

“Humbled by life”:

**Poetic representations of existential pathways and personal life philosophies among
older adults in Norway**

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Abstract

In this article, we support the use of poetic representations to study experiential and existential meaning-making. We do so by presenting five spoken-word poems, which we created out of the transcriptions of 14 in-depth interviews with Norwegian older adults, prior to their enrollment in a biographical writing course. The poetic representations, which have been named by themes from the transcript are: a) *Where love takes us*; b) *Relax during catastrophes*; c) *Learning to see humankind as one common humanity*; d) *Listen inward*; e) *Life is, indeed, too short*. Each poetic representation condenses diverse meanings and perspectives about life. They also maintain the anonymity of participants, as the plurality of their voices becomes one within the stanzas. While presenting this creative form of qualitative inquiry and providing some methodological reflections, we also discuss the implications of this approach for the theoretical development of the notions of personal life philosophies and existential pathways in cultural psychology.

Key words: personal life philosophies, existential pathways, poetic representations, meaning-making, tension, poetry, older adults, cultural psychology, virtues, virtuous aging.

The life we plan, and the life we dream of, are not necessarily the life we live. What is then the life we narrate to ourselves? What are the life-stories we want others to remember when we die? Human beings are meaning-makers, story-crafters, which is to say that we all have a creative potential. We can embrace this potential by allowing the contrast between our expectations and the actual unfolding of events to show us pathways for being-in-the-world, and by choosing some of them. In doing so, we engage in a dual process: that of experiential and existential meaning-making. On the one hand, we might implicitly or explicitly give sense to memories, even trying to find a red thread among our experiences. On the other hand, we might also try to make sense of the uncertain and evanescent character of life and its dilemmas, such as which virtues could make life worth living through and beyond suffering, dying, and death. In this article we explore such nuances of meaning-making in human development, as we analyze 14 in-depth interviews of Norwegian older adults, prior to their enrollment into a biographical writing courseⁱ. We have subsequently created poetic representations with excerpts from the interview transcriptsⁱⁱ. These spoken-word poems are meant to portray the *existential pathways* and *personal life philosophies* of our study participants, notions which we elaborate upon theoretically in the pages to follow whilst discussing these poetic representations. In a nutshell, existential pathways evoke diverse trajectories of being-in-the-world, while personal life philosophies nuance: a) the ethical orientation of such pathways; and b) the ways in which we, as human beings, attempt to bring congruence to our life stories and to find meaning within both joyful and challenging life-events, which fosters resilience.

Using poetic forms of documentation in qualitative research helps the researcher articulate the essence of participant voices, and makes the research available to wider audiences, as poetry—and other artistic forms—can make emotional nuances of our experiences vivid (Richardson, 1994; Hill, 2005; Faulkner, 2009; Lehmann & Klempe, 2017).

For instance, some researchers have carried out poetic portraits of older adults in health research (Parsons Emmett, Dobbs, Williams, & Daaleman, 2011), while others have used ethno-drama to dive deeper into the experiences of aging with chronic diseases (Jønsson, 2018). However, more detailed analyses of poetic participant voices are needed. This can benefit the development of qualitative inquiry, and also help to advance the development of theories and practices in social and health sciences.

Crafting Poetic Representations

By transcribing data in poetic forms, researchers attempt to condense the essence of the experiences of their study participants, reorganizing their exact words in verses that evoke what being human is about (Faulkner, 2009). That is, poetic representations aim at evoking emotional intensities that create shared experiences between the audience, the participants, and the researcher (Faulkner, 2005). In this article, we use poetic representations for two main reasons. Firstly, integrating the multiple voices of participants into a single poem facilitates the anonymization of the data (González, 2002). Secondly, creating poems as part of the analysis of qualitative data can facilitate greater appreciation of the tensions across emotional intensities and different directionalities among positions, beliefs, and affective processes of the study participants (Lehmann & Klempe, 2017; Lehmann, 2018). That is, poetry conveys the multiple tensions that form our affective processes and which can coexist in the stream of consciousness (Lehmann, 2018). In doing so, presenting the data in the form of poetic representations supports our quest as researchers, namely, that of diving into both the tensions that form our directionality as human beings and the diverse layers contained in the meanings we give to our experience and our existence.

Crafting our own poetic representations. We conducted the 14 interviews and created the poetic representations in the Norwegian language, later translating the poetic representations into English for the purposes of the current article. The verses of the poems

correspond to direct quotations from our study participants, so that each stanza integrates several of their voices. The only modifications we incurred were: splitting long sentences into verses; changing capitalizations and punctuation; and erasing some connecting words to make the sentences more straight-forward. In practical terms, we assigned each participant a colored font when bringing their quotations onto a blank page, so as to ensure that most participants would appear in each of the poems. We then proceeded to unify the color of the texts to black font, as it is presented in this article. In addition, we triangulated some information of the interviews with the fieldnotes written during a 7-week writing course in which the study participants took part, although a thorough analysis of what occurred in the course will be presented elsewhere. The main themes we found in the data related to virtues such as love, trust, self-exploration, common humanity, and authenticity. For this reason, we (respectively) named the poems: a) *Where love takes us*; b) *Relax during catastrophes*; c) *Learning to see humankind as one common humanity*; d) *Listen inward*; e) *Life is, indeed, too short*.

Poetic reflexivity: The paradox of co-creation. Co-creating poetic accounts in research can lead to the dilemma of whose voices are present in the poems, whether those of the participants or those of the researchers (Hill, 2005). One of the goals of creating poetic representations with the exact words of study participants is for the researcher to condense the essence of what participants are conveying without jumping over to interpretations of their essence (Faulkner, 2009). When reviewing the poetic representations, we addressed our creative process as a twofold endeavor: that of us being both poets and interpreters in crafting these pieces (i.e., in transforming excerpts from the transcriptions into verses). We pre-selected fragments that gave account of the diversity of life trajectories, and this formed the tension between perspectives within the stanzas of the poems. With this, we aimed at conveying tunes of *multivoicedness* within each of the poems, while portraying the wisdom of

our study participants. Since it is our objective to study the crossroads between experiential and existential meaning-making among older adults, we then further developed the notion of *personal life philosophies*, previously used in developmental cultural psychology (e.g., Zittoun et al., 2013). Thus, other than intuitively selecting sentences which appeared to be aesthetic or philosophical, we were also working with an explicit theoretical direction in mind. In addition, there is one layer of interpretation that is unavoidable, namely, the act of translating the Norwegian into English. Neither of the authors has Norwegian or English as a mother tongue, although we are fluent in both languages. In order to deal with these issues, we sent preliminary versions of the poems in Norwegian and English to our study participants, asking them if they felt these poems were faithful to their perspectives, and if they felt understood both individually and as a group. In addition, we discussed the poems with a Norwegian poet and an American proofreader, so as to better the language of the translations.

Existential Pathways and Personal Life Philosophies:

Insights from Poetic Representations

From an existential perspective, aging involves shaping one's life and overcoming obstacles, as well as embracing farewells; leaving behind that which passes across and through us (Längle & Probst, 2000). Thus, old adults are searching for a comprehensive understanding of life, a sense of being human, as well as figuring out what were and are their personal attitudes to life, either in secular or religious ways (Längle & Probst, 2000). However, the developmental implications of these arguments could be further investigated, and we attempt to explore this in connection to the notion of personal life philosophy by means of poetic representations. The connection between personal life philosophies and values has been mentioned theoretically (e.g., Zittoun et al., 2013), and other traditions in cultural psychology have extensively focused on morality (e.g., Shweder, 2002). Yet, to the

best of our knowledge, there are almost no research reports on the development of personal life philosophies and the notion of virtues.

“Where Love Takes Us”: A Poetic Representation of Love

Love appeared as a main theme when participants spoke about their greatest lessons in life during the in-depth interviews (see Table 1). As stanza [1] portrays, not all the participants have lived and (or) are living a life that corresponds with a conventional imagined trajectory, such as getting married and having a family. This was also evident during the biographical writing course they took part in after having been interviewed. In this course, many of the participants wrote about poetic instants, insights, regrets, and longings in relation to love, while narrating stories about past lovers, current partners, or their divorce experiences. This plurality of experiences of love evoke polyphonic tunes, as they recall the tension that coexistent positionings of the self or affective processes create when they move along divergent directions (Bakhtin, 1963/1999; Lehmann, 2018). Since life trajectories are so diverse among the participants, the polyphony of this poem is related to the weight of choices, and the possibilities of meaning-making emerging from such choices, as one looks back across one’s life. Hereby, we coin the notion of *existential pathways* to emphasize the plurality of possibilities for being-in-the-world and of standing for one’s choices within the uncertainty of life. This notion is similar to that of equifinality in cultural psychology, which indicates that a developmental finality can be afforded through different conditions and routes (von Bertalanffy, 1968 in Sato, 2017). However, existential pathways relate to our *Dasein*, understood in existential semiotics as modalities of being, doing, and becoming in a relational way, directed towards otherness (Tarasti, 2012). That is, the notion of existential pathways explicitly acknowledges the weight of existential givens, such as uncertainty and the evanescent character of life, and the constant dilemmas we embrace in our everyday lives and which serve as the bases of our decisions (van Deurzen, 2012; Yalom, 1980).

Table 1. “Where love takes us.” A poetic representation of love.

[1] Getting married, right?	don't wait to say it.
Then, having kids.	
Of course, that's an important part.	[4] There had to be a divorce first.
Yes.	It was very,
	very,
[2] The most important lessons:	very hard.
where love takes us,	
a partnership.	[5] To choose,
You have to take a chance	one,
into a relationship.	whom I am married with now.
You also have to develop,	Meeting love,
you have to go through ups and downs.	it gave me opportunities.
Nothing is ever finished,	
it is made along the way.	[6] But I've also made a powerful decision:
	I will be free.
[3] Why wasn't it so easy	Being too dependent on others,
to find one,	it has to do with self-confidence.
a partner?	But depending on others
Life happens to you.	also involves many disappointments.
If one loves someone	
then they should say it,	[7] Life is not for amateurs.

Rather than an equifinality point of being in a long-lasting romantic partnership, this poetic representation illustrates existential pathways related to the longing for romantic relationships, as well as the dilemmas of entering into, staying in, or leaving them. These

processes give account of philosophical explorations about what love represents in human life, recalling layers of both experiential and existential meaning. Love is a virtue most human beings want to embrace, yet it is one that few of us achieve and maintain in the shape of a single, long-lasting relationship. The answer to the riddle of love, if there is any, does not lie in pursuing this finality. There are possibilities to find meaning and purpose in life even when life does not unfold as we had hoped and planned, and this is possible despite our experiences of love having had a price: waiting, heartbreaks, or confronting one's sense of freedom, as the stanzas [3], [4], and [6] illustrate. One of the givens of our existence is that life brings us into dilemmas and tensions between opposites, such as wanting relatedness as much as we want freedom (van Deurzen, 2015). To provide another example, one can work towards a positive purpose in life, such as love, while simultaneously entertaining a negative concern, such as hate, or one can strive to attain love through respect, while cultivating the value of reciprocity (van Deurzen, 2012). Similarly, as we go about facing these dilemmas, we confront our freedom to choose as well as our isolation, which are other existential givens (Cooper, 2017). Questions, such as what is freedom in the context of a relationship and whether it is found in or out of relationships, are crucial for the integration and internalization of personal life philosophies.

As the beginning of the stanza [3] indicates, it is not easy for everyone to find a partner. The verses that follow in this stanza suggest two existential pathways for integrating this longing for partnership into a personal life philosophy. One pathway is to hold unto the belief that "*life happens to you*," that not everything is under our control. That can be liberating, or at least a way to make sense of uncertainty. Another pathway is to find a task to be responsible for in such a situation, such as "*If one loves someone then one should say it, don't wait to say it*." This sense of responsibility and agency can be even interpreted as coming along with nuances of regret, e.g., for not having said "I love you" in a timely manner

in the past. We do not have certainty about the threshold between our responsibility and what is out of our control when it comes to the arrival of partnerships, nor about how long these relationships last. Yet, this intimate dance between responsibility and surrender is part of life and can lead us to diverse insights. The internalization and integration of personal life philosophies involves attitudes of accepting, opposing, pursuing, or surrendering in the face of various life events, and these attitudes are expressed in the coexisting tensions between affective processes, of which we are invited to make sense. However, existential pathways are not always integrated into personal life philosophies, but often remain as open-ended questions, or even as emotional injuries.

In addition, as expressed in stanza [7], there is a paradox in ending the poem with the statement that “*life is not for amateurs.*” On the one hand, this excerpt suggests that there is an aspiration to be professionals in living life, yet it is precisely by going through the uncertainties and dilemmas of life as amateurs that these older adults have gained this invaluable experience. Life is about the weight of our choices, and how we craft—or not—those choices as we make sense of our stories. As Rilke said to the young poet, and to all of us as amateurs of life:

be patient towards all that is unresolved in your heart and to try to love *the questions themselves* like locked rooms, like books written in a foreign tongue. (Rilke, 1929/2016, p. 17, italics original)

Embracing the uncertain and evanescent character of life, as well as the weight of our choices, does not make the longing for, and the experience of, love any easier—it makes it human. What the existential pathways allow us to understand about aging, is that the integration of a personal life philosophy about love as a virtue depends on the subjective insights given the specific circumstances, such as the desire to find a partner earlier in life and not being able to do so, or going through a divorce (as described in stanzas [3] and [4]

respectively). We continue to elaborate upon this within the next poetic representations, which give account of other virtues.

“Relax During Catastrophes”: A Poetic Representation of Trust

Another theme that emerged from the in-depth interviews was the idea of trusting in life working itself out and trusting in one’s ability to deal with life, even with its catastrophic nuances. The verses of this poetic representation, presented in Table 2, evoke a homophonic tune, since a multiplicity of participant voices can head in a similar direction (Bakhtin, 1963/1999). However, the fact that the voices point towards trusting life does not mean that there are no tensions involved in walking the path of this virtue. In fact, while most participants described trust in life as their existential pathway and as a path they would like youngsters to pursue, they also acknowledge its many challenges. In stanza [1], the study participants mention the contrast between expectations and reality, which reflect two features of existence: that of embracing the uncertainty of life, and that of embracing that which it is instead of that which we speculate it could be (Martínez, 2009). As much as we can plan life, life does not necessarily unfold exactly as we wish it would. The crossroad of experiential and existential meaning is unveiled here—in accepting that life does not necessarily happen as we imagined it would and yet finding a red thread that speaks of virtues in our life histories. This process of narrating and poeticizing life does not make the tensions that form our affective processes disappear, but it reconciles them with a sense of purpose (Lehmann, 2018). Altogether with trusting life and trusting one’s capacity to relax while dealing with life’s challenges, this existential pathway of trust, as evoked in stanza [2], implies a sense of acceptance of, and surrender to, our limited capacity to control and predict life. Thus, trust as a virtue conveys agency and accountability for dealing with life, whatever the issues may be for the given individual, and it conveys a sense of acceptance of, and the ability to embrace, the uncertainty and uncontrollability.

Table 2. “Relax during catastrophes.” A poetic representation of trust

[1] Throughout a long life
you ought to be prepared
to change, at times,
your image of the future,
with no notice at all.

Not everything goes as you want (laughter).

[2] It is what it is.

It will be what it will be.

Life is like that,

you must take it as it comes.

What I have learnt

is to relax during catastrophes,

as I like to say (laughter).

[3] One cannot be eighteen years old

and have sixty years of life experience.

Learn from history,

Read more!

And do not forget the history.

There are many wonderful youngsters,

but it is also hard for a lot them.

A lot of pressure on body-image,
and other pressures as well,
which we dodged
while growing up in Norway,
in the 50's, after World War II.

We escaped all of that
because we did not have so much.

[4] It will all work out,

Yes (laughter).

One way, or another (laughter).

It will all work out.

[5] Life comes in phases.

Life, these phases

can give us different challenges.

Life does something to us,

indeed, it humbles us,

so we become less self-conscious,

more open to others.

[6] It is a process:

we are all humbled by life.

“Relaxing during catastrophes” is not always the easiest of journeys, given specific historical and cultural constraints, such as war or ideals of perfection upon our body-image, as described in the third stanza. There is, however, a resource to cope with life’s constraints and unpredictability: laughter. We transcribed the persistent laughter of participants during the interviews (see stanzas [2] and [4]), for adopting the attitude of humor reflects the multiple layers of affective processes which are present in existential meaning-making. This is what poetry does in us, it reconciles the tensions of existence (Vygotsky, 1925/1974; Lehmann, 2018). Therefore, this humbling process of life, as introduced in stanzas [5] and [6], is a poetic turn, an act of befriending our fragility, our vulnerability, and the beauty beneath the tragic features of life, and letting them show us their wisdom. Wanting to trust life and doing so in the midst of challenges, is a virtue which requires an optimistic attitude, as such an attitude supports the awareness and recognition of the tragic aspects of life, as well as one’s possibility of transcending them, or at least, reconciling their presence. Such optimism can compensate for the weight of existential givens (Frankl, 1975/1994; Wong, 2017), and mediate our process of internalizing and integrating a personal life philosophy. This, however, is a life-long process, as we gain insights from the existential pathways we undertake, and cope with life’s challenges. In addition, there is a paradox in the description of such trust in life, as it is also given by experience, as life often humbles us—which might not be the easiest of journeys either. This paradox is also present in the ending verse of the poetic representation about love: “life is not for amateurs” (Table 1, stanza [7]). Nevertheless, we all are amateurs in life, and experience humbles us, as it grounds us in our sense of humanity. We address such a sense of humanity further in the next poetic representation.

“Learning to See Humankind”: A Poetic Representation of our Sense of Humanity

Most study participants referred to the relational principle of “menneskeheten,” a sense of common humanity, as captured in the poetic representations in Table 3. This gives

account of the way in which Scandinavian cultures emphasize the “sameness” that unites us as human beings and that implies the goal of being accessible and friendly to other members in the community no matter who they are (Gullestad, 1986, 1989). Actually, Norwegian culture is defined as a horizontal individualistic culture, since it stands for both a sense of independence and freedom, as much as it promotes equality and non-hierarchical ways of relating to others (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). In this vein of ideas, such a process of turning towards the other in a non-hierarchical manner, while maintaining a sense of self, requires boundaries (see stanza [2]). Thus, “Learning to see humankind as one common humanity” (see stanza [2]), is exactly that, a learning process. Striving towards virtues as we relate to others is a life-long practice, rather than a state one accomplishes. Our study participants had practiced it throughout their lives, and they want younger generations to practice it too. Yet, how is one to practice it? Our participants suggest that one can do so by means of honoring the costs of striving towards equality and generosity, while maintaining a sense of individual identity and freedom (see stanza [3]), as well as questioning power and personal assumptions (see stanza [4]). This mode of being, an existential pathway, reflects identity formation as a process of internalization and externalization through cultural, social, and historical guidance (Valsiner, 1998). Embracing our sense of common humanity is a personal life philosophy that is highly driven by cultural ideology, and that provides ethical guidelines in terms of such attitudes as friendliness, kindness, and honesty. However, the ideology of the welfare state in Scandinavia is being threatened by the primacy of individualism that capitalist societies encourage (Nafstad, Blakar, Carlquist, Phelps, & Rand-Hendriksen, 2007). Therefore, psychological interventions that aim at reinvigorating virtues such as equality are encouraged in Norway (Nafstad et al., 2007). This is relevant for developing community interventions, since, paradoxically, the sense of independence promoted in horizontal individualistic

cultures, such as in Norway, can lead to social isolation (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998), as presented in the sixth stanza of the poem.

Table 4. “Learning to see humankind as one common humanity.” A poetic representation of the sense of common humanity.

<p>[1] It is important to be kind we all have equal worth. Not naive, but kind. Supporting others, saying nice things when there is a chance for it. You can't be honest without being generous. When meeting others, to make it easier, you must be quick in setting boundaries. You must care for yourself, and accept others. One will become completely exhausted if they don't do so.</p>	<p>either for themselves or for others, sometimes it can cost a lot. But, I think that, sometimes, it is important to do it anyways.</p>
<p>[2] We need to look beyond ourselves, our own lives. Learning to see humankind as one common humanity. Trying to meet children in a good way, both our own children and those of others.</p>	<p>[4] Fairness, being critical to power. How we think, and what we think... why we think about what we do, why we do what we do. It is, probably, something about equality: to show a sense of common humanity.</p>
<p>[3] If one acts kindly towards others, one gets further than if they don't.</p>	<p>[5] Meeting others with respect. Either they sit on the streets and beg or they sell Sorgenfriⁱⁱⁱ, or they have a lot of money. It does not matter.</p>
	<p>[6] Such things, small things. Because it is a lonely existence, being outside. Outside,</p>

If one really stands up

like I am, outside of society in a way.

In the following poetic representation, the study participants dive more explicitly into the process of self-exploration which is necessary to develop as one lives one's life, and which reflects the sense of individualism promoted in Norwegian society. Interestingly, instead of evoking loneliness, as the sixth stanza of the poem above does, it evokes the virtue of solitude. That is, it asks for a space in our everyday lives devoted to reflection, intuition, and(or) spiritual endeavors.

“Listen Inward”: A Poetic Representation of Self-Exploration

The virtue of self-exploration appeared as a liminal space between the rational and the emotional, the scientific and the intuitive, the personal and the spiritual. Insights about life blossom in these thresholds. In a similar way to the poetic representation of the sense of common humanity (Table 3), the verses of “listen inwards” that we present in Table 4 suggest a sense of individuality and personhood. However, the nuances of those stanzas take an additional direction, one more developmental than ideological. Even if the verses touch upon other aspects of Norwegian culture (see stanza [2]), such as the praise of nature (Ibsen, 1863/1999), the study participants are conveying a direction inwards, either exploring the mind or the soul. This mode of being-in-the-world and being-with-the-world as an existential pathway suggests insights related to interconnectedness with otherness (e.g., with other persons, with nature, with God) which can be interpreted in either secular or religious ways. Reflections upon one's inner life and the relationship with oneself, often pose the dilemma of whether or not human beings have a spiritual dimension, and cultural psychology could address this issue more consistently in their developmental theories (Lehmann & Brinkmann, 2019a). Given that most participants described this on a secular—or at least non-religious—perspective, we let the poetic representation be as non-directive as possible when it comes to

spiritual practices, yet open to them. This is actually one of the resources of poetry, the ambiguity which evokes the questions and tensions that form our affective processes and that are part of meaning-making (Lehmann, 2018). In addition, the second stanza of the poem emphasizes part of the questions one asks oneself when developing a personal life philosophy. The existential paths and the answers, whether scientific, spiritual, or in between, vary among individuals. What gains weight for us from a developmental perspective is the questioning in itself, which can facilitate experiential and existential meaning-making. Indeed, since the study participants indicate a more explicit process of insight about life which they would like others to remember, they are giving account of the possibilities for existential meaning which gain special importance when aging (Lehmann & Brinkmann, 2019b).

Table 3. “Listen inward”. A poetic representation of self-exploration

<p>[1] I am a bit of a believer.</p> <p>We can unveil our own layers, within ourselves.</p> <p>Listen inward.</p> <p>Listen to your gut feelings, which are not scientifically proven.</p> <p>Trust yourself.</p> <p>Use your head, your common sense.</p> <p>In society today there are many incredible influences, and that is alluring.</p> <p>But, stop and think.</p>	<p>[2] I don't think science has figured it all out.</p> <p>There is magic in walking in nature, for it gives you pleasant thoughts.</p> <p>We have an inner world, which we are in continuous contact with.</p> <p>Right from the moment we wake up until we go to bed, opportunities to get to notice the depths of life.</p> <p>[3] Don't get hung up in all the temptations, desires and possibilities, let things glide slightly by.</p> <p>Let things glide slightly by,</p>
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and also, consider them thoughtfully,
may we learn that we can be free.

This poetic representation also touches upon the trust emphasized in the poetic representation of “relax during catastrophes” (See Table 2), a trust in life and in oneself as being able to cope with, and find meaning in, any circumstances. In connection with this, and implicitly presented as a practice, there is a direction in this existential pathway, independent of its consideration as secular or religious; that of becoming free, of choosing wisely. We discuss this quest for authenticity and its implicit connection with ethics in the following poetic representation.

“Life is, Indeed, too Short”: A Poetic Representation of Authenticity

The poetic representation presented in Table 5 brings in a sense of perspective about life, reflecting some nuances of the integration of personal life philosophies. One of its main nuances was the acceptance and embrace of existential givens, such as our impending finitude, something that resonates with Heidegger’s understanding of authentic existence (Martínez, 2009). A personal life philosophy is a process of balancing both gains and losses along one’s life trajectory, a balance which becomes particularly important as we age (Zittoun et al., 2013). Looking back onto one’s life and reflecting upon its ephemeral nature, brings a tune of nostalgia and perhaps even regret into this poetic representation. That nostalgia and those possible regrets are, at the same time, presented as a source of wisdom. For instance, they bring in the tension between freedom and responsibility (Frankl, 1975/1994) in a subtle way (see stanza [1]), when suggesting others not rush into making important life decisions, and that they allow themselves to experience life.

In addition, this poem brings in a topic which requires further development in aging studies; that of reciprocity. Some of the other poetic representations we have presented above

imply a top-down approach to wisdom, where the older adults want the reader to learn from their experiences and from their perspectives on love. This is more in line with the assumptions of the Legacy Project (Pillemer, 2015), the project whose interview protocol we used as an inspiration for our in-depth interviews, and which aims at highlighting the wisdom of older adults and sharing it with other generations. In a traditional way, the accumulation of experience that older adults gain across chronological time gives them the social role of holding wisdom, a wisdom which others could use in order to make better decisions (Valsiner, 2008). This is reflected in the fifth stanza. In contrast, stanza [4] of this poem suggests an empathetic turn towards younger generations, and invitation to intergenerational dialogue, from which older adults could also learn. In addition, this accumulation of experiences does not necessarily imply an accumulation of wisdom. On the one hand, and as evoked in the second and third stanzas of the poem, one needs to make mistakes in life and persevere towards goals. On the other hand, wisdom in itself might blossom through an explicit practice of integrating existential pathways into personal life philosophies, which orient our attitudes towards life, the ethical codes of our actions. Aspiring towards authenticity can then support us in such a quest for virtuous aging (Laceulle, 2018).

Table 5. “Life is, indeed, too short.” A poetic representation of authenticity.

[1] Life is, indeed, too short.	[3] Dare to bet on yourself,
It quickly becomes so for all of us.	dare to believe in yourself.
I have taken way too little care of myself.	Self-criticism is way too widespread.
So, use the opportunities you have.	Don’t take yourself so seriously.
We have been raised to work,	Bringing some humor to people
We have been raised to show up,	so they laugh even when it’s dark,
there is so much that we should.	it has been life-saving for me, many times.

We will, we must, we should.

Try different things,
do not do what your dad does,
do not do what your mother says.
don't rush into determining
your profession or career.

[2] Some people have it, sort of have,
a lot of luck and things come easy.
But the most of us need to work
constructively towards goals.

And it gives results,
and responsibility for our lives.
One should make mistakes.
They belong to life.
If one does not make any mistakes
towards others, of course, one must say.
Yet, if one just make a mistake
towards oneself, it is not so dangerous.

It will be work out. Things work out.

[4] Accept things are as they are.
It's not that easy to be young today.
There's a lot of superficiality,
both about knowledge and relationships.
Now, I know so many great young people
which I think have taught me a lot,
so, I won't say that I know
what they aren't capable of.
I want to be more in dialogue with them.

[5] And by all means, of course,
avoid drugs. It's very basic and
destructive, if they get caught up in them.
Avoid getting caught up in the digital
world.
And, also dropping out of school (laughs).
They must not do that!

[6] Never take the easy way out.

Discussion

Co-creating poetic representations as forms of qualitative inquiry supported our quest as researchers to explore the crossroads between experiential and existential meaning-making in human development. This is so, given the tension that multiple voices bring into the poems

—either having a polyphonic or homophonic direction—and the ways in which the stanzas can reconcile, if not resolve, such tensions inherent in our being-in-the-world. Indeed, the five poetic representations we have presented above—discussing the virtues of love, trust, common humanity, self-exploration and authenticity—give account of the fact that ageing is not a uniform process, as it is experienced differently by each person, in accordance with specific life circumstances (Zittoun et al., 2013). Thus, our use of the notions of existential pathways and personal life philosophies appeal to the uniqueness of ageing trajectories, while pointing out the similarities in the pursuit of virtues within and beyond cultural guidance.

A personal life philosophy can be defined as the ways in which we synthesize our past experiences with our imagined life trajectories (Zittoun, 2017). Virtues are then human capabilities that enable us to realize the moral values and demands of personal life philosophies. This process in itself recalls the tension between reality and imagination, immersing us as human beings in the possibilities and constraints of living, and the affective processes involved in dealing with what is and what is not possible (even if we long for it). In doing so, integrating personal life philosophies, as a developmental process, entangles the various attitudes we hold when dealing with existential givens. These existential givens involve, among other features, facing our impending finitude, recognizing the weight of our choices within the threshold of freedom and responsibility, our longing for interconnectedness, and the isolation that comes as we develop our identity as individuals (Cooper, 2017). In our data this appeared in the form of diverse existential pathways, or modes of being-in-the-world and with-the-world, such as perspectives on romantic partnerships, or ways of being in the community as part of a welfare state ideology in Norway. Thus, existential pathways point in different directions, showing the possibilities and the dilemmas of life. We aimed to condense these various pathways into singular poetic representations. We are suggesting that these existential pathways have the potential to

become sources of existential meaning, if human beings look at these experiences as seeds that can help to make life worth living. This exploration of meaning-making has been addressed extensively in existential therapies (Frankl, 1975/1994; Wong, 2009), and could be more explicitly linked with the importance of developing personal attitudes towards life as we age (Längle & Probst, 2000).

We suggest that the integration of lived-experiences into personal life philosophies involves both narrative and poetic turns. Narrative turns are efforts to give congruence to our stories (Murray, 2015), independently of their outcomes. Poetic turns enable the coexistence of multivoicedness and tensions as we are crafting our stories, giving room to paradoxes, dilemmas, and ambiguities. These poetic turns spark wisdom and beauty within the fragility of our lives (Lehmann & Brinkmann, 2019a), since we have, on the one hand, a story to craft and on the other, the instants which palpitate in us as we craft it, the emotional rhythms of doubt, regret, exhilaration, hope, etc.

When introducing the notion of personal life philosophies, cultural psychologists link this process with that of the internalization of values. However, the notion of values appears ambiguous, being used to refer to both “motivational dispositions that are deeply rooted in individual’s affective domains” (Branco & Valsiner, 2012, p. ix) and ethical stands (Zittoun et al., 2013). Thus, in this article, we prefer the notion of virtues, in order to provide a more explicit link with philosophical inquiry and ethics, as much as to give account of the connection between the notion of virtue and the notion of practice. This is so, given that our study participants referred to the importance of reflection, questioning, insight, as much as they referred to practice, to life as a learning process which is renewed in actions which speak of virtues even if this represents challenges and costs. These reflections are congruent with the wisdom in action, where both reflecting and acting accordingly to such reflections shape virtues, as Aristotle indicates when referring to *Phronesis* (Kraut, 2018). Virtue ethics serve

this purpose since they focus on emotions and the way in which they affect our moral judgments (Gardiner, 2003). In addition, they consider motivation towards behaving well while adapting to circumstances, which often comes in the form of dilemmas, with flexibility and creativity (Gardiner, 2003).

In a similar vein of ideas, there are recent developments in gerontology which speak of virtuous aging, and which support our perspective. Virtuous aging (Laceulle, 2017), relying on the experience of older adults, considers their existential vulnerabilities. An existential vulnerability could be, for instance, the process of letting go of life, which could be interpreted as frailty, and associated with existential loneliness (Larsson, Rämgård & Bolmsjö, 2017). In order to support older adults to better cope with these vulnerabilities, a theory of virtuous aging focuses on the ways in which they could develop attitudes towards their own lives, which they can use to better relate with their communities and the society in which they live (Laceulle, 2017).

In addition, theories of virtuous aging recognize the human aspiration towards authenticity and resilience, which can show the bright side of vulnerability (Laceulle, 2018). Thus, we are suggesting that this practice of virtues can also be interpreted as being grounded in the awareness of our human condition, as we are, in the words of our study participants, “humbled by life.” That is, further developments in theories of virtuous aging could acknowledge the process of existential inquiry that facilitates the integration of personal life philosophies. Discourses on authenticity in virtuous aging could address existential vulnerabilities as an opportunity for older adults to look at their lives with courage and openness, having become who they are and having realized potentials, as well as still having the possibility to act accordingly to their virtues (Laceulle, 2018). In existential therapies, this existential courage to face confusion, uncertainty, suffering, and risks, gives ground to the ethical ground for our actions (Wong, 2017).

In principle, the notion of personal life philosophy moves in the direction of resilience, assuming that ruptures across our life trajectories can lead to resilience and to the experience of values (Zittoun et al., 2013). Translating the use of values in cultural psychology into that of virtues, we further suggest that striving towards virtues give us a sense of directionality and purpose, which guides our decision-making and meaning-making processes, and it is consequently also influenced by them. However, to pursue a sense of consistency toward the virtues we strive for is challenging. We often elaborate discourses that convey the sense of congruence that we struggle to keep, and which sometimes speak of other values/virtues than those we attempt to pursue (Branco & Valsiner, 2012, p. ix). Therefore, further developing theories of virtuous aging in connection with personal life philosophies in cultural psychology could address the ways in which the practice of virtues leads to the experience of reciprocity and resilience among older adults.

Conclusion

In this article we have supported the use of poetic representations as a form of qualitative inquiry, which can be especially relevant when studying the experiential and existential nuances of meaning-making. We have coined the notion of existential pathways—modes of being-in-the-world and with-the-world while coping with existential givens, such as our impending finitude or the weight of our choices. In addition, we have further developed the notion of personal life philosophies, which has been introduced earlier in developmental theories of cultural psychology in connection to values. However, we prefer the notion of virtues instead of values in our theorizing, and further link it with that of attitudes, which mediate the integration of existential pathways into personal life philosophies. Given that the use of the notion of values can be epistemologically confusing in psychology, theoretical developments could aim at more consistently integrating philosophical and ethical approaches to values, virtues, and attitudes.

We focused on five virtues that appeared as we analyzed the content of the interviews, co-creating poetic representations based on the transcripts. These virtues were love, trust, self-exploration, common humanity, and authenticity. What appears to be common in the five poetic representations corresponding to these virtues are the ways in which these virtues are directed towards a sense of otherness, and the dilemmas and costs that such directionality represents. We have therefore emphasized that life is presented in dilemmas, and that poetic representations can condense these dilemmas as they give account of diverse existential pathways, given the tension between a sense of individuality and a sense of otherness. We have also highlighted that personal life philosophies constitute efforts to bring congruence to one's life stories and to one's history, as well as to ground those narratives within the ethical guidelines from which one derives attitudes—attitudes that can serve as vehicles for us to strive for virtues. However, narrative turns towards developing our personal life philosophies do not suffice in the quest for meaning. These efforts also reflect poetic turns, those of reconciling the coexistence of dilemmas, oppositions, contradictions, and uncertainties, with a spark of beauty in the chiaroscuro of the fragility of our human condition. For narrative and poetic turns to occur, human beings—either consciously or not—make use of attitudes towards circumstances, which mediate the process of integrating personal life philosophies. This process is of special importance among older adults, given the existential vulnerabilities that aging conveys. That is, existential pathways are not always integrated into personal life philosophies, yet aging as a developmental process has the potential for such integration. This mediation of attitudes, and the development of attitudes towards existential pathways themselves, requires further theorizing. We are suggesting that this process of existential meaning-making gains special importance as we age, and that health and community interventions could see them as an opportunity to prevent isolation, depression, and anxiety among older adults, as much as an opportunity to promote mental health and wellbeing. In

addition, the feeling that others turn towards us in reciprocal ways is not always granted. Older adults want to also learn from younger generations, and community interventions could promote further spaces to boost such inter-generational dialogues. This is so given that our poetic representations also articulated the vulnerability that is part of our human condition, and how our existential vulnerabilities can serve as the ground in which virtues blossom. At the same time, these virtues blossom on the threshold of the general and the particular; both within the nuances of Norwegian culture and within what is common to us all, as humankind. Thus, this article is built on the theoretical threshold between the individual and cultural internalization and expression of virtues.

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ⁱ We received approval for this project from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) in July 2018. Our study participants signed a consent form prior to the interviews.

ⁱⁱ We analyzed 89 A4 pages (36,859 words) of transcriptions from 14 in-depth interviews with Norwegian older adults. Our participants came from the middle class (most of them with academic backgrounds), all having had formal education. Most of the questions of our semi-structured interviews were based on the protocol of interview of The Legacy Project at University of Cornell (Pillemer, 2015). In a nutshell, this protocol looks at life lessons and experiences that older adults have had during their lives; wisdom which can inspire others. Given the fact that our interview-protocol explicitly addresses the theme of values, and that we aim at advancing the theoretical development of virtues in cultural psychology, this oriented our process of coding the interviews and the subsequent organization of the poems.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sorgenfri is an independent magazine in Norway. This magazine has a special focus in supporting people who have challenges with the abuse of psychoactive substances, and some of those people sell the magazine in the streets of Trondheim, so it is also known as a “street magazine.”