The “Spice of Life”: Community-Dwelling Elders’ Perceptions Regarding the Significance of Variety to Their Lives

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Introduction
Variety has been referred to as “the spice of life” and appears to contribute to the psychological well-being of people of various ages. Due to changes in physical functioning, living situations, and roles with age, elders, however, may be particularly vulnerable to threats to psychological well-being and opportunities to experience variety.

In previous exploratory nursing research, community-dwelling elders who perceived themselves as experiencing more variety on a day-to-day basis felt they had more mental energy, described themselves as performing better on daily tasks, and reported fewer depressive symptoms, in comparison to those who expressed experiencing less variety.

Theoretical Framework
Variety
Variety is a concept that has not been fully defined or described in the nursing literature, although elders emphasize its importance. In the classic psychology book, Functions of Varied Experience, Fiske and Maddi (1961) provided a conceptual framework for the concept of varied experience. Fiske and Maddi noted three primary functions of varied experience: 1. Assists with normal development and functioning 2. Serves as an end in itself, as it is sought after for its own sake 3. Contributes to positive affect

Florence Nightingale (1960/1969) discussed the importance of variety to physical and mental health and recovery: You who believe yourselves overwhelmed with anxieties, but are able to walk . . . out in the country, to take your meals with others in other rooms, . . . how much your anxieties are thereby lightened; . . . how intensified they become to those who can have no change; . . . how impossible it is for them to escape from a pursuing thought without some help from variety. . . . a pleasant view, . . . a little needlework, a little writing, . . . would be the greatest relief. (pp. 60-63)

Method
Sample
Convenience sample
N = 34 independently living community-dwelling elders
n = 25 women
n = 9 men
M = 71.6 years (SD = 6.1), Range = 65-87 years
All White
53%, Married, 35%, Widowed
74% in houses; 26% in apartments or condos
Locally recruited
91% rated their health as good or better
M = 143 (SD = 2.7) years of education, Range = 10-22 years
All retired, except for one person working part-time.

Setting
Midwestern city, population of approximately 65,000 people.
Recruited via flyers and announcements at a local senior center, church, and community fitness program.

Instruments
Interview Questions
People seem to have their own definition of what variety means to them. What does the word variety mean to you?
How much variety do you experience on a typical day? . . . During a typical week?
How satisfied are you with the amount of variety you experience?
How does experiencing variety affect you? How does not experiencing variety affect you?
How important is experiencing variety to you and to your quality of life?

Demographic Data
Pertinent demographic data, such as marital status, type of dwelling, level of education.

Procedure
Participated and primary investigator met in person in a private room at the home, senior center, School of Nursing Building, or other public setting (e.g. at a local mall). Participated and signed the consent letter and completed the demographic data form and closed-ended items. Primary investigator conducted the interview, interview audiotaped with written permission. Each participant received $10.00 following completion of the session.

Data Analysis
Descriptive statistics were computed for the demographic items. A series of two separate content analyses of the interview information were conducted to address these areas:

Meaning of variety
Using responses to the question: “What does the word variety mean to you?”

Significance of variety
Using responses to the questions:
“How does experiencing variety affect you?”
“How does not experiencing variety affect you?”
“How important is experiencing variety to you and to your quality of life?”

Content Analysis Steps:
Interviews transcribed by the two student researchers; transcripts reviewed by primary investigator and compared with written notes from the interviews.
Primary investigator segmented the interview data into individual thoughts or themes and the student researchers reviewed the work. The interrater reliability (percent agreement) in determining the constitution of an individual thought or theme was 89.7%.
Research team members reviewed the thoughts and themes and created categories based on similarities among the data. The categories were revised until agreement was reached among the 3 researchers.
Research team members took turns independently sorting the thoughts/themes into the categories.

Results
Meaning/Definition of Variety
Having multiple activities to do in a day or week—A range of activities
“Variety means doing different things, like for instance, reading, going to coffee, going to your exercises, traveling.”
“Trying to pace yourself so that you have a little bit of each is very important.”

Spice of Life—That which makes life enjoyable and interesting
“Well that’s the spice of life— it’s what gives you zip.”
“There are certain things that we all enjoy and it may not be a whole lot of things, but I still feel that I’m doing such a variety of things.”

Not being patterned or following a strict routine
“Every day is not a carbon copy of the day before.”
“My friends are so patterned and so predictable—they don’t have any variety. . . . I said, ‘What are you going to do today?’ and she said, ‘I’m going to do the laundry.’ I said, ‘What are you going to do then?’ She said, ‘Well, it’s laundry day.’ I said, ‘For crying out loud! You don’t even have to walk downstairs! You walk to the washer, you throw the clothes in. When do you do that? Sit and watch the machine’.”

Relationships with people (old and new acquaintances)
“I enjoy being around young people. I think it would be very boring to be in a retirement community with all old people. I don’t think I could hack that.”
“It means your friendships. That you don’t isolate yourself to just one or two particular friends.”

Experiencing new and different (not usually done) activities and events
“I think just trying to put something different into your day other than just staying home and watching television.”
“To me it would mean your daily life—things that you do every day and every day and every day and then these special things—family get togethers, church activities.”

Results Cont...
Open to Possibilities
“That you get involved with what’s going on in the world and keep your eyes open.”
“Change is variety. Whether we like it or not, variety is going to hit us in the face one way or the other. We can either put it in Ziploc bags or we can let it happen to us.”
“It’s just the surprise in life.”

Challenges
“A number of different things that would challenge me in different ways.”

Significance of Variety—Variety is important because it...

Contributes to mental health
“Variety makes us feel whole—like we’ve been there and done that, in a positive way.”
“If you don’t have variety, you just don’t feel satisfied with the day, with what you’ve accomplished.”
“Makes me much more optimistic.”
“Stress-relieving. If you don’t have variety, you worry about things.”
“Keeps me sane, not getting depressed, and not getting worried.”
“Makes life enjoyable and interesting
“Everybody has to have something to look forward to.”
“Variety is the spice of life. It keeps life interesting.”
“You get bored without it.”

Keeps people motivated and active
“Move your boundaries, change your goals, experience it!”
“You need to interact with people of different ages . . . It’s just a real different outlook.”
“Keeps me going.”
“Makes people happy
“Keeps me uplifted.”
“Cheers me up.”

Keeps people healthy and well
“It keeps me young.”
“If you don’t have variety, you don’t do those things, and you don’t feel as well.”
“I need it to be healthy.”

is necessary for life
“It keeps me alive. It really keeps me alive.”
“I thrive on it.”
“Even if you aren’t feeling good, you still need variety.”
“I’d die without it.”

Creates concern for others and decreases self-absorption
“If you don’t get out of yourself enough, that’s when it can be very detrimental.”
“It become more helpful to other people and not concerned for myself.”

Keeps people mentally sharp and alert
“Keeps my mind active. That’s why I do so much of it. I do crossword puzzles a lot—that’s good for my mind. Doing all of this different stuff keeps me alert.”

Makes people interesting to others
“It keeps you interesting and vibrant to others. Our children don’t worry about us.”

Conclusions
The community-dwelling elders felt variety was vital to their quality of life.
They sought it out if they were not experiencing enough variety.
People working with elders may wish to consider enabling the availability of opportunities to experience variety for those with physical or cognitive limitations or other restrictions in their living situations.
These exploratory findings provide support for further investigation into the benefits of variety with larger, more diverse samples of community-dwelling elders.

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