THE HANDBOOK OF STRUCTURED LIFE REVIEW

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This book is aptly titled because, indeed, it is a handbook for the professional or layperson who is interested in planning and conducting a structured life review with another person. In fact, the specific audience for *The Handbook of Structured Life Review* is the person whom the authors call “the therapeutic listener,” i.e., the social worker, nurse, member of the clergy, counselor, or family member who seeks to undertake the role of interviewing an older person for the purpose of facilitating a life review. (Note: The authors emphasize that structured life reviews are not intended exclusively for older persons and may be of great use to individuals in middle age or even younger.)

Barbara Haight, a nurse with many years of experience conducting, researching, and writing about life review, partnered with her husband in authoring this book. In their introduction, the Haights stress the comprehensive nature of their book as a guide for the therapeutic listener. The attention to detail in this book is impressive. The reader is advised about how to get started in the process (e.g., full disclosure, written agreement, whether or not to tape record, etc.); is informed about issues interviewers frequently encounter; and is given specific techniques grounded in the profession of counseling that have proven to be helpful. Throughout the book the authors explain Erik Erikson’s eight-stage human development theory and employ this famous model as a theoretical foundation for the structured life review process.

The reader with little or no experience in facilitating the life review process will find interview questions suggested by the authors to be especially helpful. These are presented in various chapters according to which age (stage) in the Erickson model on which the review is focused. For example, when talking about the reviewer’s young adulthood period, which Erickson labels the “Intimacy vs. Isolation” stage, more than a dozen questions are suggested from which the interviewer may choose. These include “What was life like for you in your 20s and 30s?,” “Did
you form significant relationships with other people?,” and “What important decisions did you
make during this time?” To their credit, because they realize the uniqueness of each person
telling her or his life story, the authors do not narrowly prescribe interview questions. In fact,
they offer suggestions to the reader for customizing questions.

Anyone familiar with aging and life review recognizes the important role Barbara Haight
has played over the years as a contributor to the literature on this topic. The breadth and depth
of her knowledge of this gerontology subspecialty is evident in this book from start to finish.
I was particularly enamored of the myriad stories and examples provided that enriched the
overall reading experience.

One caveat is in order. The Haights’ concept of structured life review is more highly devel-
oped, detailed, and of a longer duration (eight one-hour visits) than other models that facilitate
the life review process. While the authors assert this fact, they provide little information about
alternative models. Therefore, the beginner may interpret this highly rigorous and structured
model as the way life review should be, and that would be unfortunate. Many people who other-
wise would benefit from a systematic review of their life may not have the time or energy to
participate in an eight-part process. It is important to understand that the “structured life
review” is one way, not necessarily the way, of doing this important work.

That said, I enjoyed and learned from this book. I believe it makes a substantive contribu-
tion to the life-review literature. I can envision The Handbook of Structured Life Review being a
useful tool for professionals who work with older adults as well as family members who wish to
undertake this vital and fascinating work.