

The Social and Cognitive Empowerment of Older Adult Women: An Analysis of a University-Based Lifelong Learning Community

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Background

What is the impact of lifelong learning? Lifelong learning is “cognitive process by which individuals continue to develop their knowledge, skills and attitudes over their lifetime” (Lamb et al. 2009, p. 713); however, others argue that the process is also particularly social in nature (Formosa 2005; O’Shea & Stone 2011). It is time that aspects of lifelong learning that socially and cognitively empower women be examined. **This study uses a perspective of social and cognitive empowerment to understand the transformative power of lifelong learning in the lives of women in older adult learning communities.**

Social Empowerment

Sense of Community has been defined as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan & Chavis 1986, p. 9). Luthans and colleagues’ (2004) understand it as: “who you know” becomes “who you are”.

Hypothesis One: *The sense of community empowers older adult women in lifelong learning communities, such that it positively relates to their perceived overall quality of life and life satisfaction.*

Cognitive Empowerment

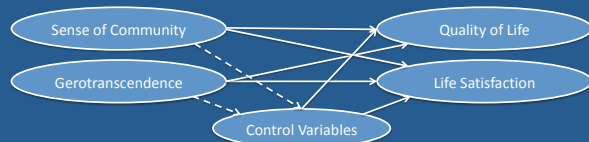
Gerotranscendence is an emerging concept regarding how the mindsets of adults shift as they age. Specifically, it reflects a shift in three dimensions: Cosmic, Self, and Others (i.e., social and personal relationships). The *cosmic* encapsulates shifts in broad, existential perspectives, such as spiritual connections. The *self* consists of changes in perspectives regarding how individuals presently view themselves and how they look upon their past lived experiences. *Others* (i.e., social and personal relationships) captures changes in how a person experiences and perceives his or her relationships and how those relationships are contextualized (Tornstam 2005; 2011).

Hypothesis Two: *Gerotranscendence empowers older adult women in lifelong learning communities, such that it positively relates to their perceived overall quality of life and life satisfaction.*

Control Variables

In order to explore these hypotheses, control variables such as pain and health conditions, demographics (i.e., personal relationship status, income level, and education), and psychological factors such as locus of control must be utilized.

Model



Methods

Sample and Recruitment

An online survey was distributed via Qualtrics to 1,117 unique email addresses derived from registered members of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Arizona State University. The institute is now comprised of over 1700 older adult learners (around 1100 at the time of the survey), participating in a venue of over 2225 short courses, lectures, special events, and service-learning opportunities annually. **The study sample of 209 women who completed all the items in question for this study’s analysis was homogeneous.**

Measures, Central Tendencies, and Dispersions

Qualitative and quantitative measures were utilized to explore the relationships related to social and cognitive empowerment. Four subject matter experts (SMEs) associated with the lifelong learning institute categorized the responses to the qualitative question, “How has your participation in the Osher Lifelong Institute at ASU influenced your life?” The SMEs coded the responses ($n = 158$) based on the measures used in the study.

The quantitative scale sources and descriptive statistics are provided below.

Table 1. List of Topics, Descriptive Statistics, and Psychometric Scale Sources

Scales and Topics	Mean (SD)	# of Items	# of Scale Anchors	Scale Source(s)
<i>Socially Empowering</i>				
Sense of Community	23.129 (3.395)	8	4	Peterson et al. 2008
<i>Cognitively Empowering</i>				
Cosmic Gerotranscendence	13.273 (3.102)	5	4	Tornstam 2011
Self Gerotranscendence	30.99 (3.721)	10	4	Levenson et al. 2005
<i>Quality of Life Measures</i>				
Overall Quality of Life	4.197 (0.639)	1	5	Single Item
Life Satisfaction	65.866 (5.556)	20	4	Neugarten et al. 1961
<i>Quantitative Control Variables</i>				
Locus of Control	51.336 (5.724)	12	6	Shewchuk et al. 1992
Age	69.176 (7.415)	1	-	Single Item
Daily Interference of Pain	1.770 (0.908)	1	5	Single Item

Table 2. Additional Demographic Categorical and/or Ordinal Control Variables

Scales and Topics	Mode
Personal Relationship Status	Single ($n = 112$)
Income	\$85,000 or more ($n = 52$) ^{1,2}
Education	Graduate or advanced degree ($n = 125$) ²
Daily Interference of Health Conditions	No ($n = 156$)

¹ 58 individuals did not to answer the income question; it was excluded from further analyses.

² This figure was also the median.

Qualitative Results

Analysis of the qualitative responses showed that 96.8% of respondents noted that lifelong learning at the institute positively impacted their life, and the majority (68.4%) of individuals reported tied lifelong learning to improved quality of life themes. Self gerotranscendence (37.3%) and sense of community (27.2%) are also prevalent themes found among the qualitative responses.

Quantitative Results

Stepwise regression was utilized to explore the possible relationships. Sense of community felt within the lifelong learning community appears to be socially empowering, such that it is tied to both perceived overall quality of life and life satisfaction. Self gerotranscendence appears to be cognitively empowering such that it connected to perceived life satisfaction. These relationships are salient even after controlling for contributing factors such as locus of control, relationship status, and health conditions, specifically pain issues. Cosmic gerotranscendence, education, and age were not significant in the regression model after entry of the aforementioned variables. The tables below highlight the quantitative connections and their relative weights found from the data.

Table 3. Influence of Cognitions and Demographics on Overall Quality of Life

Variable	B (SE)	β	t	Zero-order (r)	Semi-partial (r)	VIF
(Constant)	2.624 (.413)	-	6.360***	-	-	-
Sense of Community	.025 (.012)	0.134	2.201*	0.199	0.13	1.052
Locus of Control	.022 (.007)	0.202	3.357**	0.237	0.199	1.035
Married or Partnered	-.347 (.077)	-0.273	4.512***	0.329	0.267	1.044
Daily Interference of Pain	-.193 (.043)	-0.272	-4.464***	-0.346	-0.264	1.059

*** $p < 0.001$ level (2-tailed). ** $p < 0.01$ level (2-tailed). * $p < 0.05$ level (2-tailed).

Table 4. Influence of Cognitions and Demographics on Life Satisfaction

Variable	B (SE)	β	t	Zero-order (r)	Semi-partial (r)	VIF
(Constant)	30.843 (3.739)	-	8.250***	-	-	-
Sense of Community	.421 (.103)	0.249	4.074***	0.378	0.235	1.126
Self Gerotranscendence	.448 (.096)	0.296	4.681***	0.414	0.27	1.201
Locus of Control	.203 (.059)	0.208	3.432**	0.347	0.198	1.107
Married or Partnered	2.209 (.653)	0.197	3.385**	0.168	0.195	1.016

*** $p < 0.001$ level (2-tailed). ** $p < 0.01$ level (2-tailed). * $p < 0.05$ level (2-tailed).

Discussion and Conclusion

So what is the impact of lifelong learning? Is it empowerment? Participation in lifelong learning is an indispensable pursuit for older adults to remain active and empowered, cognitively and socially. A social and cognitive empowerment perspective helps assess the transformative power of lifelong learning in the lives of women in older adult learning communities. Lifelong learning providers can be sources of transformation and empowerment for women, but they should seek to foster sense of community and gerotranscendence. Breadth and depth are needed in learning opportunities promoting introspection and social opportunities to look outside oneself.

This study’s findings are particularly significant for women who are disproportionately represented among older age groups and who are often not specifically studied. This study contained women who are doing well financially and are well-educated. Across the study variables, the women displayed higher levels of well-being in general. Future studies must assess the ability of lifelong learning communities to empower women who are still marginalized or disadvantaged compared to this study’s sample. As these studies seek to discover the keys to empowerment, a social and cognitive perspective on empowerment will be beneficial.