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Research on Guided Autobiography: A Review of Content, Process, and Outcome

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Guided Autobiography (GAB) is a structured, thematic, group approach to life review. Since its development by James Birren, it has been widely used and has generated empirical research. The focus of our article is on this research investigating 1) the content of GAB (defined in terms of the assigned themes); 2) the GAB process (as explicitly designed and how it implicitly manifests in the experience of learning); and 3) outcomes of GAB (both tangible, e.g., a written life review document, and subjective, such as increases in mastery and decreases in depression). The existing research supports the premises of GAB and suggestions for subsequent research are offered.

James Birren developed Guided Autobiography (GAB) over a number of years beginning with a Hawaiian seminar in the mid 1970's, along with a number of colleagues, many of whom are included in this compilation. GAB—a structured, thematic, group approach to life review—has an intuitive appeal, earning the praise of legions of older adults who have engaged in this introspective and generative effort. There is also a modest body of empirical literature documenting the process undertaken by participating individuals as well as the products of such participation. This brief contribution offers a selective and partial review of this literature, framed in terms of content, process, and outcome to describe the essence and domains of research undertaken, and it suggests avenues for further empirical investigation. Even as the area of life review has been an appealing and profitable area of research and practice in general, this review restricts its focus to GAB.

GAB: Content

GAB typically includes adults of all ages, disproportionately older adults, who have registered for a course or workshop, which meets for ten or more sessions (and mostly over the course of ten or more weeks). In academic settings, each meeting is often divided into two sections: a didactic *first* session, during which the concept and theory of life review and the origins of GAB are

discussed, as well as the introduction of specific themes to guide the *second* experiential session, wherein individuals from the class are further divided into small groups of approximately 4-6 persons and a facilitator, to engage in the activity of the structured life review. In more applied settings, the didactic session is frequently omitted. The activity of the group involves participants preparing two-page written pages of texts in advance of the week's session on the assigned themes and then reading these texts, or parts of these texts, to the group. The themes were derived by James Birren and colleagues from a sweeping review of the literature of both theory and research, as well as many years of experience (and are listed below). Through what has been described as the developmental exchange (Birren & Deutchman, 1991), participants choose what and how much to share and often extemporaneously draw associations between themes; they identify overarching themes—for themselves and other group participants and/or draw parallels between their stories and those of others. The groups typically last two hours per session.

Themes of GAB

The themes of GAB typically comprise the following (de Vries, Birren & Deutchman, 1990, Birren & Deutchman, 1991): the major branching points in life; your family; your major life works or career; the role of money in your life; your health and body image; your sexual identity; experiences with death and ideas about death; your spiritual life and values, and your aspirations and life goals. Other themes have been added according to research or applied interests, e.g., the role of music, art, or literature in your life; your experiences with stress. Each theme is prefaced with a brief description and participants are provided a series of questions to guide their thinking and writing about the theme. Birren has referred to these as

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sensitizing questions, which serve to prime memories, “prime the memory pump,” as Betty Birren would say, and stimulate reflection and recognition (Birren & Birren, 1996).

de Vries, Bluck, & Birren (1996) examined the ways in which participants explored death and dying in the GAB theme. With a sample of 27 women and 27 men, drawn in equal numbers from three age groups of GAB participants (ages 20-39, 40-59, 60 and older), the authors coded the representations of both death and dying, as applied to the self, another, or in the abstract, in the written thematic essays for the theme. They also coded the essays for integrative complexity (representing the structure of thought as revealed in the connected narrative materials) and the levels of involvement, impact, and acceptance with which participants discuss death and dying. Death (as an event) was more frequently referenced and with greater complexity than was dying (as a process). Even as this was the case across age and gender groups, middle-aged persons more frequently discussed death and less frequently discussed dying than either of the other two age groups; no gender differences were observed. The death and dying of another was more frequently discussed than was the death and dying of the self or in the abstract. Overwhelmingly, high personal involvement and impact characterized these discussions. These data reveal the complexity, in multiple forms, with which participants approach and are engaged with these themes and perhaps, by extension, the others—highlighting some evocative age differences.

Ruth, Birren, & Polkinghorne (1996) analyzed data across themes with a sample of 10 men and 10 women. They were particularly interested in the central life goals and dominant activities (e.g., a type of meta-theme) around which the projects of life were formed in the narrative compilations. Using the method of constant comparison, five types of life projects were identified and described as: achieving, being social, loving, family life, and struggling. Life projects involving family, communities and career were more common in the narratives of women; for men, the life projects took a more restricted focus on personal achievement and career development in a social context. Other differences noted included gender, following cohort expectations of traditional gender role scripts and social economic status (SES), where life struggles were more common among those of lower SES, and the achievements and social aspects of life were more common among those of higher SES. These analyses facilitate a more holistic view of the GAB essays—here described as life projects—and further suggest how the experience of GAB may differ by age, gender, and other individual differences.

Summary

Research into the content of GAB has been modest and focused on the themes, both individually and collectively. The guiding themes were established by a review of literature; at least one of the themes has been

shown to be associated with complex, creative thinking. Profitable avenues for future research suggested by this literature may include: 1) an exploration of the ways in which men and women of different ages engage with the themes around which GAB is structured and 2) identifying the salience of particular themes and meta-themes in the life stories. Such research has the potential to also enrich the growing and more general literature on life review and reminiscence, focusing on what and how memories are included in personal narratives.

GAB: Process

James Birren believed that guided thinking about, writing, and sharing one’s life story provides the opportunity to discover, clarify, and deepen the meaning of a lifetime of experiences (Birren & Svensson, 2009). Particularly in the later years, a person needs to believe that his or her life has mattered, that it has had a purpose or an impact on the world. Guided autobiography enhances these feelings, promotes successful adaptation to old age, and assists positive choices by persons at a crossroad in life. A grasp of the fabric of one’s life can make a significant contribution to well-being in later life. When it results in a written form, it can also create an important legacy for families (Birren & Deutchman, 1991, p.1).

In particular, Birren felt that the structured and group nature of the exercise was beneficial. The structured nature derives from the facilitated process and from the themes representing the universality and uniqueness of life to “evoke thinking about the strong threads that bind together the fabrics of lives” (Birren & Svensson, 2009, p. 4). The group nature of the exercise facilitates recall, ensures that one is “heard” or witnessed in the telling of a story, and fosters camaraderie and support. These views expressed by Birren and others essentially focus on enhancing self-aspects, and such issues have been the subject of some research; other research has focused on the method itself and how individuals appraise their experiences, as described below. In general, the modest research could be described as adopting an explicit and more implicit focus on process.

The Explicit Group Process and the GAB

Vota and de Vries (2001) examined the process of GAB with a focus on its virtual implementation, rather than face-to-face, and with many implications for how individual differences may mediate the process and enlistment. Eight participants were selected from a pool of 23 interested candidates; of the initial 8, two left the experience early on citing irreconcilable differences stemming from a chat room dispute and another left after the third week. The final five participants were all Caucasian women averaging 69.5 years of age. Vota and de Vries (2001) describe their process of developing and offering a GAB experience online, highlighting some of the challenges and successes. For example, participants

expressed a strong desire to forego the traditional weekly theme format, “demanding the ‘right’ to respond at will” to any of the themes (Vota & de Vries, 2001, p. 341). The change initiated by this “demand” resulted in greater satisfaction with the process by the online group, marked by an increase in both the frequency and intensity of online posting, the virtual equivalent of essay sharing and discussion contributions. Interestingly, these ‘posts’ were shorter than those produced in the face-to-face administration of GAB and often described as “bite-speak” by the authors: that is, briefer, less likely presented in complete sentences, and with greater jargon. It is difficult to determine if such changes were attributable to the more fluid approach adopted in the face of protest or the increased comfort level with the approach itself (e.g., after the passage of several weeks), but the overall cohesion of the group improved. Birren and Deutchman (1991, p. 44) described this cohesion as the “healing power of the group” facilitated by “developmental exchange” of group members.

The demographics of these participants, however, differed from more traditional venues; Vota and de Vries had the impression that these participants were both relatively more open to new experiences and freer to comment on them than those in traditional groups. It remains an open question the extent to which such challenges to the typical format of GAB are unique to these participants—or part of the more general experience.

The Implicit Process (of Change) and GAB

Thornton has been interested in GAB as a learning experience and has explored this in a variety of ways. For example, Thornton and Collins (2010) sought to understand the learning strategies both reflected in and nurtured by GAB. They asked 114 participants from six GAB workshops two questions in the penultimate and final meetings of the groups: respectively, “What am I learning in this guided autobiography workshop?” and “Where to go from here?” The participants were 88 women and 26 men ranging in age from 46 to 92 years with an average age of 62—typical of GAB groups. The participants’ learning scripts in response to the first question were transcribed and content analyzed. There were 109 scripts that had sufficient data for coding, yielding 940 direct answers and averaging approximately 8.5 learning comments per participant. These scripts were further analyzed, and three superordinate learning constructs emerged: explanatory comments, learning reports, and learning topics. Explanatory comments were relatively rare, comprising less than two percent of all responses and essentially formed excuses for non-completion of GAB assignments. Learning reports were the most common and reflected two axes of learning: a process/outcome axis and an expanding/consolidating axis. The former axis ranged from comments on tangible results (e.g., an interpretation, a new understanding, a framework) to comments on the ongoing efforts in reaching these results (e.g., developing

a new interpretation/understanding). The latter axis ranged from an appraisal of efforts that have helped “pull together” or “establish” a coherent life story to more active, open-ended efforts—poles perhaps best described as integrative, in the case of consolidating, to differentiating, in the case of expanding. Finally, learning reports concerned the content more than the process and coding revealed 19 categories distributed over three broad subjects: learning about the self (8 categories), learning about others (6 categories), and learning about GAB and life review (6 categories). Neither age nor gender introduced any significant differences into these patterns. These efforts highlight the active intellectual experience of GAB for participants, defined in terms of both their approach and response to the materials, discussions, and group interactions.

Several authors have proffered that the mechanism by which the method of GAB effects change is through the self. Reker, Birren, & Svensson (2014), for example, cite a pilot study by Schroots and van Dongen (1995) on the actual and ideal selves—in the past, present, and future—of five female participants before and after participating in GAB. Schroots and van Dongen report greater integration of the actual and ideal selves across time periods, at post-test than at pre-test. They identified greater self-continuity, and that GAB encourages “reflection on the history of one’s self, with the result that experiences and feelings of the past are activated and connected with the individual’s present” (p. 120).

Focusing particularly on changes in the self through GAB, Reker, et al (2014) conducted a study with 21 participants, 10 of whom were 19 to 50 years, and 11 of whom were 51 to 86 years. Seventeen were female and four were male. They were particularly interested in the reconstruction process of the self-system that take place during and as a consequence of GAB and how these structural changes relate to appraisals of life and the ways in which the self is perceived by others. Furthermore, they were interested in exploring age group differences in this self-aspect reconstruction. This reconstruction was operationalized as the extent to which three self-aspects—the actual self, the ideal self, and the social image of the self—were congruent (i.e., the distance measured between pairs of these self-aspects), integrated (i.e., similarity or matching in ratings across self-aspect adjectives), and consistent (i.e., pre-test/post-test similarity in overall ratings of self-aspects) over the course of GAB participation. Analyses revealed increased congruence in the actual vs. ideal self, as well as the actual vs. the social-image self, greater integration for the actual self, and stability for the self-aspects over time—with some greater changes for the older, as compared with the younger, participants.

In pilot research on the therapeutic effects of GAB participation, Malde (1988) reported inconclusive results, suggesting that GAB could “either increase feelings of self-worth and acceptance or lead to a resurgence of guilt and feelings of inadequacy” (p. 290). In a follow-up larger study with 39 individuals, 36 of whom were women, with

an average age of 70, equally divided into three groups (traditional GAB, modified GAB, waitlist control), no group differences were found on the three dependent measures of self-concept, time competence, and purpose in life (reported in Malde, 1988). Sample size, measure sensitivity, and the amenability to change were considered as possible interpretations for this lack of group differences. In a survey follow up with a subset of these participants, data suggested that changes in the sense of self may be more apparent over time as participants integrate the knowledge and experiences taken from participation in GAB (Malde, 1988).

Summary

The processes of GAB can be seen as both explicit, focusing on how participants engage in the experience, and implicit, focusing on the mechanisms of change implied or evidenced by engagement in the experience. These processes are especially fertile grounds for subsequent research, particularly given the prominent role of the developmental exchange: how do the shared recollections of group members stimulate personal recall and evaluation? How does an individual decide what to share and when to share it or, perhaps, what not to share? The order of the themes makes intuitive sense, although Vota and de Vries (2001) (non-traditional implementation of GAB) challenged the systematic introduction of topics. The underlying processes of such engagement are similarly of interest: perhaps parallel to the development of a cohesive GAB group, what is the intra-individual process of participation? How might this vary by age, gender or other individual difference variables? These questions lead naturally into consideration of the outcome of participation, as reported below.

GAB: Outcome

James Birren has described GAB as therapeutic—without being therapy. The potential of GAB participation for personal growth is neatly previewed by the influential role of the self-system in the GAB process. Birren and Svensson (2009) and Thornton & Collins (2010) have articulated some of the outcomes anticipated, and observed, from GAB participation. Tangibly and importantly, participants complete the course with a written life review document—something that has drawn people to participate from the outset (Vota & de Vries, 2001). Birren and Svensson (2009) and Thornton, Collins, Birren and Svensson (2011) have also proposed more subjective benefits of participation, including an appreciation of one's life as it has been lived, insight into their own experiences and those of others, and increases in self-confidence and self-worth. Vota and de Vries (2001) reported that their participants described their ultimate experience in GAB to be overwhelmingly positive and sought to continue the process—these are outcomes often reported (Thornton & Collins, 2010).

The study by Thornton et al (2011) describes the processes of the developmental exchange shaped by group activities in GAB and their relationship to learning in later life. The developmental exchange is a central feature of social development, interpersonal dynamics, situated learning, and personal transformation. It is the enabling process in GAB settings that promotes the achievement of personal goals and group accomplishments. Nevertheless, these exchanges are embedded in the GAB structures of time, events, participants, themes, perspectives, medium, and quest for relevance. Ongoing research studies are gradually clarifying the actual, ideal, and social image of self as well as the processes, outcomes and specific learning topics achieved during the GAB experience as they unfold through the listening, participating, and diversifying structures of the developmental exchange.

As one of the first studies to examine the outcomes of participation in GAB, Reedy and Birren (1980) (as reported in Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Birren & Svensson, 2009) described their pilot study of 45 participants and compared their pretest scores with posttest scores on a number of psychosocial variables. They found increases in self-acceptance, energy/vigor, connectedness, and positive views of others (who were also seen as increasingly similar to the self), as well as decreases in anxiety and tension. Although not formally GAB, Bohlmeijer, Valenkamp, Westerhof, Smit, & Cuijpers (2005) engaged a single group, pre-posttest design with 79 older participants (70% of whom were women, with an average age of 66 years) who completed 12 group sessions, each of which had an assigned theme and a structure comprising reminiscence, dialogue, and creative expression. They found, similar in many respects to the pilot work of Reedy and Birren (1980), significant decreases in depression and increases in mastery. These findings align with a growing literature on the benefits of life review in general, as suggested by Butler (1963) many years ago in his introduction of this field.

Brown-Shaw, Westwood, and de Vries (1999) have commented more explicitly on this therapeutic potential, lauding the possible growth as a consequence of involvement but realizing its limitations. They note that in the reviewing and sharing of one's life, critical events may be identified, but risk remaining unresolved—with potential significant personal consequences. Many events may lose their potency over time, or resolve naturally; moreover, not all critical events lend themselves to enactment. They propose that GAB may serve a type of diagnostic function, highlighting those aspects of the self in need of change (including repair) and “may prepare individuals to take these issues to another level of understanding” (p. 112). Brown-Shaw et al. (1999) and Kuhl & Westwood (2001) describe a creative and innovative therapy adjunct to GAB—Group-Based Enactment—for those who have identified unresolved issues through their participation in the groups. They provide several evocative case studies.

The enactment takes place in a cohesive and supportive group typical of the GAB small groups under

the direction of a skilled therapist. The “warm-up phase” helps construct the scene and the script, drawing directly from GAB texts and cross-cutting themes. The “action phase” sets this script in motion. The participant becomes the protagonist in this enactment and the other group members are invited to participate in supporting roles, all directed by the therapist. The story is enacted as per the original script. It is paused in places for further discussion and clarification and the story/event is ultimately resolved, often through acting out what might have been—extending the original script. Participants, including those supporting actors, often take away new interpretations and feelings from these enactments—integrating the previously unresolved event into a new frame of reference. This approach moves the natural and therapeutic aspects of GAB into an active therapy intervention.

Summary

There has been significant interest in the outcomes of engagement in a life review experience beginning with Butler’s (1963) early proposals. These outcomes are both tangible (such as the written life review document) and more subjective (such as the emotional consequences of considerations of life). Research using GAB, or comparable versions, has been modest and has yielded positive outcomes, although more systematic research is needed; for example, going beyond single samples and follow-up research beyond the post-test. A more focused effort on particular content and its relationship to outcomes would also be a welcomed and sophisticated research strategy, elaborating on the approach adopted by group enactment research—in both therapeutic and educational contexts.

Conclusion

The brief review above offers both empirical support for GAB and suggestions for future research in three domains: content, structure, and outcome. The content, as expressed by the preselected themes (themselves established theoretically and by a review of research), has received some inherent backing. That is, content analyses on the theme of death and dying reveal a depth of contemplation—a profitable approach to reflection on one’s life. At the same time, the extent to which this is representative of the approach taken to other themes remains to be explored. Similarly, does the approach to themes vary either by theme or experience? Are later themes addressed in ways that differ from earlier themes? This is particularly germane to the understanding of the developmental exchange. The themes represent fertile grounds for reviewing one’s life—particularly with respect to age and gender and perhaps other individual difference variables. The explicit structure of the process makes intuitive sense, even as challenges to this linear progress have been offered by at least the online participants. General support for this thematic progress through the life

story has yet to be established. Similarly, the other elements of the unique structure of GAB merit explicit testing: Do the priming questions enlarge thought and consideration of issues? Does preparing the text encourage reflection? What role does the developmental exchange play in issue consideration and/or group cohesion? The implicit structure has been an especially fruitful area for research, highlighting the self and illuminating the process of learning. The particular dimensions of this experience merit further attention. The outcomes of this activity underscore its psychosocial focus and, further, set the stage for deeper consideration of particularly troublesome events, issues, and possible personal transformation. This is perhaps the most frequent area of research in the field of life review—the consequences of engaging in a life review. How does GAB compare with other forms of life review and reminiscence in this context? It would seem that the systematic nature of GAB renders it especially well-suited for further research; the sampling of studies already undertaken provide a solid beginning.

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