

Excerpt from Doctoral Dissertation
*Grandparent Tales: Exploring the Experiences of Older Adults
in Autobiographical Writing Groups*
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Defining Various Forms of Storytelling

There has been some confusion on the terminology in much of the literature regarding the various forms of storytelling, which can include reminiscence, life review, journaling, autobiography/memoir writing and guided autobiography, among others. Some researchers use any number of these terms interchangeably or fail to clearly define the terms. Following is an attempt to provide the commonly accepted definitions of these terms, however, not all researchers may agree on these definitions.

Storytelling Defined

In the broadest of perspectives, storytelling is the telling of a narrative designed to interest, amuse or instruct the hearer or reader (Hoffman, 2004). Within this study, storytelling refers to the narrating of events in the life of a person or persons and the specific happenings within a family, along with feelings and perceptions of personal experiences, as well as an account of historic events through which the person or family has lived.

Reminiscence Defined

Reminiscence is the act or process of recalling past experiences, events or mental impressions. It most often refers to recollections or awakening memories that are retained, revived and retold verbally, or in writing, in the form of stories or memoirs (Merriam, 1993).

Life Review Defined

Life review goes beyond reminiscence and is generally related to the later stages of life. Older adults may sift through these memories to understand them in new ways and make meaning of their lives. When someone is there to hear these life memories, it may help elders to resolve old conflicts, accept losses or celebrate accomplishments. In this way life review may differ from reminiscence in that there is a powerful psycho-emotional process going on as individuals review their lives (Merriam, 1993).

Journaling Defined

Journaling is the act of writing down one's thoughts, feelings, memories or contemplations. Often a journal is a diary containing one's private reflections not intended for viewing by others. Sometimes a journal can be a day by day account of a trip, a scientific endeavor or one's work life meant to be shared with associates or transcribed by a secretary. One's journal can contain only written material or could include drawings and doodles as well. People who put together scrapbooks of photos, cards, letters, ticket stubs and other personal memorabilia, often add journaling to the pages to document the details of meaningful events, people and places (Carlton-LaNey, 2003).

Autobiography/Memoir Writing and Guided Autobiography Defined

Autobiographical or memoir writing refers to any first-hand, personal stories people write down about their own lives and experiences (Wikipedia, 2006). Merriam (1995) offered what she called the "classical definition of an autobiography" as "the recounting of an entire life, one's life, a life, the summing up" (p. 2). Birren (1987) took these concepts a step further and designed

a ten-week guided autobiography course for older adults in which reminiscence, life review and self-reflective essays are utilized primarily for “enriching the lives of adults through writing, sharing and preserving their life stories and experiences” (Birren & Cochran, 2001).

Distinction Between Reminiscence and Life Review

Researchers have attempted to make a distinction among the collection of terms describing the relating of personal thoughts and stories. Thornton and Brotchie, (1987) observed that some of those working with the elderly viewed reminiscence as a possible sign of mental degeneration. However, noted psychiatrist and geriatrician Robert Butler (1963) believed that reminiscence is a normative, universal phenomenon that is important for the individual’s growth and development in late life. Although Butler differentiated between reminiscence, simply recalling, thinking and/or talking about past experiences, and life review, a more evaluative, complete survey and reintegration of one’s life experiences, Merriam (1993) found that these terms are often used interchangeably by researchers. Similar terms are used as well, such as retrospective life-span analysis (Job, 1983), personal narrative (Cohler, 1983 & 1996), life history (Myerhoff, 1980) and oral history (Ryant, 1981). Further, said Merriam, there is confusion as to how reminiscence can be distinguished from memory, daydreaming, nostalgia, recollection or even therapy.

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