

Introduction to the Special Section: Reminiscence through a Cultural Lens

Reminiscence through a Cultural Lens

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Remembering our personal past is a fundamental human process, one which has profound implications for optimizing mental health and mastering daily life. As a species, we share common biological substrates for memory retrieval (e.g., neurotransmitters such as acetylcholine and brain regions such as the hippocampus), suggesting that reminiscence is a universal human ability. Given its essential nature, one might conclude that there would be very little variation in reminiscence processes and outcomes.

Yet the meaning and the value attributed to the various ways of reminiscing are powerfully influenced by culture. The contents and functions of personal memories are shaped by differences in physical environments, self-views, concerns for behavioral and emotional regulation, socialization and language, all variables dependent on culture (Ross and Wang, 2011).

Since reminiscence is a complex process with many possible antecedents and outcomes (Webster, Bohlmeijer, & Westerhof, 2010) individual differences and diverse cultural contexts might influence the expression of reminiscence types, styles, and uses (Alea & Wang, 2015). To take one example, at a broad level, cultural differences in individualism versus collectivism may moderate certain outcomes. For instance, Schroder, Kartner, Keller, and Chaudhary (2012) found that children participated in joint reminiscence activities in order to either express themselves (autonomy-oriented German sample) or to comply with mothers' expectations (relatedness-oriented Indian sample). The salience of oral tradition in some cultures may also be a factor influencing the importance attributed to the social functions of reminiscence. Indeed, Nile and Van Bergen (2015) found that Indigenous Australians, ostensibly having a stronger oral history tradition than Euro-Australians, made greater use of reminiscence for social purposes, including teaching others about cultural values. Differences also emerge at more specific levels. For instance, the processing of

personally painful memories shows differences when culture, religion, and historical events interact (e.g., O'Rourke et al., 2015). Nevertheless, there are also points of cultural convergence when reminiscence is broadly conceived. For instance, there appear to be strong cross-cultural similarities in understanding the different uses and forms of reminiscence. This evidence comes from studies using translated versions of the Reminiscence Functions Scale (e.g., Ros et al., 2016). It seems, therefore, that regardless of culture, the main dimensions of reminiscing (the what) show strong agreement; the why, when, where, and who components, in contrast, may show important differences.

This special section includes three papers which examine just these types of similarities and differences among ethnic/cultural groups in reminiscence practice. The first paper describes preliminary efforts to identify culturally sensitive ways to employ reminiscence with African Americans in the United States. Shellman, Mokel, Walton, and Bailey-Addison document their attempt at developing a culturally sensitive training manual geared for peer counselling with older African Americans. The authors adopt a strategy of collecting information through focus groups with a sample of potential users, paying attention to language and trust issues, learning styles, and social acceptance of the intervention. As such, these authors point to the vital pre-conditions which can either enhance or jeopardize subsequent reminiscence interventions. Like other therapeutic approaches, alliances based upon trust and mutual respect go a long way towards increasing therapeutic efficacy. This study is a model to emulate in research on cultural factors influencing processes and outcomes of reminiscence intervention.

In the second paper, Yancura illustrates the powerful influence of language and culture on processes of reminiscence in Native Hawaiians. She describes a cultural framework for sensitively and effectively conducting reminiscence interventions/research with Native Hawaiian Elders, known as *kupuna*. The paper exposes both the uniqueness of this ethnic group as well as commonalities shared with past research on Western cultures. Interestingly the author underlines how specific features of a culture, in this case the linguistic recognition of the reconstructive nature of memory and a tradition of oral transmission in the Hawaiian culture may act as facilitators for the implementation and the process of reminiscence intervention. She also provides important novel insights

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into specific reminiscence functions when seen through a cultural lens. Specifically, Yancura notes that within the Native Hawaiian worldview, death constitutes a gateway to the spiritual world. Because of this, using reminiscence in aid of intimacy maintenance might be associated with more positive psychosocial outcomes for *kupuna* relative to elderly Caucasian adults. This is a subtle and tantalizing claim.

Finally, in an empirical investigation conducted in Trinidad in the Caribbean, Alea, Ali and Arneaud, take the unprecedented step of examining how basic human values, themselves shaped by culture, relate to the various functions of remembering one's past. More precisely they investigate how values such as self-enhancement (versus self-transcendence) and openness to change (versus conservation) are linked with reminiscences for self, directive, and social functions in a lifespan sample of Trinidadian adults from different ethnic groups (e.g., Afro-Trinidadian, Indo-Trinidadian). This complex research is intriguing in its consideration of how cultural variables may differentially influence the use of personal memories, depending on the phase of life.

As a group, these studies support the relatively recent turn towards cultural investigations in reminiscence research. They provide insights that have perhaps been benignly neglected in earlier research endeavors. For instance, Shellman and her colleagues alert us to the importance of the actual methods, measures, and goals of particular projects. Similarly, Yancura reminds us that worldviews serve as macro-narratives, and these overarching cultural stories shape memorial uses. Developing culturally appropriate and sensitive means of engaging persons from diverse sociocultural contexts can not only

enhance the experience of the participants but might possibly provide more reliable information to researchers, practitioners, and program planners. Finally, Alea, Ali, and Arneaud demonstrate the importance of actually assessing reminiscence processes and outcomes in more than one cultural group within the same study. Although we might assume that various cultural attributes causally influence reminiscence practices, without a direct comparison our assumptions remain intriguing possibilities rather than empirically supported outcomes.

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