

Introduction to the Special Section: The Value of Personal Memories

The Worth of Personal Memories: *Reviewing, Letting Go, or ... Obliterating?*

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Following Webster, Bohlmeijer and Westerhof (2010) one can usefully distinguish three types of interventions based on memories of one's life. *Reminiscence interventions* facilitate the recollection and sharing of memories with others in order to provide cognitive and social stimulation, promote bonding, and elevate mood. Characteristically they focus on positive memories and involve limited reevaluation of the memories. *Life-review interventions* consist of systematically reviewing memories of all phases of life from childhood to old age, giving them a constructive meaning that will sustain identity and purpose, and thus promote well-being. *Life-review therapies* bolster life review with psychotherapeutic strategies and techniques, such as those of cognitive therapy and narrative therapy. Typically they have been developed to help people battling depression. Through directed reappraisal and reinterpretation of memories these interventions help the depressed person change her or his way of thinking about events of the past and view of one's self.

Research evidence has accumulated in the last 20 years for the usefulness of the various forms of reminiscence interventions (for a review: Caza, 2013; Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014). Meta-analyses (e.g. Pinquart & Forstmeier, 2012) have shown that these interventions improve well-being and relieve depression, the effects being strongest for life-review therapies, to a degree similar to cognitive-behavior therapy. Indeed a review using standardized criteria reported that life-review therapies meet the standards of evidence-based psychological treatments for geriatric depression (Scogin, Welsh, Hanson, Stump, & Coates, 2005). Regarding processes at work, it appears that the reevaluation and cognitive restructuring of memories that are the core of life-review therapies constitute the crucial components explaining the efficacy of these interventions in clinical depression. Congruent with theories, increases in mastery and life

meaning (Korte, Westerhof, & Bohlmeijer, 2012) and in the sense of personal control and efficacy (Hallford, Mellor, & Cummings, 2013) have been identified as mediators of the therapeutic effects for these interventions in depression.

In summary, a large body of knowledge in the fields of reminiscence and life review advocates for the position that the evaluation and integration of memories, both positive and negative, into a coherent and meaningful whole contribute in large measure to psychological well-being and mental health in later age. This sizeable constituency endorses the view that memories define who we are and that their preservation, at all phases of life and especially in older age, is vital for our identity and our well-being.

Yet is it always good to remember and review? Could the argument be formulated that, in some situations at least, it would be better to leave the past alone and move on? Sales, Merrill, and Fivush (2013), referring to the survivors of the Holocaust, have stated that for those who have experienced a trauma of such magnitude "it may healthier not to reason about their past lives...and simply move forward and assume one can change the future rather than to try to make sense of a past that may simply be senseless" (p. 19-20). And we have known for some time (e.g. Coleman, 1986) that older adults do not subscribe unambiguously to life review, about half of them seeing no point at all in reviewing their past and, for that matter, not feeling any worse for it.

Recent research developments in cognitive neurosciences go some steps further than this general proposition of letting go. The prospect of altering our personal memories, once a mere fantasy, is now taking shape. Keeping the better memories and "editing out" the disturbing ones is in the realm of near future possibilities.

Experimental work demonstrates the feasibility of purely and simply eradicating some memories (Lu, 2015). For instance, research done with mice, using cell-manipulation techniques, has shown how the emotional valence of memories can be experimentally altered, in other words manipulated "externally" (Redondo et al., 2014). Furthermore, it is now possible to generate a fear

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memory, internally represented as well as behaviorally expressed, through artificial means (Ramirez et al., 2013).

A number of researchers in the domain of what we can call external memory manipulation have clarified that their ultimate objective is a clinical one, i.e. the treatment of mental health problems such as PTSD and depression. This line of research springs from the discovery of a particular memory process, called reconsolidation. It is known that when memories are reactivated they return to an unstable state from which they must again restabilize in order to persist. In other words, they go through a process of reconsolidation (Nader, Hardt, & Lanius, 2001). This discovery opens up new vistas in the treatment of disturbing flashbacks in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It is conceivable to attempt blocking the reconsolidation of a then reactivated memory by chemical means, leading eventually to the removal of that memory.

Intervention consisting in the administration of the beta-blocker propranolol during the reconsolidation period is representative of that area of research (see Westerhof, this issue). Research shows that this pharmacological intervention, while not erasing the recollection of the events per se, “numbs” the emotional and physiological responses and related distress (Soeter & Kindt, 2010). In other words, the injection of the beta-blocker suppresses the memory-enhancing effect of strong emotional arousal. This area of research could open new avenues for the treatment of mental disorders, not only for PTSD but also addiction, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), depression, and psychotic symptoms of delusions and hallucinations.

In brief, these works claim the benefits of fundamentally altering, even eradicating, personal memories via external manipulations. As said above, this perspective stands in sharp contrast with the widespread view that weaving personal memories into an integrated and meaningful life story is a developmentally salient undertaking in later life, resulting in well-being.

These developments are not immune to controversy. Critics have said that changing the contents of our memories, even just altering their emotional tonalities—however desirable for traumatic memories—could subtly reshape who we are (President’s Council on Bioethics, 2003). Identity involves a temporally extended aspect, involving past, present and future, which could be compromised when memories are “erased.” As Hancock (2016) has formulated, “While we are custodians of our memories, we neither choose nor own them, but rather they own and choose us, making us who we are.” (p.4). If we take chess as an analogy to life story, each move by one piece not only alters the relationships among all other pieces involved in the action but also changes our understandings of all previous moves. Indeed, what about learning from these negative experiences? What about the way in which those incidents shaped us? Would personality and experiences still make sense without that context?

These recent developments spark an interesting debate on the value of personal memories and on their role in

psychological functioning, with conceptual, ethical, and practical ramifications. Stated bluntly, these developments raise the question: Is it worthwhile to invest the effort to make sense of one’s past, or instead to let go and, or as we say in vernacular language, to “forget it?”

To orient our discussion on this topic, I have asked two eminent colleagues in the fields of autobiographical memory and reminiscence, Susan Bluck and Gerben Westerhof, to provide their insights, which they presented in a forum at the 2015 conference of the International Institute for Reminiscence and Life Review in Orlando, Florida. The scope and depth of their communications at this conference, and the great interest they generated, justified making them accessible in the form of articles, which you will find next. We hope that reading their contributions will help you sharpen your own thoughts about this important topic.

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