder of one’s impermanence. In this sense, the obituary writing technique facilitated existential learning (DeRobertis, 2017) in that it served to stop the students in their tracks and thereby make it difficult for them to uncritically continue living out habitual patterns and/or taking their lives for granted. To illustrate, the students in this study remarked that the exercise (a) “made [them] think” (Student 13) and “put [their lives] in perspective” (Student 16), (b) encouraged them to “step out of [the] box” of their “everyday routine and feelings” and “focus on seeing the bigger picture” (Student 15), and (c) left them feeling “hopeful that [their actual] obituary could possibly be parallel to what [they wrote]” (Student 19).

By confronting the dialectic between death and life, the students became more capable of living courageously and creatively in accordance with their values by engaging fully in the present moment knowing they have a future of their situated choosing (Krishnamurti, 1954; Schneider & Krug, 2017). This serves as an alternative to either (a) denying death by overemphasizing aliveness and optimism, projecting one’s fear onto the unknown, attempting to defy death, and so forth or (b) engaging in pessimism and death obsession, being accident prone or neglectful of one’s health, and so forth (Schneider & Krug, 2017). The exercise also provided a platform for the students to safely question “the sea of collective responses [to] and attitudes” about death (May, 1983, p. 107) and to develop a sense of self-empowerment and self-determination as an alternative to conforming to death anxiety in the culture.

Promoting Presence and Being

Though typically first experienced as emotions, in mature form, the qualities of *presence* and of *being* beyond the conditioned self (comparable to those associated with self-actualizing people; Maslow, 1987, 1999) that emerge out of confronting one’s impermanence provide a source of inner guidance toward optimal functioning and commitment to the common good (Ostaseski, 2017). Furthermore, as noted by Frankl (1963), the moment one’s potentialities are actualized, “they are rendered realities; they are saved and delivered into the past, wherein they are rescued and preserved from transitoriness. For, in the past, nothing is irrecoverably lost but everything irrevocably

stored” (pp. 190–191). This is particularly pertinent for emerging adults as they develop the ability to integrate a sense of past time perspective into a worldview dominated by present and future (McAdams, 2015).

Connections to the Emerging Adulthood Literature

The theoretical tenets that are supported by the findings of this study also reflect extant empirical research findings on emerging adulthood. For example, the integration of subjective and objective modes of thought in postformal complex cognition has been demonstrated as conducive to accepting the inevitability of death in emerging adults (Jennings, Galupo, & Cartwright, 2009). Furthermore, interventions involving deep reflection on and discussion of one’s purpose in life have been found to promote emerging adults’ goal-directedness and to serve as a protective factor against normative decline in life satisfaction (Bundick, 2011). Moreover, the development of measurable traits associated with wisdom have been found to be negatively correlated with hedonistic impulses and positively correlated with values related to personal growth, positive interpersonal relationships, and social interest (Webster, 2010).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

First, a principal limitation of the current study is that it involved a sample of emerging adults (college students), and the findings reflect their particular phase of development and the relevant concerns therein. Although the findings both support the general theory behind the obituary writing technique as well as contextualize outcomes described in extant case studies and in informal observations (Kirk Schneider, personal communication, April 2017 and June 2019) involving a broad age range, it is important to note that searching for a purpose in life (a key finding in the current study) is associated with life satisfaction primarily for adolescents and emerging adults and less so for adults (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009). Therefore, it is suggested that further inquiry explore the obituary writing technique from the vantage point of individuals in other phases of the life span and their specific developmental tasks, challenges, and/or concerns. An additional limitation concerns the data having been derived from an academic assignment, which could have impacted what the students were willing to disclose and/or could reflect an effort to appear favorably in the eyes of their professor.

Second, given that emerging adulthood has a cultural dimension (Schwartz, 2016), it is important to bear in mind that this study used a sample of predominantly White females completing an upper-division psychology course. These dimensions of cultural context (gender, race/ethnicity, education level, choice of major/minor) likely influenced the findings—particularly the content of the obituaries and the specific life goals and areas for growth identified by the students. Therefore, further study involving different demographics is recommended to identify additional themes and to assess the extent they could be socially constructed. Doing so also could contribute to emerging literature on the multicultural applicability of existential-humanistic psychology and psychotherapy (Hoffman et al., 2019).

Third, because this study was designed primarily to explore the process mechanisms and dynamics involved in the obituary writing technique, although the participants identified goals and areas for growth, the sustainability of outcomes was not directly evaluated. Accordingly, a longitudinal follow-up is recommended to assess participants’ progress in working toward their goals, along with a longer-term reflection on completing the obituary writing exercise.

Fourth, though some of the participants identified as having been previously diagnosed with and/or treated for anxiety, depression, and/or substance abuse, overall, this study involved a relatively nondistressed sample. Additional research should explore the process dynamics of obituary writing with more severe clinical populations.

Finally, to contribute to the emerging body of research on the helper-as-person in the training of helping professionals (Bland, 2018; Geller & Greenberg, 2012; Regas, Kostick, Bakaly, & Doonan, 2017; Smith-Hansen, 2016), it is advised that further research explore the obituary writing technique in the process of helper development and its potential utility for promoting mindful presence, empathy, creativity, wisdom, and so forth in the interest of facilitating clients' growth.

Conclusion

The findings of this study closely resemble the characteristics of the process by which emerging adults actively construct meaning from difficult experiences, as described by Bargdill, Marasco-Kuhn, Muron, and Chung (2019). First, an experience emerges unexpectedly that disturbs their sense of everydayness and familiar predictability, makes them aware of their inauthentic behavior, and prompts them to respond more authentically. Second, the experience directs attention to life's fragility and to the extent to which relationships are taken for granted. Third, the experience enables them to become more conscious of and to integrate their sense of identity, to develop a stronger sense of life purpose, and to appreciate the small stuff in everyday life. Fourth, the experience energizes personal growth and maturation, strengthens interpersonal relationships, and motivates the achievement of significant life objectives. Fifth, the experience has layers of meaning that are not fully understood at once but rather unfold over time and lead to feelings of gratitude despite the mixture of negative and positive components. Taken together, both this study and Bargdill et al.'s study heed Wong's (2017a) suggestion for advancing emerging psychological research on meaning-making (particularly from the positive psychology canon) by providing more qualitative inquiry that (a) incorporates "the dark side of human existence, which includes suffering and death" in order to "deepen [psychologists'] understanding of what it means to live a meaningful, fulfilling life and how to achieve it" and (b) takes into account lived experiences beyond self-reported measures of surface-level behavior, cognition, and affect (p. 82).

Moreover, the obituary writing technique appears to hold promise as a relevant antidote to concerns raised during the last decade about emerging adults' abilities to embrace healthy challenges (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018) and to engage interpersonally (Twenge, 2014, 2017). Accordingly, this study comes in response to Bronk and Baumsteiger's (2017) call for research that demonstrates how contemporary emerging adults may assume meaningful aspirations that result in self-determined goal-directedness and that "construct a kind of positive developmental context for their continued growth" (p. 49) in a manner that is both personally fulfilling and conducive to constructive worldly engagement.

This study provided the first formal investigation of the process mechanisms and dynamics of obituary writing. In addition to preventing the technique from falling into obscurity and obsolescence or becoming dismissed as unscientific in light of its limited literature base, my intentions were (a) to offer research that counters faulty assumptions about the passivity of existential-humanistic therapists as they typically are portrayed in mainstream textbooks (Henry, 2017) and (b) to provide a heuristic foundation for

maintaining a dimension of depth in contemporary scholarship in developmental and meaning-making processes while also (c) building bridges between literatures in existential-humanistic and mainstream psychology. On the other hand, it is worth noting that for most seasoned existential-humanistic psychologists, the findings of this study generally offer little that is conceptually new but instead provide an affirmation of extant existential-humanistic theorizing as demonstrated in the reflective writing of today's emerging adults. Accordingly, it is important that the vitality of these existential-humanistic principles and related research findings is maintained at the level of description—and not sedimented and/or diluted into a prescriptive strategy or confused for a rote manualized activity with an unambiguous, preordained outcome (Mølbak, 2012). Rather, the mindful use of obituary writing as a technique serves simply as a “conduit or means” for helping professionals and educators to collaboratively and creatively promote clients' or students' self-reflection within the context of an empathetically attuned relationship as the primary vehicle for growth and sustainable change on an individualized basis (Elkins, 2016, p. 117)—and not as a shield against the mystery of engagement therein.

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