

Editorial

The Case for Community-Specific Reminiscence

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I attended my first meeting of the *International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review* (IIRLR) in 2003. I didn't know anyone there, but that didn't last long. Donna Sislo greeted me warmly at the check-in table, and at some point later that day I got the chance to talk for a few minutes with the Executive Director, John Kunz. I don't remember much about what we talked about, except for two things. First, he was sincerely interested in hearing about how my new interest in reminiscence had brought me to the conference, and second, he ended our brief chat with an invitation to "Come meet us at the bar later!" (which I gratefully did). My lasting impression of the conference—confirmed many times since—was that I was in the company of people who enjoyed each other's company—and their stories. Since then, the thing I've valued most about the field of reminiscence and life review is this sense of shared community, even among members whose countries of origin, first languages, academic backgrounds, and interests in memory for personal history couldn't be much more different from each other. In particular, it's this value we place on strong, communal ties that continues to attract me to the field.

Because our field is inclusive of so many different interests in, and uses for, reminiscence, it's natural for us to categorize and organize these activities. One common distinction we've come to draw is that between "research" and "practice." As two brief examples, the IIRLR presents separate awards for research and practice, and our journal has separate categories for articles in these areas. In general, our field's use of the term "research" includes the investigation of basic processes of memory for personal history and the identification of individual differences in those processes. The products of this basic research may well form the basis for future applications which can benefit specific individuals, but the immediate goal of basic research is a deeper understanding of those principles of memory function that apply to most or all people. The goal of "practice," on the other hand, is to employ reminiscence in ways that help people, either through the use of existing techniques or by inventing new ones. To be sure, sound research design is required to evaluate the

effectiveness of these applied techniques, but the goal of practice-oriented research is not to identify general principles that apply to all "people" but to intervene strategically to promote well-being, one "person" at a time. In short, the activity of research describes and explains people—the way they are—while that of practice intervenes and changes people to make their lives better than they were before. The vast majority of published work in reminiscence and life review can, I believe, be categorized as contributing to "research," "practice," or often both. That has certainly been my observation of the papers published in this journal since its inaugural issue in 2013.

The breadth and depth of work in reminiscence and life review is truly remarkable and something of which its members can be justly proud. Yet, at the same time, I can't escape the nagging feeling that *something in this published record is missing*. Specifically, through word of mouth and occasionally by stumbling on websites I hadn't known about before, I keep encountering a type of reminiscence-based program that I rarely see included as part of the reminiscence literature in peer-reviewed academic journals. Some of these programs are self-described as *oral history* programs, while others fit well within Faith Gibson's description of *community-based reminiscence* programs for community development (e.g., Gibson, 2011). However, for reasons I'll outline shortly, the term that I think best captures their characteristics and inherent value is *community-specific reminiscence*.

Typically, the kind of program I'm referring to is one where a relatively small group of project organizers records the experiences and values of people in their community and makes these recordings available to current and future members of that same community, usually through some easily accessible archival method (e.g., audio or video recordings available in a local library or on a website). One example might be a group of students and teachers in a small town which records interviews with older community members and produces professional-quality, edited videos that can be viewed at the local library. Another example might be an online display of maps from different eras of a community that include hyperlinks from important locations on the maps (schools, parks, stores, restaurants, etc.) to audio recordings of memories for events and people associated with those locations.

I like the term "community-specific reminiscence" because for me it captures the idea that participation in

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providing, recording, and accessing reminiscences is solely at the level of the community. It's reminiscence by members of a community for other members of that community. This self-imposed limit on the population of interest highlights the fact that these programs have no expectation or need for persons *outside* the community to play a role in the project—or even to know about it at all. I see nothing “wrong” with this when it's consistent with the goals and mission of the project, but recognizing the insular nature of these programs goes a long way to explaining why examples of community-specific reminiscence are so hard to find in the reminiscence literature. From the point of view of project organizers, for example, why should they go to the trouble of writing an article describing their program when the people the project was designed to benefit—the people *in their community*—already know about it? The answer, naturally enough, is that there *is* no reason; there's little to no incentive or need for local project organizers to reach out to the wider reminiscence community. However, there's a very good reason why we should do more to reach out to them.

Shortly after I became interested in reminiscence and life review, I heard a speaker repeat the often-quoted phrase: “It's hard to dislike someone once you've heard their story.”¹ I don't know if the idea has ever been tested formally through empirical research, but it certainly *feels* true, at least to me. Within the current discussion, this observation forms the basis for why I think our field should pay more attention to community-specific reminiscence. In particular, I would argue that a large part of the value of reminiscence in a community-specific context comes from the opportunity for community members to get to know each other better through shared stories. Hearing the stories of a person whose life is very different from our own puts us in a position to understand and empathize with them; and when this happens we become more likely to shift our frame of reference to see this person as one of “us” rather than one of “them.” Even when community members continue to disagree on particular issues, reminiscence has the power to promote greater levels of tolerance and good will among these same people. In our current polarized political/cultural environment, our field takes on even greater importance through its potential to reduce society-wide levels of “dislike” by helping people to “hear the stories” of those we'd never get to know otherwise—whether locally or half a world away.

So how do we deliver on this potential? I wish I had an easy answer, but, in general, I'd start by asking if there's more the field of reminiscence and life review could do to make it easier for communities to engage in reminiscence-based projects and to bring the products of community-specific reminiscence to the attention of people outside

these local groups. Focusing on this journal as a resource, I might offer the following suggestions:

First, the readership of the journal is made up of people with a wide range of experiences and skills in starting reminiscence programs. I don't see why we can't publish more articles that provide persons who are thinking of starting a program in their community with detailed descriptions of strategies from which to choose (e.g., schoolchildren interviewing older adults in the community) and instructions on the use of new technologies for recording and presenting archived reminiscences (e.g., video, podcasts, websites, etc.). The more advice available to new project leaders on the practicalities of starting a reminiscence project, the fewer procedural obstacles they'll have to overcome themselves—and the more likely it is that their project will get past the planning stages. If you have experience and skills in this area that could be of service to someone who doesn't, I encourage you to make your knowledge available to others by contributing an article to the journal. This is something our publication category of “Practice” was specifically designed to make room for.

Second, if you are an organizer for a community-specific reminiscence program, you're in a position to contribute an article that describes how your program works and how people can access the life stories of people in your community. Again, this is just the type of information the journal's “Practice” category is meant to convey. In doing so, you'll give organizers in other communities ideas for how to craft their programs, and you'll contribute to an expanding repository of life stories allowing people in different communities the chance to learn about each other.

Third, if you know of a community-specific reminiscence program that does good work locally but is not widely known outside of their area, you might take the initiative to ask the organizers to contribute an article describing their program. If their interest or confidence in doing this is low, perhaps you could offer to assist them with manuscript preparation and with the publication process, in general.

These are a few things readers of the journal could do to promote community-specific reminiscence. As we share our stories and listen mindfully to those of others I very much hope we'll come to better appreciate its value in building higher levels of cohesion within communities and greater levels of understanding and tolerance between them. As an aspirational goal, I'd love to see our field build over time some type of cross-cultural “story web” where people in one culture can learn about the lived experiences and perspectives of people in other cultures through the medium of shared life stories. This prospect of linking people from different cultures and communities together reminds me of Charles Sherrington's famous metaphor of

¹ There are a number of versions of this idea. One is that “It's hard to hate someone whose story you know” (Margaret J. Wheatley). Another is “There isn't anyone you couldn't love once you've heard their story” (Mary Lou Kownacki).

the brain as “an enchanted loom where millions of flashing shuttles weave a dissolving pattern, always a meaningful pattern though never an abiding one” (Sherrington, 1940). With community-specific reminiscence, the threads we weave aren’t neural elements within the brains of single persons but stories with the power to link multitudes of people together. Because people and cultures change over time, my hoped-for pattern of shared reminiscence might not be “abiding,” but I’m confident it would be meaningful. It might not be “research” in its traditional sense or a form of “practice” that addresses the problems

of individuals, but the act of linking communities together might make our society healthier as a whole. That strikes me as worth doing. Maybe we can meet at the bar later to talk about it.

References

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