

# Self-Aspect Reconstruction through Guided Autobiography: Exploring Underlying Processes

Gary T. Reker  
Trent University

James E. Birren and Cheryl Svensson  
University of Southern California

This research explores possible reconstruction processes involving the self-system (actual, ideal, and social image selves) of participants taking part in Guided Autobiography (GAB). Ten young and eleven older adults met each week for 12 weeks. Data were collected at pretest, midtest, and posttest. Three indicators of structural change were measured and analyzed: self-aspect congruence, self-aspect integration, and self-aspect consistency. For all participants, results revealed a significant increase over time in self-aspect congruence (actual/ideal and actual/social image) and self-aspect integration (actual self only), while self-aspect consistency remained stable and moderate. Compared to younger adults, older adults showed significantly greater congruence in actual/ideal and actual/social image self aspects following the GAB experience. Moreover, greater self-aspect congruence was associated with positive evaluations of others and life at present. Our findings provide us with a greater understanding of the underlying mechanisms that operate when individuals, particularly older participants, report having grown personally through GAB.

*Key Terms:* Self-Aspect Reconstruction; Guided Autobiography; Self-System

In the first edition of the new *International Journal of Reminiscence and Life Review*, Birren and Svensson (2013) noted that today there is a growing public, cultural, and historical interest in the telling, writing, and sharing of personal life stories. The methods of reminiscence, life review, and autobiography are the vehicles through which the telling, the writing, and the sharing of stories are activated. While there are a number of similarities and differences that characterize these major autobiographical methods, the common focus is directed towards an active reconstruction of the past as a basis for achieving meaningful integration with the present and optimistic projections into the future. Space does not allow for an in-depth exposition of their similarities and differences. The interested reader is encouraged to consult Reker, Birren, & Svensson (2012) for a fuller description.

In 1963 Butler introduced the life review as “a naturally occurring, universal process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences... prompted by the realization of approaching

dissolution and death, and the inability to maintain one’s sense of personal invulnerability” (p. 66). The broad aims and goals of life review were to achieve conflict resolution, reconciliation, atonement, integration, and serenity through the processes of active review and evaluation of one’s life (Butler, 1963). Since those early beginnings, the field has grown exponentially on many fronts, particularly in the areas of conceptualization, definitions, program delivery, program evaluation, and qualitative and quantitative research studies. A large number of variables have been the focus of research studies, including ego integrity, life satisfaction, psychological well-being, happiness, self-esteem, meaning in life, self-acceptance, positive adjustment, anxiety, and depression. Overall, positive outcomes seem to result from reminiscence, life review, and guided autobiography, although to differing degrees (for periodic reviews see Bohlmeijer, Smit, & Cuijpers, 2003; Lin, Dai, Hwang, 2003; Molinari & Reichlin, 1984-85). Many of these studies have been conducted through the nomothetic approach to knowledge (i.e., tendency to derive general laws). Ideographic approaches (i.e., tendency to specify), however, have lagged behind. Recently, Barlow and Nock (2009) and Bohlmeijer and Westerhof (2013) emphasized the need for a more intensive study of individuals over time and on the processes of change. We concur. A complete and more balanced understanding of the impact of reminiscence, life review, and

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Gary T. Reker, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, Department of Psychology, Trent University; James E. Birren, Ph.D., Emeritus Professor and Dean of Gerontology, University of Southern California; Cheryl Svensson, Ph.D., University of Southern California.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Gary T. Reker. E-mail: greker@trentu.ca

autobiography on human functioning can best be achieved when we examine “the inside of individual lives” through the exploration of underlying processes of change.

In this paper, we will focus exclusively on the autobiographical method of *Guided Autobiography* in our exploration of underlying processes. Guided Autobiography can be defined as the process of reconstructing the past and integrating it with the present using thematic topics that are significant to individuals over the life course, such as family, career, health, gender identity, experience with death, meaning in life, etc.

### *Guided Autobiography: Program and Goals*

Birren (Birren & Birren, 1996) is well known for the statement, “You don’t know where you are going unless you know where you have been” (p. 299). It is the latter part of this statement that has played a pivotal role in Birren’s interest and passion to develop a method that would allow an individual to explore his or her past life. That method is known as Guided Autobiography (GAB).

Guided Autobiography (GAB) is a structured review of one’s life with the general goal of achieving temporal integration, conflict resolution, reconciliation, ego integrity, generativity, and wisdom (Birren & Birren, 1996). It is one of several autobiographical methods that have been used in the past for the purpose of promoting an overall sense of psychological, physical, and emotional well-being in adults across the entire life span (Birren & Birren, 1996; Birren & Cochran, 2001; Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Birren & Hedlund, 1987; DeVries, Birren, & Deutchman, 1990, 1995).

GAB is structured around a number of life themes, such as branching points, family, career, money, gender identity, experiences with death, spirituality, and others. Elements include lectures on autobiography and the principles of human development, sensitizing exercises, writing of mini autobiography, reading of mini autobiography, and small group discussion. Guided Autobiography relies more on the group process and the sharing of life stories with others, referred to as developmental exchange. The open sharing of deeply personal material is a key element in the GAB group experience that leads to the development of affective bonds with others and to a change in attitudes toward self and others (Birren & Cochran, 2001; Birren & Hedlund, 1987; de Vries et al., 1990, 1995; Reker et al., 2012; Shaw, 1995; Thornton, 2008; Thornton & Collins, 2007).

Guided Autobiography is not therapy but is therapeutic in that it leads to a reduction in tension, reduction in feelings of loneliness, increased self-awareness, and a greater acceptance of one’s own life (Birren & Birren, 1996). For example, in one study conducted by Birren

(2003), 140 GAB participants reported that they were stimulated to recall their life events, to develop an accepting view of those events, and to hold more accepting attitudes towards others. Furthermore, the combination of a systematic review of major life themes, the sharing of stories, and the group experience resulted in a more *integrated* perspective on life. Moreover, participants continued to correspond and hold reunions long after the formal program had ended, suggesting that the GAB experience can lead to new friendships and confidant relationships.

GAB participants often report that they have changed as a result of the GAB experience. Birren and Hedlund (1987) found that the experience had a strong positive effect on the lives of 90% of the participants that held for up to two years after the course was completed. Specifically, participants reported that they felt more self-confident and more self-accepting, experienced a greater sense of coherence and purpose in life, and felt more comfortable and open about sharing their values with others.

### *Conceptual Framework for the Present Study*

The cognitive perspective on the study of the self-concept offers a theoretical roadmap for the present study. Within this perspective, self-knowledge and self-representations constitute the most salient features. The self-concept is a system of affective-cognitive-motivational structures that provides an evaluative and interpretive context for how the self is viewed. Markus (1977) refers to these structures as ‘self-schemas’ and Markus and Nurius (1986) have extended this notion to ‘possible selves.’ Possible selves are cognitive manifestations that “represent individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming...” (p. 954). Possible selves are subjectively constructed representations of the self in the past, in the present, and in the future (e.g., the happy self, the honest self, the uptight self, etc.). Given the potentially large repertoire of possible selves and since not all self-knowledge can be cognitively represented at any one time, it is more appropriate to think about the ‘working self-concept’ or self-conceptions that are presently available and active (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In addition, possible selves are open to change and modification in response to changing internal states and life experiences. Markus and Nurius (1986) state it this way:

The content of the working self-concept depends on what self-conceptions have been active just before, on what has been elicited or made dominant by the particular social environment, and on what has been more purposefully invoked by the individual in response to a given experience, event, or situation. (p. 957)

In a developmental context, each individual strives to find unity in his/her life by ensuring that these differentiated selves remain integrated. Because life stories and self are bound together across a life, the integration of life events and their interpretation through the GAB experience are important processes to explore.

### *Guided Autobiography and the Self-Concept*

Our brief overview of the therapeutic effects of GAB suggests that the GAB experience can enhance self-awareness and self-identity (Birren & Schroots, 2006). Individuals develop self-identity through analyses and revisions of three self-images: the actual self, the ideal self, and the social self. The actual self is defined as a generalized view of the present self, reflecting our abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. The ideal self is defined as a generalized view of a future or idealized self, reflecting our goals and aspirations, and the social self is defined as a generalized view of how one believes others perceive the actual self. These self-aspects form a generalized self-system.

The question of whether Guided Autobiography can enhance awareness of the self was first studied by Reedy and Birren (1980). In a pre-post assessment of 45 participants in a 10-session GAB program, the actual, ideal, and social-image components of the self were found to move closer together. Moreover, participants' views of generalized others moved more closely to their own views of self. Spanish researchers Botella and Feixas (1992-93) provided a first demonstration of how the method of Guided Autobiography can lead to a reconstruction of the self-system of older participants. A small sample of eight older adults, average age 68 years, took part in 10 guided autobiography group sessions for 1.5 hours each week over a three-month period. Ten individuals with similar demographic characteristics formed a pre-post control group. The degree of reconstruction was assessed pre-post in both groups by having participants rate their actual self, ideal self, and social-image self on a number of bipolar adjectives using a 5-point Likert-type scale. Results showed that the GAB group experienced a significant reduction in the distance between ideal versus actual self and ideal versus social-image self compared to the control group. A significant difference in distance was not found for actual self versus social-image self. While preliminary, these findings suggest that participation in Guided Autobiography can lead to significant positive changes in the reconstruction and meaningful integration of self-aspects.

Schroots and van Dongen (1995) conducted a pre-post exploratory study of the effect of GAB on the self-perceptions of five female participants. Using a 6-point Likert scale, participants rated personal value-statements on their past (example, "In the eyes of dad I did everything wrong"), present, and future on a list of 24

affects. In addition, participants rated the concepts, "Generally how do you feel", and "How would you like to feel", on the same 24 affects. For each participant, correlations between pairs of variables (e.g., actual-ideal) at posttest were compared with correlations at pretest, with higher correlations at posttest indicating greater integration. They found greater integration for the real and ideal self comparison and for all possible time perspective comparisons. According to the authors, self-perceptions lead to greater continuity of one's identity and the past becomes more integrated with the participant's present and future following the GAB experience. They conclude that GAB "directs the participants into 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).

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of the present study was threefold: (a) to examine the possible underlying reconstruction processes within the self-system when participants take part in GAB, (b) to assess the impact of structural changes to the self-system on content ratings of what life has been like up to this point and the way others are perceived, and (c) to explore age group differences in self-aspect reconstruction. Based on prior research by Birren and Cochran (2001), it is predicted that exposure to GAB will lead to increased self-aspect congruence, particularly for actual/ideal self and actual/social image self. In addition, based on the work of Botella and Feixas (1992-93), it is predicted that participants will show increased actual self, social image self, and ideal self integration following Guided Autobiography. No predictions are offered regarding potential age group differences in the reconstruction process.

## Methods

### *Participants*

In the fall of 2007, Birren and Svensson conducted a Guided Autobiography class at the University of Southern California. Twenty-one participants, four males and 17 females, all students of GAB, met each week for 12 weeks during the fall semester. The wide age range of the participants allowed us to create two age groups: younger: 19-50 years (N=10), and older: 51-86 years (N=11). The demographic characteristics of the younger, older, and combined groups are presented in Table 1. Within the combined group: 67% were single; 24% were married, and 9% divorced; 76% were Caucasian, 14% Asian/Pacific, and 10% Black/African American. A majority of the group had achieved a bachelor's degree or higher (72%) and enjoyed an annual household income in excess of \$70,000.00 (53%).

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of the GAB Participants*

Variable	Younger (19-50 years) (N = 10)	Older (51-86 years) (N = 11)	Combined (19-86 years) (N = 21)
Age			
Mean	29.20	69.91	50.52
SD	10.29	13.44	23.92
Sex			
Female	100%	64%	81%
Male	0%	36%	19%
Marital Status			
Single	70%	64%	67%
Married	20%	27%	24%
Divorced	10%	9%	9%
Ethnicity			
Caucasian	70%	82%	76%
Asian/Pacific	30%	0%	14%
African American	0%	18%	10%
Education			
High School	20%	9%	14%
Bachelor	60%	0%	29%
Masters	10%	36%	29%
Ph.D.	0%	27%	14%
Other	0%	27%	14%
Annual Household Income			
Under \$10,000	10%	0%	5%
\$10,000 - \$29,999	50%	0%	24%
\$30,000 - \$49,999	0%	27%	14%
\$50,000 - \$69,999	0%	0%	5%

## Measures

*Multiple Self Assessment Survey (MSAS).* The MSAS (Reker, 2007) consists of 20 bipolar adjectives, each rated on a 7-point scale. The MSAS, in a form suitable for administration, is included as Appendix A. Adjective pairs are anchored by the positive or negative pole and their opposite (e.g., happy-sad; unfriendly-friendly). The positive pole of each construct was given a score of “7” and the negative end a score of “1”. Polarity was randomized to control for halo effects. Participants were asked to rate four concepts on the same 20 bipolar adjectives: Myself-The Way I Am (coefficient alpha = .82); Myself-The Way I Would Like to Be (coefficient alpha = .90); Myself-The Way Others see Me (coefficient alpha = .84); and The Way I View Other People (coefficient alpha = .95). In addition, a different set of 20 bipolar adjectives was created on which participants rated the concept, My Life up to this Point (coefficient alpha = .91) at pretest.

Three indicators of structural change to the self-system were derived from the scores on the MSAS: self-

aspect congruence, self-aspect integration, and self-aspect consistency.

*Self-aspect congruence* measures the perceived distance between any two self aspects. The three self-aspects generate three distance measure pairings: actual self vs. ideal self; actual self vs. social image self; and social image self vs. ideal self. The Euclidean distance measure was used to quantify the distance between self-aspect pairs. This involved subtracting the scores on any two self-aspects for each of the 20 bipolar adjectives, squaring the difference, summing across all adjectives, and taking the square root of the sum. A value of “0” means total congruence (no distance) between any two self-aspects. High values reflect greater distances and thus greater disparity or incongruence.

*Self-aspect integration* measures the extent to which each self-aspect becomes more integrated or consolidated. The integration index is based on Kellian (Kelly, 1955) theory and the notion of personal construct similarity. For this index, each self-aspect (actual, ideal, social image) is rated independently on 20 (7-point) bipolar adjective pairs that represent possible selves. The ratings are compared for similarity (matching) across the 20 adjective pairs and a total matching score is derived. A scoring key may be used to assist with the calculation of self-aspect integration scores. See Table 2.

For example, a participant who assigns a value of “7” to every one of the 20 bipolar adjectives for his/her actual self (19 matches) will achieve a maximum matching score of 190 ( $N(N-1)/2$  or  $20(19)/2 = 190$ , where N is the number of adjective pairs). Another participant who

Table 2. *Scoring Key for Computing Self-Aspect Integration Scores*

Matches	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
Score	1	3	6	10	15	21	28	36	45	55	66	78	91	105	120	136	153	171	190

assigns a value of “7” to eight adjective pairs, a value of “6” to seven pairs, a value of “5” to three pairs, and a value of “4” to two pairs will have a total matching score of 73 ( $36+28+6+3$ ). A high matching score indicates greater integration.

*Self-aspect consistency* measures the extent to which participants view themselves similarly over the course of the GAB experience. Specifically, we wanted to determine the extent to which each participant remained consistent *within* himself/herself (i.e., continuity) over the intervention duration. Thus, for each self-aspect (actual, ideal, social), an individual subject’s pre-test ratings on 20 bipolar adjectives were correlated with his/her post-test ratings. If one arranged the items in terms of their numerical ratings, the Pearson correlation coefficient assesses the degree to which the position of items in relation to each other remains the same across the two

times of testing. An overall mean correlation score was then calculated to obtain a quantitative index of self-aspect consistency. Moderate to high correlations would reflect stable, consistent self-aspects.

*Procedure*

The data were collected at three time points: pretest, midtest, and posttest. The pretest was conducted at the beginning of the first day of classes, the midtest at the sixth week of the 12-week GAB session, and the posttest at the end of the final class. Each class session was three hours in length.

*Statistical Analyses*

Statistical analyses were carried out using the STATISTICA software program (StatSoft, 1995). Univariate ANOVAs were performed on scores across three (pre, mid, post) and two (pre, post) time points. Age group differences were assessed using a 2 (Age Group) x 2 (Time of Testing) repeated measures ANOVA and Newman-Keuls post hoc tests. The eta-squared coefficient provided an estimate of the magnitude of all effect sizes. Bivariate associations between variables were calculated using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Individual difference scores on self-aspect congruence and self-aspect integration were also charted over the three assessment periods.

**Results**

*Self-Aspect Congruence*

*Three time points.* The means and standard deviations for self-aspect congruence are presented in Table 3. Because six participants did not attend the GAB class at the time of the midtest, only 15 participants completed the midtest. Of the six who did not attend the class at midtest, four were younger females, one was an older male, and one an older female. Thus, the results for all three time periods are based on an N=15. Our findings revealed a significant change over three time periods in self-aspect congruence for the actual self vs. ideal self ( $F_{(2, 28)} = 4.54, p < .05, \eta^2 = .245$ ) and the actual self vs. social image self ( $F_{(2, 28)} = 5.34, p < .01, \eta^2 = .276$ ) comparisons. However, the test of change over the three times of testing for the social image vs. ideal self comparison was not statistically significant,  $F_{(2, 28)} = 0.69, p = .51, \eta^2 = .047$ . Post-hoc tests revealed a significant reduction in distance (increased congruence) on actual self vs. ideal self from pretest to midtest ( $p < .05$ ) and from pretest to posttest ( $p < .05$ ) and a significant reduction in distance on actual self vs. social image self from pretest to midtest ( $p < .02$ ) and from pretest to posttest ( $p < .02$ ). We found no significant

change on any of the self-aspect comparisons from midtest to posttest.

*Two time points.* Given the loss of statistical power in a reduced sample size, we analyzed the data at pretest and posttest for the entire sample of 21 participants. The results are also presented in Table 3. Significant increases in self-aspect congruence were found for both the actual self vs. ideal self ( $F_{(1, 20)} = 10.41, p < .005, \eta^2 = .342$ ) and the actual self vs. social image self ( $F_{(1, 20)} = 11.20, p < .005, \eta^2 = .359$ ) comparisons. The social image self vs. ideal self comparison revealed a non-significant trend toward greater congruence,  $F_{(1, 20)} = 3.34, p < .08, \eta^2 = .142$ . As can be noted, the results of the pretest-posttest analyses paralleled those of the three time points analyses but had the additional benefit of augmenting the effect sizes from small to moderate levels.

Table 3. *Self-Aspect Congruence Means and Standard Deviations at Three and Two Time Points*

	Three time points			Two time points	
	Pretest	Midtest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
<b>Actual Self vs. Ideal Self</b>					
Mean <sup>a</sup>	7.44	6.04	6.21	7.78	6.27
SD	2.90	1.87	2.17	2.70	2.33
N	15	15	15	21	21
<b>Actual Self vs. Social Self</b>					
Mean	6.17	4.77	4.65	6.15	4.79
SD	2.59	2.03	1.56	2.40	1.46
N	15	15	15	21	21
<b>Social Self vs. Ideal Self</b>					
Mean	6.50	5.89	5.76	6.54	5.71
SD	2.52	3.15	2.25	2.45	2.09
N	15	15	15	21	21

While we found significant increases in self-aspect congruence over time at the group (mean) level, there were individual differences in the way participants changed over time. Figures 1 and 2 chart the nature of the change for each individual participant. Of note is the extent of individual differences at pretest. This might be expected given the heterogeneity of the participants, particularly in terms of the wide age range (19 to 86 years). Generally, there is increased congruence over time for most participants, but not for all. Homogeneity of variance analysis and inspection of the standard deviations (Table 3) show that the extent of individual differences begins to decrease from pre- to posttest, but this was only statistically significant for actual self vs.

social image self congruence (5.76 vs. 2.13, Hartley's  $F_{max} = 2.70, p < .05$ ).

*Self-Aspect Integration*

*Three time points.* The means and standard deviations for self-aspect integration are presented in Table 4. A significant change from pretest to midtest to posttest in self-aspect integration was only found for actual self,  $F_{(2, 28)} = 6.17, p < .01, \eta^2 = .306$ . There was a trend toward greater integration from pretest

to midtest ( $p < .09$ ) and a continuing trend from midtest to posttest ( $p < .06$ ). For social image self and ideal self, the change was in the predicted direction but did not reach statistical significance.

*Two time points.* The means and standard deviations for self-aspect integration at pretest and posttest are also presented in Table 4. A significant increase in integration was found for actual self ( $F_{(1, 20)} = 15.98, p < .001, \eta^2 = .444$ ) and for ideal self ( $F_{(1, 20)} = 5.18, p < .05, \eta^2 = .206$ ). For social image self, the change was

Figure 1. Individual Differences on Actual vs. Ideal Change over Three Time Periods

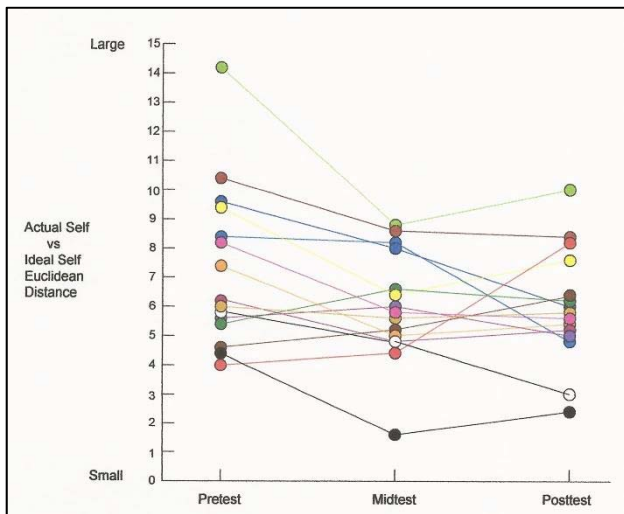
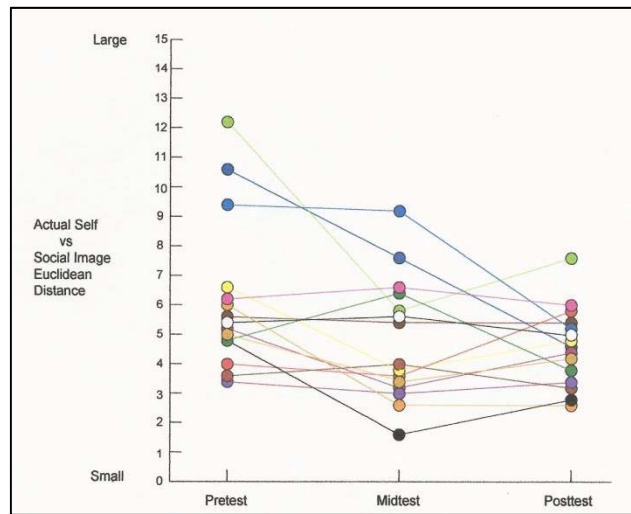


Figure 2. Individual Differences on Actual vs. Social Image Change over Three Time Periods



	Three Time Points			Two Time Points	
	Pretest	Midtest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
<b>Actual Self</b>					
Mean <sup>a</sup>	54.07	61.87	70.93	51.95	68.39
SD	14.71	18.81	19.01	15.24	20.50
N	15	15	15	21	21
<b>Ideal Self</b>					
Mean	98.60	102.73	114.47	90.33	106.19
SD	38.28	27.02	27.59	36.62	29.64
N	15	15	15	21	21
<b>Social Self</b>					
Mean	66.60	81.13	76.33	68.29	81.71
SD	27.24	36.74	29.20	30.28	34.26
N	15	15	15	21	21

in the predicted direction but did not reach statistical significance ( $p < .08$ ).

There are individual differences in the extent to which participants changed in actual self integration over time. Results are charted in Figure 3. Inspection of the respective standard deviations (Table 3) and non-significant homogeneity of variance analysis showed that variability remained fairly constant across the three time periods.

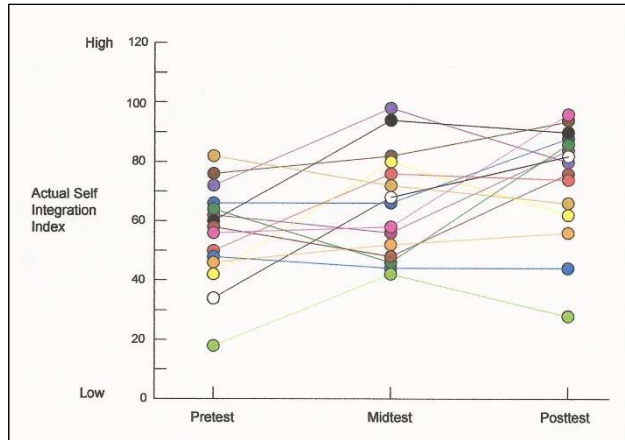
*Self-Aspect Consistency*

Self-consistency indices (correlation between the pre/post actual self) remained constant and at moderate levels: pre/post actual self correlation = .504; pre/post social image self correlation = .437; pre/post ideal self correlation = .458.

*Age Group Differences*

The wide age range allowed for the examination of potential age group differences. The participants were divided into two age groups: younger (19-50 years, N=10), older (51-86 years, N=11). In order to utilize all

Figure 3. Individual Differences on Actual Self Integration over Three Time Periods



the data, missing posttest scores for two participants were estimated using regression analysis with pretest scores as the predictor. This method offers a more individualized (unique) estimate for missing values compared to the conventional method of mean substitution. Only the pre- and posttest scores were analysed in a 2 (Age Group) x 2 (Time of Testing) repeated-measures ANOVA design. The means and standard deviations for older and younger participants on self-aspect congruence and self-aspect integration are presented in Table 5. For actual self vs. ideal self congruence, the main effect for Age Group was

not significant. There was a significant main effect for Time of Testing ( $F_{(1, 19)} = 12.25, p < .005$ , eta-squared = .392) and a significant Age Group X Time of Testing interaction,  $F_{(1, 19)} = 6.22, p < .05$ , eta-squared = .247. Newman-Keuls post hoc tests revealed significantly greater congruence from pretest to posttest (8.17 vs. 5.67,  $p < .01$ ) but only for the older participants. For actual vs. social image self congruence, the main effect for Age Group was not significant. There was a significant main effect for Time of Testing ( $F_{(1, 19)} = 12.62, p < .005$ , eta-squared = .400) and a significant Age Group x Time of Testing interaction,  $F_{(1, 19)} = 4.96, p < .05$ , eta-squared = .207. Newman-Keuls post hoc tests revealed significantly greater congruence from pretest to posttest (7.13 vs. 4.98,  $p < .001$ ) for the older participants. Finally, no significant effects were found for social image vs. ideal self congruence. A graph of the significant interactions is presented in Figure 4. The overall results show that only the older participants have a significantly greater reduction in perceived distance (greater congruence) on both actual self vs. ideal self and actual self vs. social image self-aspects. Results also reveal that older participants begin with greater self-aspect incongruence at the outset.

Similar age group analyses were conducted on the self-aspect integration measure. Only the main effect of Time of Testing was found to be statistically significant for actual self ( $F_{(1, 19)} = 15.73, p < .001$ , eta-squared = .453) and the ideal self ( $F_{(1, 19)} = 4.87, p < .05$ , eta-squared = .204). No main or interaction effects were found for the social image self.

Table 5. Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables at Pretest and Posttest for Younger and Older Age Groups

		Younger (N = 10)		Older (N = 11)	
		Pre	Post	Pre	Post
<b>Self-Aspect Congruence</b>					
Actual vs. Ideal Self	Mean <sup>a</sup>	7.35	9.93	8.17	5.68
	SD	2.30	1.98	3.01	2.56
Actual vs. Social Self	Mean	5.08	4.58	7.13	4.98
	SD	1.70	1.31	2.59	1.62
Social vs. Ideal Self	Mean	6.20	5.88	6.85	5.55
	SD	2.48	1.50	2.49	2.58
<b>Self-Aspect Integration</b>					
Actual Self	Mean <sup>b</sup>	55.00	66.60	49.18	70.00
	SD	14.39	15.63	16.14	24.80
Ideal Self	Mean	91.80	105.40	89.00	106.45
	SD	35.73	34.05	39.10	26.71
Social Self	Mean	69.30	76.60	67.36	87.27
	SD	32.18	29.60	30.00	38.56

<sup>a</sup> lower means indicate greater congruence

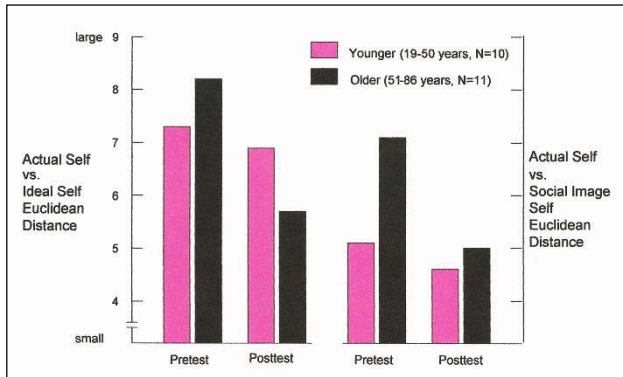
<sup>b</sup> higher means indicate greater integration

*Actual-ideal self congruence and evaluation of life at present.* Participants were also asked to rate ‘My Life up to this Point’ (posttest only) on 20 bipolar constructs using a 7-point scale. These ratings were correlated with actual self vs. ideal self congruence (posttest). Results show that greater actual self vs. ideal self congruence is significantly associated with an overall positive evaluation of life at the present time ( $r = .51, p < .05$ ). Specifically, participants who showed increased actual self/ideal self congruence viewed life as positive, enriched, empowered, interesting, coherent, connected, relaxing, and unregretful.

*Actual-social image self congruence and views of others.* Participants were also asked to rate ‘The Way I View Other People’ (at posttest only) on 20 bipolar constructs using a 7-point scale. These ratings were correlated with actual self vs. social image self congruence (posttest).

Results show that greater actual self vs. social image self congruence is significantly associated with an overall positive evaluation of others ( $r = .53, p < .05$ ). Specifically, participants who showed increased self/other congruence viewed others as successful,

Figure 4. Age Group X Time of Testing Interaction on Self-Aspect Congruence ( $N = 21$ )



reliable, forgiving, satisfied, likeable, optimistic, affectionate, and approachable.

## Discussion

In general, our findings indicate that changes in self-aspect reconstruction over time are *associated* with participation in the GAB experience. In the absence of an independent control group, we were unable to demonstrate a direct *causal* link between the GAB experience and self-aspect reconstruction. Nevertheless, in the context of a ‘naturalistic’ setting, we have identified and singled out important process variables that should be explored in future studies designed to investigate the causal effects of GAB on self-aspect reconstruction.

That being said, we found increased congruence over time for two of the three self-aspect comparisons: actual vs. ideal and actual vs. social-image self. The findings for actual vs. ideal self congruence suggest that GAB participants move toward higher self-esteem and greater self-acceptance. An important aspect of the GAB process is the provision of feedback from other members of the small reading groups when sharing the life stories. Giving and receiving this feedback is a powerful process that results in new insights and personal growth. We literally begin to ‘see’ ourselves through the eyes of others who have listened attentively and empathetically to the life stories. When asked how GAB may have changed how participants view their life differently, one student wrote that Guided Autobiography “...helped me organize my sense of self and rebuild confidence in my value – personal and professional.” This is especially important for older adults who may have diminished self-esteem once they left the workforce. This is further supported by our finding that actual/ideal self congruence was associated with an overall positive perception of life at present. Specifically, at the item level, we found significant correlations between actual/ideal self congruence and ratings of present life as enriching, positive, interesting, coherent, connected, relaxing, and

having no regrets. Thus, the perception of being at one with one’s ideal self may lead to increased feelings of empowerment, fulfillment, being in control, and having a clear sense of personal identity, all important observations that need to be more fully examined in future research. Moreover, greater congruence between the actual and the social-image self was associated with positive views of others. Perceiving others as more like oneself may lead to increased feelings of trust, relaxation, and comfort, and it reflects the effectiveness of the “developmental exchange” component (the sharing of mini autobiographies) of GAB (Birren & Svensson, 2009; Thornton & Collins, 2007) in promoting group cohesion. The increased congruence of the actual-social self is important in many ways, especially for older adults. Our *social* self is ‘how we think others see us’ and thus more congruence means that the generations began to see one another as more like themselves. The range of ages in the present study, from retirees to young college students, offered an opportunity for them to really get to know one another on a deep level. In our society there is often no place for intergenerational exchange and both older and younger students entered the class with their own biases regarding age. As one student wrote in her class evaluation, “GAB has really changed my view of the elderly and the fear and barrier I had of aging. I loved the intergenerational part of the class.” Ageism broke down when reading the stories in the mixed generational groups. In other words, it is possible that an understanding and bonding occurred during the GAB session that was not present at the outset of the class. Another student wrote, “The intergenerational aspect was key. I learned a lot from the elders and the relationships are invaluable.” A statement by another student sums up the connections and bonding within the small groups, “I’m intrigued to look for the commonalities in people’s stories.” We need to find more opportunities for intergenerational classes. Participants perceive themselves to be closer to the way they think others see them following GAB, replicating earlier findings (Birren & Birren, 1996; Birren & Cochran, 2001; Birren & Schroots, 2006; Reedy & Birren, 1980).

Regarding self-aspect integration, we found greater integration for the actual self, but not for the ideal and social image selves. This implies that the GAB participants had a better understanding of who they actually are. Our current measure of integration reflects integration *within* each of the three self-aspects and therefore is a measure of the extent to which each possible self becomes more consolidated or coherent. The fact that neither the social nor the ideal selves resulted in greater integration may be partially explained by the students themselves. This class was primarily young students or older retired or near retirement adults. Younger students are still searching for who they want to be and understanding how others see them, while older students may not have the opportunity to meet with others to get a real picture of how they are viewed by others or



to reassess how they want their ideal selves to be. When asked in the class evaluation if the GAB experience caused them to view their life differently, one student replied, “Yes! I now know things about myself I never knew before.” In the final analysis, our results show that exposure to the GAB experience is associated with a greater increase in actual self integration or consolidation over time.

Each of the three self-aspects remains relatively stable over time. When viewed in the context of increasing actual/social image self congruence, our findings suggest that participants view others as more like themselves, but don’t necessarily view their actual and ideal selves differently. One student summed it up this way, “I learned that you never truly know what a person’s been through – what their journey is like.” Such continuity in one’s identity is also supported by Schroots and Dongen’s (1995) finding that perceptions of the self from the past to the present, the present to the future, and the past to the future, all show stronger correlations following the GAB experience.

While our findings offer support for change in self-aspect congruence and integration at the group (mean) level, we also found differences at the individual level. Not every participant moved toward greater congruence or greater integration. For some, the GAB experience led to greater disparity and less integration. Perhaps the developmental exchange dynamics of sharing one’s story and listening to other peoples’ stories induces self-questioning in some participants and subsequent reevaluation of one’s self-perceptions. A qualitative time series study in which participants maintain a daily diary during GAB sessions could provide an opportunity to examine the deeper underlying processes that might shed some light on this question.

The inclusion of a midtest assessment does offer some evidence that GAB, as a process, is effective in the reconstruction of both self-aspect congruence and self-aspect integration. This suggests that GAB has the potential to trigger a transformative experience. Transformational processes *do not change* one’s experiences or situations, rather they impact *the way* one perceives or relates to personal experiences and situations (i.e., a change in perspective-taking). One outcome of transformational processes is a restructured and expanded worldview and a widening and deepening of one’s personal identity. GAB methods offer a way to assess structural changes to the self-system and provide us with an understanding of the underlying mechanisms that operate when participants report having grown personally through GAB activities.

Our finding that older members of the GAB group, compared to their younger counterparts, showed the greatest change on actual/ideal self and actual/social image self congruence underscores the importance of life

review, particularly in the later years (Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Birren & Kershner, 2002). The greater incongruence at pretest for the older adults on actual/social image comparison might reflect a self-selection bias. Perhaps older adults volunteer to engage in GAB activities to better understand themselves and their social relationships. In a developmental context, our finding of greater incongruence at pretest for the older adults may also reflect attempts to achieve Eriksonian integrity in the later years.

### *Study Strengths, Limitations, and Implications*

The inclusion of effect sizes allowed us to examine the magnitude of the statistically significant effects observed in our study. For the social image self vs. ideal self, the effects ranged from small to moderate. However, the effect sizes for the actual vs ideal and for actual vs social image self were large in size at three times of testing and remained large at two times of testing. In short, we found that GAB was associated with large changes in our dependent measures. Even allowing for a small sample size and the absence of an independent control group, our findings give us confidence that the GAB intervention results in changes that are both noticeable and important.

Before considering the implications of our findings, a number of limitations need to be addressed. First, as noted earlier, participants served as their own control. A control group of individuals engaged in something other than GAB was not available. Thus, the observed changes in self-aspect reconstruction may be due to something other than exposure to GAB. Needed are randomized control group studies of the process variables that we have identified in the present study. Second, results are based on a fairly small group of participants characterized by above average educational level and annual household income whose ages ranged from 19 to 86 years. Such individuals are expected to be highly motivated, intelligent, and goal achievers. Thus, it is not clear whether our present findings would generalize to the general population of younger and older adults. Third, the majority of the participants were female. Therefore, the current study may be better described as a study of *women’s* reconstruction processes. In sum, future research will need to replicate and extend our findings by including at least one control group and more balanced demographic, age, and gender representation.

In spite of these limitations, our findings have implications for future directions and research. First and foremost is that there should be more opportunities for older and younger people to meet in a personal and relevant manner as offered in GAB classes. It is clear from this small study that the intergenerational aspect of the class was the highlight. One older student said, “Young people have troubles, and many young people

have experienced injury and death among loved ones that I never experienced in my youth. The intergenerational element is so refreshing.” The older students come to understand and value youth, while the younger students learn to appreciate all that the older students have gone through in their lives and to see and value them for who they are.

Our finding that notable changes in self-aspect reconstruction begin to occur by the midpoint of the GAB sessions may have implications for the overall length of the GAB program. When originally conceived, GAB sessions were structured to be consistent with the length of the term in a university setting, usually ten weeks. Our present findings suggest that meaningful change can be observed in the context of a shorter GAB program, i.e., as early as four to five weeks. Future studies should investigate the optimal structural time frame for GAB sessions.

GAB is a process with the potential to change lives. It provides us with a deeper understanding of who we are, where we have been, and where we are going in the future. It can be adapted to fit many venues, from the typical classroom setting to working with special populations, i.e., veterans, women in recovery, hospice and palliative care groups, spiritual groups, etc. It has been offered worldwide from Taiwan to Seoul and all across the United States and Canada with the same result, to provide the opportunity for people to learn about themselves and others in a deep and meaningful way. The possibilities for GAB are just beginning. As James Birren is fond of saying, ‘Onward!’

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Appendix 1

**Multiple Self Assessment Survey (MSAS)<sup>1</sup>**

Gary T. Reker

**Directions:** For each of the following pairs of bipolar adjectives, place a check mark on the line that is most descriptive of **the way you are** (actual self). Note that each adjective pair is anchored by the positive or negative poles and their opposite. Neutral implies no self-evaluation either way. Go with your first impression.

Please note that for some adjective pairs, the positive pole is on the left; for others, the positive pole is on the right. On subsequent pages, please repeat the survey for all the other possible selves.

**Myself—The Way I Am**

	Extremely	Very	Quite	Neutral	Quite	Very	Extremely	
1. Happy	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Sad
2. Friendly	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unfriendly
3. Incompetent	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Competent
4. Successful	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unsuccessful
5. Unreliable	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Reliable
6. Unforgiving	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Forgiving
7. Honest	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Dishonest
8. Shy	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Outgoing
9. Satisfied	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Dissatisfied
10. Unpopular	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Likeable
11. Insincere	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Sincere
12. Easy-going	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Uptight
13. Sloppy	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Careful
14. Apprehensive	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Self-assured
15. Responsible	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Irresponsible
16. Impatient	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Patient
17. Sensitive	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Insensitive
18. Pessimistic	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Optimistic
19. Affectionate	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unaffectionate
20. Approachable	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unapproachable

<sup>1</sup> ©2014 Gary T. Reker

**Myself—The Way I Would Like to Be**

	Extremely	Very	Quite	Neutral	Quite	Very	Extremely	
1. Happy	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Sad
2. Friendly	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unfriendly
3. Incompetent	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Competent
4. Successful	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unsuccessful
5. Unreliable	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Reliable
6. Unforgiving	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Forgiving
7. Honest	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Dishonest
8. Shy	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Outgoing
9. Satisfied	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Dissatisfied
10. Unpopular	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Likeable
11. Insincere	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Sincere
12. Easy-going	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Uptight
13. Sloppy	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Careful
14. Apprehensive	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Self-assured
15. Responsible	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Irresponsible
16. Impatient	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Patient
17. Sensitive	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Insensitive
18. Pessimistic	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Optimistic
19. Affectionate	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unaffectionate
20. Approachable	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unapproachable

**Myself—The Way Others See Me**

	Extremely	Very	Quite	Neutral	Quite	Very	Extremely	
1. Happy	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Sad
2. Friendly	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unfriendly
3. Incompetent	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Competent
4. Successful	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unsuccessful
5. Unreliable	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Reliable
6. Unforgiving	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Forgiving
7. Honest	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Dishonest
8. Shy	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Outgoing
9. Satisfied	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Dissatisfied
10. Unpopular	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Likeable
11. Insincere	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Sincere
12. Easy-going	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Uptight
13. Sloppy	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Careful
14. Apprehensive	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Self-assured
15. Responsible	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Irresponsible
16. Impatient	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Patient
17. Sensitive	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Insensitive
18. Pessimistic	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Optimistic
19. Affectionate	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unaffectionate
20. Approachable	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unapproachable

**The Way I View Other People**

	Extremely	Very	Quite	Neutral	Quite	Very	Extremely	
1. Happy	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Sad
2. Friendly	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unfriendly
3. Incompetent	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Competent
4. Successful	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unsuccessful
5. Unreliable	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Reliable
6. Unforgiving	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Forgiving
7. Honest	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Dishonest
8. Shy	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Outgoing
9. Satisfied	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Dissatisfied
10. Unpopular	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Likeable
11. Insincere	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Sincere
12. Easy-going	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Uptight
13. Sloppy	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Careful
14. Apprehensive	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Self-assured
15. Responsible	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Irresponsible
16. Impatient	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Patient
17. Sensitive	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Insensitive
18. Pessimistic	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Optimistic
19. Affectionate	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unaffectionate
20. Approachable	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unapproachable

**My Life up to this Point**

A. Please **rate** what you believe **your life has been like up to this point** on the following scales (place an X on the line that best represents your belief).

	Extremely	Very	Quite	Neutral	Quite	Very	Extremely	
1. useful	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	useless
2. supported	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	unsupported
3. negative	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	positive
4. enriched	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	impoverished
5. meaningless	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	meaningful
6. empowered	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	powerless
7. sad	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	happy
8. supportive	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	unsupportive
9. boring	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	interesting
10. coherent	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	incoherent
11. isolated	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	connected
12. complicated	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	uncomplicated
13. chaotic	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	ordered
14. active	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	passive
15. incomplete	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	complete
16. altruistic	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	self-centered
17. stressful	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	relaxing
18. purposeful	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	purposeless
19. fulfilled	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	unfulfilled
20. regretful	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	unregretful