

# Reminiscence, Life Review, and Autobiography: Emergence of a New Era

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A new era is developing in which more people are telling, writing, and sharing their life stories. Our rapidly changing world and the impact that has on all people are among the factors influencing this trend. The information age is providing the technology that makes it easier to prepare and organize reminiscences about our lives. Low printing costs have made it relatively inexpensive to have memoirs of life stories printed for sharing with family members, friends, and members of institutions and groups. The retirement years are expanding, people are living longer and have time to reflect upon their histories and write their life stories. There is also a growing cultural and historical interest in the histories of individuals living in different places and times and being exposed to unusual conditions of wars and environmental crises. The personal histories of life experiences are coming to be of greater interest in history. This has been accompanied by a growth in academic studies and research on the effects and personal changes brought about by organizing and sharing life stories. The growth in neuroscience research will reveal the patterns of memories stored in the brain and the related cognitive and emotional impact of those memories. A new era in reminiscence, life review and autobiography is emerging.

*Key Terms:* Guided Autobiography; Reminiscence; Life Review; Changing Trends

## Part I. Trends in a Changing World

Today there is a growing public interest in autobiography, life review, and reminiscence or, simply put, the writing and sharing of life stories. A definitive answer to why this is occurring is beyond the scope of this article, but it would appear to be influenced by the increasingly *impersonal* context of our lives in the 21st century. Societies are more efficient in the information technology age but much less personal than when customers were friends with the owners of the small shops they visited. Currently one may enter a large supermarket, complete their purchases, and check out without ever speaking or interacting with a single person. Many people today live in gated communities and do their shopping online. The Internet seems to give us the world in our smart phone or laptop computer. What used to seem so distant now comes to life with the tap of a finger. We can view the news, weather, or political and cultural happenings in any part of our world in a matter of seconds

on our computer devices. What we don't know can be "googled" for a wealth of sites to answer our every question. FaceBook gives instant access into friends' daily, sometimes hourly, lives. However, this does not replace the "personal" relationships that we all need to live our lives fully and completely. Humans are social creatures and we need one another to become the best we can be. How many FaceBook contacts are real friends? Confidants? Someone you could turn to at any time for help and support? Probably not many. A study in South Korea showed that young Koreans socialized more often with 'invisible' friends on the Internet, or people they had never met, than with people in real life (Woo-Young, 2011). This has led to a redefinition of what a friend is, "In the past a friend meant someone you share things with, but young Koreans these days consider as friends anyone who can satisfy a particular need, so they can have dozens of friends" said Chungnam National University psychologist, Chun Woo-Young. However, this has come at a cost. The rise in the number of friends has diminished the sense of affinity or closeness. This underscores the need for ways to increase our connections through shared life stories to effectively counteract this feeling of impersonalization.

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Another trend that may contribute to the increased interest in writing life stories is the ambiguities of rapid life transitions in societies that have moved from

agricultural to industrial to information technology-based economies in the span of little more than 125 years. Today people are living longer and more actively than previous generations yet without the role models from parents and grandparents to guide the way. Today we have many years in active retirement and the time to write our life stories and participate in groups to share them and create printed copies. There is a growing personal interest in sharing and leaving behind our life stories with family members, friends, and institutions. Changes in our culture and increased longevity have contributed to the encouragement of individuals to organize and share their life stories.

The emerging reminiscence and life review era has led to the growth of academic and research interest in the study and analysis of information from individuals growing up in different places and times and exposed to different historical events. Much of early history has been written through the eyes of kings or high-ranking military and political figures. This history can be characterized as “top down” in contrast to the experiences of persons who lived through the historical events that gives rise to “bottom up” history. “Bottom up” history details the experiences of individuals living through events such as wars, economic depressions, geographic expansion, political changes and many other effects. An example of our lack of “bottom up” history relates to the Black soldiers who fought for Great Britain in the Revolutionary War. They were promised land, but Britain lost the war. We know little about the outcome of the Blacks who survived the war but did not receive free land. This history is lost because these soldiers were illiterate. Some of the details may be revealed when survivors or descendants of those who experienced such occurrences write and share the stories.

The many changes that occur in societies because of natural events, wars, economic depressions, etc., result in many influences on individuals as they grow up and grow old. The reminiscences and life stories of persons experiencing these events aid our understanding of human development. A major influence on individuals is their experiences when immigrating to another country. Why they left their country of origin and what they faced in their new country is part of their life history. The range of such experience is illustrated in the story of the emigration of a Chinese woman, Anchee Min, to America. She grew up in China during the Mao communist regime and left for America. She was given six months to learn English and lived under conditions of fear of deportation and debt (Min, 2013). Understanding how a woman matured under unimaginable immigration stresses prompts an interest in encouraging more reminiscences of immigrants to America and other countries.

Memoirs of growing up in the Great Depression and living through WWII tell us much about the wide range of personal experiences and give us insight into the variety of

impacts on the lives of individuals. A collection of such memoirs was gathered in a retirement community in California and put into a book (Tales of Courage, 2012). During the Great Depression families were short of money. Fathers lost their jobs and some begged on streets. Some men hitchhiked or got on board freight trains to cross the country looking for paid work. Families lost their homes and some moved into family homes of other members in different parts of the country. Families living in farm areas often did better than city dwellers since they could grow food, raise animals, and trade with neighbors. Some women began working to help their families survive. Their children would often find odd jobs delivering things grown in the garden. World War II had a big impact internationally but also on the everyday lives of people living at home. These stories provide the reader with a personal, bottom up glimpse into the history of WWII and the Depression.

Today the Information Technology Age provides many opportunities for creating autobiographies using computers and sharing them via the Internet with family and friends. The Internet provides a wealth of information for interested people to use if they wish to write their own life story. There are templates and programs available that organize the contents of one’s life in a chronological fashion. There are many sites that provide opportunities for life story writers to meet online for guidance and help while they write their stories. A random Google search for life story writing revealed the following:

*Scribophile* (<http://www.scribophile.com>)

*“...a respectful online writing group made up of writers who improve each other’s work with thoughtful critiques and by sharing their writing experience.”*

*WritersCafe* (<http://www.writerscafe.org/groups/>)

*“WritersCafe is an online writing community where writers can post their work, get reviews, befriend other writers, and much more.”*

*WriteWords* (<http://www.writewords.org.uk>)

*“Even in these straitened times, there are opportunities everywhere for writers, and WriteWords can help you find them.”*

*Birren Center for Autobiographical Studies*  
(<http://www.guidedautobiography.com>)

*“The Birren Center is dedicated to enriching the lives of adults through writing, sharing, and preserving their life stories and life experiences. The program provides opportunities for education, training, research and dissemination*

*of information to professionals and others engaged in the fields of life review, life story writing, and aging.”*

The Birren Center for Autobiographical Studies not only assists individuals to write their own life stories, but has also trained more than 190 Guided Autobiography (GAB) instructors throughout the world in an online, interactive training program to lead their own GAB groups. This spreads the reach of Guided Autobiography worldwide to assist others to write their life story.

*The Association of Personal Historians*  
(<http://www.personalhistorians.org/>)

APH was created in 1995 to assist people who wanted to record their life stories and needed the assistance of a professional. It has now grown to an international organization with more than 650 members. They are dedicated to helping others tell their life story. Members of APH help other people create personal histories, including memoirs, video tributes, autobiographies, biographies, family histories, heritage cookbooks, community histories, corporate and organizational histories, legacy letters, and ethical wills.

*International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review* (<http://www.reminiscenceandlifereview.org/>)

John Kunz was the founding director for the IIRLR in 1995. He was inspired and motivated by Robert Butler, who introduced the concept of life review in 1963, and from his own work in the field of reminiscence. The IIRLR has been a leader in developing the emerging field of reminiscence and life review. The mission statement is: “To further define and develop the interdisciplinary field of reminiscence and life review through discussion and collaboration in practice, research, education, volunteer and individual applications across the lifespan.” This organizational movement encourages the eliciting and recording of life stories and expands the scholarship, as well as the practical applications, of personal life stories.

Once life stories are written, there are numerous ways to get the work published. Local printers and office supply stores offer copying and comb binding services. There are also ‘Print on Demand’ publishers who will print copies as requested. A wealth of printing and publishing resources is available online for the layperson as well as the professional to take advantage when an autobiography is ready to be printed. A few of the most popular online bookmaking services include:

*Lulu.com* (<http://www.lulu.com>)

*“Lulu.com brings the world of online book publishing and book printing to you. Looking to self-publish? Lulu's print on demand (POD)*

*solutions makes publishing your own book quick and easy.”*

*Blurb.com* (<http://www.blurb.com>)

*“With Blurb, you'll find all the tools you need to make your own photo book, whether you're making a personalized wedding album, cookbook, baby book, travel photo book, or fundraising book.”*

*UBuildABook* (<http://www.ubuildabook.com>)

*“UBuildABook is a creative book publishing platform. If you have the idea, we can turn your idea into a full color, high quality book that you will cherish for years to come! We offer a great solution for self-publishing and printing on demand.”*

## Part II. The Changing Person

The emerging reminiscence era is expected to have many impacts that range from individual benefits to influencing science and institutions. There is a wide range of individuals who benefit from writing and sharing life stories. Participation in a group such as Guided Autobiography (GAB), that is built on the small group process, leads to memory priming, which stimulates details of life experiences that may have been forgotten or overlooked. Sharing and listening to the life stories of others leads to personal connections and bonding among participants, such that groups often want to continue to meet. Volunteering or undertaking new educational activity can also follow after a GAB class. Participants' self-esteem is increased and goals that once may have seemed unreachable are then acted upon. GAB participants often report feeling ‘transformed’ after participation in a GAB class. One student summed it up thusly: “It has made a difference in my outlook. I have found solace in looking back and courage to go forward.”

Families benefit by listening to and receiving copies of the life stories of members. Previous generations often did not pass on the details of their immigration or living through social upheavals. The sharing of life stories can strengthen family identity. An article in the New York Times (Feiler, 2013) concluded that the single most important thing anyone can do for their family is to develop a strong family narrative. Marshall Duke and Robin Fivush from Emory University developed the questionnaire, “Do You Know,” to measure how much children know about their families. Questions ranged from, “Do you know where your parents met?” to “Do you know where your grandparents came from?” In their study from 2001 they concluded that children who knew more about their family's history had a stronger sense of control over their lives, increased self-esteem, and believed their

families functioned more successfully. Children who know their family narrative are more emotionally stable and happier. Family stories not only link the generations but also give the youngest members a strong, secure emotional base from which to grow.

We would be remiss not to mention the possibility of negative consequences related to the writing and sharing of personal life stories. When recalling a past event, feelings of sadness, remorse, and even guilt may arise. In Guided Autobiography groups, such responses have never appeared to have a lasting negative effect but instead appear to contribute to the opening of deeper and broader levels of sharing. In our experience leading GAB classes, there seems to be a self-regulatory apparatus at work within each person and participants only write and share memories they feel comfortable sharing. There is no need to “tell it all” if the author feels any discomfort in doing so. Mary O’Brien Tyrrell has thoroughly explored the potential negative consequences of uncovering painful memories in her book, *Become a Memoirist for Elders*, (Tyrrell, 2012). She is a personal historian who works from the ‘outside-in’ to capture the life stories of her clients. After working for more than twenty years helping older adults write their life story, she lists a few of the potential negative consequences: a) old hurts and wounds may surface that result in painful memories as well as the potential for resolution; b) family dynamics play a strong role in life stories both with siblings and children and need to be handled sensitively; c) clients who may have suffered severe trauma during their lifetime need special attention and care since the painful memories may resurface; and d) individuals with a history of clinical mood disorders and psychosis are not candidates for telling their stories in a non-clinical setting. Even though there may be the possibility for negative outcomes when writing and sharing one’s life story, it is our experience that the benefits far outweigh the potential risks for the general population.

Life narratives and autobiographies are often dismissed as “soft information” not particularly relevant to outcomes in real life, as are the biological influences of genetics. How individuals interpret their lives as revealed in their life stories is commonly not accepted as a major influence on the outcomes of lives. However, a contrasting point of view is that the way people interpret their lives influences their behavior and decisions and it can be a major influence on the directions and outcomes of lives. Recently consideration has been given to the influence of cultural innovations on the genome (Fisher & Ridley, 2013). This opens a window on the important effects of personal beliefs upon human genetics. That is, not only are individual beliefs important to the outcome of a life, but the beliefs of a group of people can influence the genetics of that group. “Recognizing the role of culture-driven gene evolutions in the origins of modern humans provides a powerful reminder of how easy it is to confuse cause and effects in science” (Fisher & Ridley, 2013, p. 930). This

leads to the suggestion that reminiscence and the sharing of life stories can have important causal effects on the outcomes of lives and culture. Measurement of the changes in participants in groups that share oral and written autobiographies has its beginnings. It is likely to be a feature of the expanding reminiscing and life review era.

Periods of transition in life such as retirement or chronic disease may lead to tensions that can be shared and alleviated in groups devoted to reminiscence and life review. Because of the bonding that takes place in such groups, participants no longer feel alone. A further step is the creation of the feeling that they are not alone in life. Transition tensions are addressed in individual counseling and psychotherapy, however a next step is often useful. This step includes the participation in a group where one’s personal views of life or life stories are exchanged with others. One of the authors, Birren, spoke to the retiring director of a psychoanalytic center in Los Angeles, CA, Martin Grotjahn in the 1980s and asked the question: “Have you changed your mind about anything as a result of your long practice?” His answer was, “I would add having individuals participate in a group” (Grotjahn, 1987). Groups that involve reminiscing and sharing life stories add priming of forgotten memories and offer alternative perspectives on life.

### Part III. The New Era of Reminiscence, Life Review and Autobiography

Several new steps can be anticipated in the further development of the reminiscence era. One is the growth of neuroscience studies that will reveal the pattern of organization of memories in the brain. Such studies can also reveal relationships between cognitive and emotional aspects of memories. A related step would be to examine the changes in the organization of memories before and after a group life story writing process, such as Guided Autobiography. The views and beliefs individuals have of themselves are also amenable to change in reminiscence groups and a topic for future neuroscience behavioral research.

The selves we tell ourselves we are have an influence on our behavior and will become subjected to neuroscience research of how our self-views are organized in our brains. There are several levels of analysis that can be applied to our views of ourselves. At the top and most abstract level is the study and analysis of the verbal products of reminiscence, life reviews, and autobiographies. At the top level, the concept of narrative identity is relevant. McAdams and McLean have defined narrative identity as “... a person’s internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purposes” (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233). Our narrative identities, the selves we tell ourselves we are, can

be studied for influences of culture, family, gender, and natural events. Future research and studies in this area will likely lead to more insights into the influences of how our views of ourselves lead to improved life patterns.

Further research is also expected to expand on the biological or bottom-up study of how our self-views are organized. Early brain measurements, such as the electroencephalogram, were primarily used to detect brain pathology. The development of further methods is also being used in research on the organization of brain activities with mental task performances involving cognition and emotion. Magnetic resonance imaging, MRIs, positron-emission tomography, and PET scans are expected to be increasingly used to visualize and document the changes that occur in the brain as a result of reminiscence, life reviews and participation in autobiography groups. The further development of top-down behavioral research and bottom-up biological research of the organization of our life views can be expected to provide further pathways that will lead to the optimization of emotional and cognitive patterns of lives.

Institutions may encourage the collecting of reminiscences and stories about the development of their organization by recruiting past members to recall, write, and share their memories of the earlier times of the start-up, emergence and changes in the groups they are identified with. What the early days were like during the founding of a college, a church, a community, or societies can be viewed in the reminiscences of the pioneers. Such institutional histories will add much to our understanding of the influences and details of the past and perhaps contribute to our understanding of pathways to the emergence of new steps in societal progress.

There are current changes in society that increase the importance of the emerging reminiscence era. One of these is the shift in public health from curative care to preventive care. Health care in the past largely addressed the needs of the presenting health problems. Attempting to prevent health problems from occurring involves broad areas of concern such as social and cultural contexts and the role of the brain as contributing to health. The broadening view of health and conditions affecting it are thoroughly discussed in the book, *Health, Illness and Optimal Aging* by Carolyn Aldwin and Diane Gilmer (2013). As the context broadens to recognize contributing factors to health and optimal life styles, the nervous system will receive more attention as the mediator of many health correlations. How people interpret their lives influences their habits and choices of behavior and thus influences health outcomes. Modifying personal views of life often accompanies reminiscence and life story writing, particularly in groups such as Guided Autobiography (GAB) where the participants hear about the experiences of others. This primes old memories and new thoughts. GAB is a group process that can open new and useful interpretations of lives (Birren & Deutchman,

1991; Birren & Cochran, 2001). Other individual benefits include: increased self-acceptance, decreased anxiety/tension, increased positive view of others, increased meaning and purpose in life, and connectedness with others.

One of the major issues facing the social and behavioral sciences is the understanding of the differences in life views of men and women. Women are more willing than men to participate in reminiscence and autobiography groups. One thought is that talking about one's life is regarded as a feminine and not a male interest. Encouraging men and women to participate in autobiography groups may provide information that will stimulate further knowledge that will improve relationships between the genders. An important topic of research interest is the analysis of the life stories of men and women. Culture and other changes have dramatically affected lives. Women received the right to vote less than a hundred years ago in 1920 and are more active in work life and professional careers today than ever before. How men and women describe their lives and interpret them is a topic that will receive more attention as more life story information becomes available. Presumably there are cultural and biological factors that influence the ways men and women grow up and grow old. The emergence of the reminiscence era and individual life stories will add to our knowledge about human development and perhaps lead to clues about pathways to more productive lives and the growth of wisdom.

## Summary

We are living in a new, exciting era that holds promise for the expansion of the field of reminiscence, life review, and autobiography. Developed countries are entering this emerging era with an increase in the writing, sharing, and printing of life stories. There are many contributing factors, but the underlying constant is "change." As a person, society, or even our world, we are not a fixed point but are ever evolving and changing. We cannot escape our highly developed information technology age, with its ever more sophisticated devices, and go back to the "good old days" when families sat on the front porch and swapped stories. Neither should we ignore the possibilities that new scientific advances in neuroscience have given us. For instance, we now have the capacity to study the brain and learn where memories are stored so that they can be manipulated to improve mental health. We need to embrace the changes that are happening all around us and use them to strengthen and maintain our human connections with one another to overcome the effects of this "impersonal age."

The information age has made it possible to more easily prepare and exchange personal life stories. Listening to and reading the life stories of others leads to the priming of memories of past experiences and their

interpretation. New group methods have been developed that encourage individuals to tell and share their life stories. Guided Autobiography is an organized group process that brings individuals together to write and tell their life stories about life events and their impact and interpretation.

It is expected that the growth of neuroscience research in the next generation will reveal in greater detail the reorganization of memories and their association with emotional and other mental processes in the interpretations of lives and related life decision processes. Technology should be embraced, but not used to replace our connections with one another. The new reminiscence era we find ourselves in bares testimony to the importance of using our shared life stories to maintain our shared sense of values, life, and goals for the future.

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