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Re/composing Memories: Aging, Emotion, and Autobiographical Memory

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Memory is an elusive and yet compelling concept. In this paper, we explore the narrative complexity of autobiographical memory, from Randall and McKim's (2008) existing framework that outlines four overlapping angles: *truth-wise*, *self-wise*, *time-wise*, and *other-wise*. We seek to take up and extend each of these angles, or dimensions, aiming to bring them to life with empirical data - and we propose a fifth angle*, emotion-wise*, highlighting the affective nature of autobiographical memory. Based on participant observation, life history interviews, and the written memoirs of older adults who participated in (primarily) library-based writing groups in Southern Ontario, Canada, we employed narrative inquiry to investigate the process and activity of writing as a leisure practice. In our data, participants discuss their unconscious and/or deliberate blurring of fact (reality) versus imagination in their memory-based accounts. They reflect on their shifting conceptions of past, present, and future selves within the stories they tell as well as their recounted experiences of self-discovery and self-exploration. They also explore the role of others in shaping their stories and memories. Throughout, the influence of emotion is palpable. We posit that dynamic reminiscence, such as that represented by the crafting of memoirs within writing groups, enables the exploration of these dimensions of autobiographical memory. As such, the capacity of participants to engage in narrative practice is nurtured, and the greater is the concordant capacity for development, growth, (self-)wisdom in later life.

Key words: Aging; Memory; Emotion; Dynamic Reminiscence; Memoir

> *"…the past is beautiful because one never realizes an emotion at the time. It expands later, & thus we don't have complete emotions about the present, only about the past."*
> – Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume Three: 1925-1930*

Autobiographical memory has long been a topic—or concept—of interest to neuroscientists, psychologists, sociologists, and gerontologists alike. Various metaphors have been employed to hypothesize how autobiographical memory might function, the most dominant of which is mechanical, with focus and attention paid to how memories are encoded, stored, or retrieved as though they are files in a computer (Randall, 2007; Rubin, 2012). This framework has undoubtedly contributed to our understanding of the complexity of memory, but some have argued it leaves insufficient room for the subjective and emotive experience of remembering incidents and episodes from our past (Schacter, 2001). Scholarship that explores the emotional aspects of memory (and/or the role of memory in emotion) has largely not addressed this lacuna - again, primarily exploring how certain emotional states and/or stimuli might implicate the encoding of memory (what gets remembered) and the retrieval of memory (Cappeliez, 2020; Kensinger & Schacter, 2008; Mills, 1997; Strongman, 1996). Indeed, much of this literature has been behavioural in nature–examining (and seeking to measure) how emotion influences the number (quantity) of events remembered, on the subjective vividness (quality) of the remembered events, and on the amount of 'accurate' detail remembered about prior experiences (Habermas, 2019; Holland & Kensinger, 2010; Kensinger & Schacter, 2008). However, there are a few scholars, largely within narrative gerontology, who have entered into this conversation about the complexity of autobiographical memory and the role of emotion therein.

In this paper, we seek to contribute to this scholarship and further tease out the emotional (or affective) aspects of memory. Herein, we share findings from a qualitative study of both the processes and the outputs of crafting leisure biographies in guided memoir-writing groups for older adults. Our objective of this study was to understand the meaning of leisure for older people by elucidating the

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types of memories that are associated with, and the stories that are told about, leisure by older adults. Our intent in this paper is to illustrate the complexity of auto-biographical memory with respect to aging and narrative identity, and the narrative practice that each of our participants (and ourselves) were in the midst of actively negotiating and reflecting upon. In so doing, we explore the narrative complexity of autobiographical memory from Randall and McKim's (2008) four overlapping angles of *truth-wise*, *self-wise*, *time-wise*, and *other-wise*. We then conclude by arguing that the affective nature of autobiographical memory could complement Randall and McKim's (2008) framework as an additional dimension.

Narrative Gerontology and Autobiographical Memory

A central premise of both narrative psychology and narrative gerontology is that we are all meaning-making beings (Randall, 2011). Alongside his colleague, Elizabeth McKim (Randall & McKim, 2008), Randall's assertion is that each one of us experiences and understands our lives (and thus ourselves) both *as* stories that are unfolding over time and *through* storytelling. For these scholars, the mechanistic computational metaphor for autobiographical memory is insufficient. As Randall (2007, p. 612) argues, "...where it is lacking is in its ability to capture, among other things, the subtle ways in which memory actually feels to us as we age." Randall (2007; Randall & McKim, 2008) proposes the compost heap as an alternative metaphor for autobiographical memory, the organic nature thereof allowing us to better consider the less tangible, less measurable, and more dynamic elements of memory. From this perspective, the "sins" (or the inefficiencies) of memory are highlighted (Schacter, 2001).

From this perspective, memory is itself based in story and can be explored from four overlapping angles: truth-wise, self-wise, time-wise, and other-wise (Randall & McKim, 2008). The truth-wise angle addresses the imaginative dimension of autobiographical memory, wherein truth is described as a "thorny issue" for three main reasons: the backward gaze of time (or a subjective, interpreted recall), the tendency to condense the past, and the (debated) definition of truth itself (pp.155-159). The individual dimension of memory is described within the self-wise angle. Here, Randall and McKim (2008, pp. 159-163) explain that just as our sense of self is rooted in what we remember, so what we remember depends on our sense of self (or selves) that does the remembering. The time-wise angle picks up on the temporal dimension of memory, wherein both levels of time (lifetime periods, general events, specific events) and modes of time (past, present, future) are relevant (pp. 151-155). Lastly, Randall and McKim (2008) describe the other-wise angle as being the relational dimension of memory - wherein there is acknowledgement that relationships elicit selves and that environments evoke memories (pp. 163-166). These four angles demonstrate just how intricate the realm of memory is. In addition, attention to these four angles, when exploring autobiographical memories, can lend insight into the dynamic complexity that can characterize reminiscence.

Reminiscence – Dynamic and Otherwise

Reminiscence can take many forms (creative expression, group and individual interventions, and it may be formal or informal), and as such a singular definition is somewhat elusive. However, it tends to include a focus on autobiographical memory and, like narrative, meaning-making (Gibson, 2004). Reminiscence emerged from Butler's (1963) work on 'life review' and is theoretically based on Erikson's ontogenetic model. Here, the idea is that old age tensions between ego-integrity and despair must be resolved by means of retrospection in order to achieve wisdom (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986).

The documented psychosocial and health benefits related to reminiscence include helping to manage anxiety and depression, combating social isolation through relationship building, adapting to change, and enhancing general well-being (Gibson, 2004; Griffin et al., 2019; Pinquart & Forstmeier, 2012; Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014; Zauszniewski et al., 2004; Zhou et al., 2011). While these benefits have been noted in diverse groups, such as older adults (Pöllänen & Hirsimäki, 2014), findings regarding the efficacy of reminiscence are mixed (Forsman, Schierenbeck, & Wahlbeck, 2011; McKee et al., 2005; Zauszniewski et al., 2004). This may be partially due to the different ways in which researchers have defined and applied reminiscence in these studies (Lin, Dai, & Hwang, 2004). It may also be due, in part, to inherent risks associated with the process and whether the reminiscence is adaptive or maladaptive (Fernandez-Perez et al., 2020; O'Rourke, Cappeliez, & Claxton, 2011). For instance, reminiscing about regrets has been found to correlate with poorer social well-being and psychological morale, and lower positive affect (Fernandez-Perez et al., 2020; McKee et al., 2005; O'Rourke et al., 2011). Further, when reminiscence serves the function of bitterness revival, boredom reduction, rumination and/or death preparation, it has been associated with poorer psychological health (Cully, La Voie, & Gfeller, 2001; Korte, Westerhof, & Bohlmeijer, 2012; McKee et al., 2005; O'Rourke et al., 2011). Freeman (2011, p. 10) summarizes this eloquently by describing, "…looking backward, one can sometimes see certain features of the past for the very first time; and while the result can be great joy and gratitude, it can also be the deepest pain and regret."

The potentially therapeutic effect of reminiscence gains traction for narrative scholars who have observed that far too many older adults face these later life losses and challenges with inadequate narrative resources, and thus too meager a sense of meaning at their disposal (Freeman, 2010; Randall, 2011). This is especially important in later life, during the so-called 'narrative phase' (Freeman, 1997)—throughout which meaning making is vital to our continued development. As Randall (2011, p. 24) writes: "Simply put, the older we get, the more meaning we require in order to cope with, and grow

through, the losses and challenges…that later life can bring." Further, the potential for reminiscence to be therapeutic grows when we seek to tell reflective, dynamic stories rather than fixed, set-piece, or well-rehearsed stories (Randall & McKim, 2008). Chandler and Ray (2002) describe dynamic reminiscence as a type of remembering that leads to self-discovery—prompting us to recontextualize and reinterpret both memories and stories told on the basis of those memories. As Randall and McKim (2008, p. 203) write, "dynamic reminiscence represents simultaneously the stirring up of memory and the breaking down of our tried-and-true habits of interpreting the past. It is a way of both expanding and examining our stories at once, one memory at a time." For these authors (Chandler & Ray, 2002; Randall & McKim, 2008; Ray, 2000), dynamic reminiscence is key to growth in later life—that in being both conscious and reflective of the stories we are telling, and in deliberately seeking to examine, extend and expand those stories, our interpretive possibilities become more profound and more comprehensive.

The original intention of our empirical project was to investigate the meaning of leisure for older adults by elucidating the types of memories that are associated with, and the stories that are told about, leisure in later life. The goal was to explore both the process and the outcome of crafting and co-creating leisure memoirs in guided (largely library-based) writing groups for older adults. This, we anticipated, would allow insight into the role that leisure has played across the life course of participants, which we posited may have implications for present-day leisure meaning-making and engagement. Hence, we started off interested in how (and what) participants might write about leisure experiences—past, present, and future. Given the conversations that ensued and the rich narratives that were elicited, this original focus remained but evolved into an additional interest in writing as a form of leisure practice. The methodological implications of this were a shift to a focus on narrative practice (Bamberg, 2012) rather than (or, more accurately, in addition to) narrative outputs.

Narrative practice, or the practice of narrativity, extends analysis to the work and the circumstances of storytelling (Hyvärinen, 2008), such that the everyday processes that shape how stories are constructed, whether and how they are conveyed and received, and their interconnections become of interest (Gubrium, 2010). Not a novel concept, 'narrative practice' thus turns attention to the activities of storytelling, the resources used to tell stories, and the auspices under which stories are told (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). As Bamberg (2012, p. 207; 2011) describes, a focus on narrative practice deliberately seeks to recognize that:

> "…when people engage in storytelling — whether they are about whole lives or a moment that is captured in four seconds…whether these stories are about others or whether they topicalize/thematize moments of the life of the speaker (as in self-disclosures), whether they are fictional or not — when engaging in storytelling, people point indexically to how they anchor their position from where they want to be understood."

Bamberg (2012) points out that each position taken within the telling of a story is situational and may change from one interactional setting to the next, affected by environments and repertoires and social practices. Stories, and the telling thereof, are thus a dynamic, active, and artful negotiation of identity and relationality—an essential source of psycho-socio-cultural learning that shape who we are and might become (Smith & Sparkes, 2009; Spector-Mersel, 2010).

Memoir, as a genre and as narrative practice, can be argued to be imbued with a form of narrative ethics, in that it requires the author to think *with* the story they are telling (Frank, 1995). As Frank (1995, p. 158) writes:

> ...the moral imperative of narrative ethics is perpetual self-reflection on the sort of person that one's story is shaping one into, entailing the requirement to change that self-story if the wrong self is being shaped. Narrative ethics is an ethics of commitment to shaping oneself as a human being.

The auspices under which memoirs are written and shared allow for both author and audience to think with the story that is being told. As part of this, when we write memoirs and when we think with stories, if doing so 'ethically', we do not "...immediately move on once the story has been heard, but continue to live in the story, becoming in it, reflecting on who one is becoming, and gradually modifying the story" (Sparkes, 2003, p. 170; Frank, 2010; 1995). Attention to narrative practice and narrative ethics is thus theoretically aligned with a life course perspective (Marshall & Mueller, 2003).

Method

This study took place in Southern Ontario, Canada. At the outset, the research team attended a regular meeting of a pre-existing writing group at the main branch of a public library. We described the research aims and expectations, circulated information sheets, and answered questions that arose. We were explicit that participation was voluntary, and those who chose to participate would: a) be observed during the guided writing sessions for a period of 15 weeks; b) participate in one face-to-face life history interview; and c) share pieces of memoir writing that they felt were relevant to the project. Participants were recruited first via purposeful (in this pre-existing group) and then via snowball sampling by expanding to writing groups in other libraries within the region and to non-library affiliated writing groups within the community.

Participants

Twenty-six individuals agreed to participate. Participants were all, or had been, members of a public library-based writing group. Several were accomplished writers, having published their work. Some participants had subsequently ceased participation in a public writing group setting and now enjoyed writing as a solitary leisure activity or had since established a private writing group with closely aligned peers. However, many participants were novices to the task and practice of writing. The final participant profile included: (a) an age range between 56 and 88 (average age of 71); (b) two males and twenty-four females (relatively proportionate to the ratio of males to females in the writing groups observed); (c) almost entirely Canadian-born individuals, primarily Caucasian, with three identifying as a racial/ethnic minority (two Métis, one Egyptian immigrant); and (d) several participants (6/26) who self-reported as living with a disability and/or chronic illness. While we did not collect explicit data regarding socioeconomic status (e.g., annual household income), we did have several participants (5/26) who discussed either living in social housing or receiving social assistance and/or a disability pension. See Table 1. Each participant was interviewed in person for approximately one to two hours using a semi-structured, life story interview guide (Riessman, 2008). The interview guide consisted of open-ended prompts which served as a conversational agenda in which to navigate these narrative exchanges (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Interviews were digitally audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim. In the data shared within this paper, all names used are pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

The collected data were first subjected to a categorical-content analysis of the life history interviews, observations, and written memoirs (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). As Lieblich et al. (1998) describe, categorical-content analysis focuses on the 'whats' rather than the 'hows' of storytelling by scrutinizing stories for similarities and disjunctures, patterns, and central themes. In terms of analytical steps, this approach involved: 1) selection of the subtext; 2) definition of the content categories; 3) sorting the material into the categories; and 4) drawing conclusions from the results (Lieblich et al., 1998, pp. 112-114). We analyzed the interviews, observations, and memoirs for content categories openly, and then "defined the major content categories that emerge[d] from the reading" (p. 113). The strength of this form of analysis lies in its capacity to develop general knowledge about the core themes that make up the content of the stories collected.

However, after completing the categorical-content analysis, we felt that our analytical strategy was fracturing the data excessively. To mitigate this and further consider what we saw as integral components of how participants were constructing meaning of their experiences, we decided to expand our data analysis method to include a holistic-content analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998). In this approach, researchers look at separate sections of the story (in our case, life story or memoir) to analyze the meanings in light of content that emerges from the rest of the narrative or in the context of the story in its entirety (Lieblich et al., 1998). We thus followed the five analytic steps of holistic-content analysis as described by Lieblich et al. (1998, pp. 62-63), in that we: 1) repeatedly read the transcribed material until a pattern emerged; 2) composed an interpretation of the life story; 3) located important themes arising out of the conversations; 4) returned to the transcribed narrative and marked each emergence of identified themes; and 5) made note of our conclusions after analyzing each narrative for identified themes.

Within this approach, "narrative" very much encompasses the researchers' interpretations of stories (Wells, 2011). This analytic perspective attempts to steer clear of any notion of objectivity by pointing to the researchers' interpretations as also constituting a story with subjective meaning attached. As Lieblich et al. (1998) explain, holistic-content analysis is more suited to research that focuses on "the person as a whole, that is, his or her development to the current position" (p. 12). Thus, looking at the evolution of participants' stories through a holistic content analysis, we were able to elucidate and explore the narrative complexity of autobiographical memory.

Through this described analytical process, Randall and McKim's (2008) four overlapping angles of *truth-wise*, *self-wise*, *time-wise*, and *other-wise* were identified as relevant within the stories told. Here, we take up and extend each of these angles, or dimensions, seeking to bring them to life with empirical data using verbatim quotations from the life history interviews and excerpts from written memoirs. Throughout each of the findings sections below, we are especially attentive to the affective nature of autobiographical memory, which we will later argue is an additional dimension that could complement Randall and McKim's (2008) framework.

Results

Truth-wise: Blending Fiction and Memoir

We begin with a nod to the issue of truth within autobiographical memory and how many of our participants could be said to be engaging in dynamic reminiscence via memoir-writing wherein truth (and memories thereof) is a deliberately constructed concept. There is great debate over the level of veracity a memoir must have, in order to be classified in the genre (Olney, 1998; Pascal, 1960; Schwartz, 1998). But the issue of truth, Randall and McKim (2008) write, is "...problematic for at least three main reasons: the backward gaze of time, the tendency to condense the past, and the definition of 'truth' itself" (p. 155). When an event or experience is re-told, emotions are stirred, which in turn can affect the meaning and interpretation of the memory (Bernsten & Rubin,

Table 1

Participant information

Pseudonym	Library or Private Group	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Education	Occupation	Social class	Marital status	Living Children (if known)	(dis)ability (if disclosed)
William	Library	M	74	Métis	College	Part-Time (real estate)	Middle Class	Divorced	2	Arthritis
Mary	Library	F	65	Métis	University Degree	Retired (social services)	Middle Class	Divorced	3	
Joanne	Library	F	73	Caucasian	Unknown	Retired (retail)	Lower SES	Divorced	1	Cane
Emily	Library	F	79	Caucasian	Unknown Degree	Retired (secretarial)	Un- Known	Widow (Twice)	3	
Doris	Library	F	Over 70	Caucasian	Unknown Degree	Retired (healthcare)	Un- Known	Un-Known	2	
Beth	Library	F	56	Caucasian	Unknown	Retired (education)	Upper Class	Married	2	
Charlotte	Library	F	80s	Caucasian	Some High School	Retired (education)	Lower SES	Widow	3	
Edith	Library	F	73	Caucasian	Some High School	Retired (self-employed)	Middle Class	Married	2?	
Louisa	Library	F	65	Caucasian	GED	Volunteer	Low SES	Divorced	2	Motorized wheelchair & Multiple Health Problems
Margaret	Library	F	58	Caucasian	Diploma	Part-time (secretarial)	Low SES	Divorced	4	Multiple Health Problems
Sylvia	Library	F	60	Caucasian	High School Degree	retired (secretarial)	Middle Class	Married	1	
Gertrude	Library	F	59	Caucasian	College Diploma	Retired (education)	Low SES	Divorced	3	Multiple Health Problems
Elizabeth	Library	F	83	Caucasian	High School Degree	retired (retail)	Middle Class	Widow (Twice)	3	Cancer Survivor
Dorothy	Library	F	58	Caucasian	University Degree	Retired	Middle Class	Married	0	
Iris	Library	F	Over 65	Caucasian	University Degree	Retired (education)	Middle Class	Married	not disclosed	
Jane	Library	F	Over 65	Caucasian	University Degree	Retired (education)	Middle Class	Married	4	
Harper	Library	F	87	Caucasian	University Degree	Retired (self-employed)	Middle Class	Divorced	3	
Agatha	Library	F	71	Caucasian	University Degree	Retired (private sector)	Middle Class	Divorced	0	
Ursula	Library	F	Over 70	Caucasian	University Degree	Retired (education)	Middle Class	Divorced	4	
Willa	Private	F	67	Caucasian	University Degree	Retired (private sector)	Middle Class	Widow	1	
David	Library	M	Over 60	Caucasian	University Degree	Retired (education)	Middle Class	Married	1	
Barbara	Library	F	71	Caucasian	University Degree	Retired (healthcare)	Upper Class	Widow	2	
Anne	Library	F	Over 55	Middle Eastern	University Degree	Retired (education)	Upper Class	Married	2	
Edna	Private	F	88	Caucasian	University Degree	Retired (secretarial)	Middle Class	Widow	2	
Flannery	Private	F	Over 50	Caucasian	Graduate Degree	Retired (education)	Middle Class	Married	2	
Shirley	Private	F	75	Caucasian	Graduate Degree	Retired (healthcare)	Middle Class	Divorced	2	Cancer Survivor

2012). As such, what is (versus what is not) a truthful memory is nearly impossible to discern - nor, many argue, should it matter (Bruner, 2005; Freeman, 2002). Indeed, according to Giorgio (2009), "memoir is confessional; its truths located in the facts *as you remember them*" (p. 153; emphasis added). That these revelations are balanced by either deliberately or inadvertently leaving out of some facts and memories is entirely at the author's discretion. Several participants within our study were overtly reflective about the fine lines between memory and truth and imagination. For example, when introducing his memoir, David inscribed the following in the foreword:

> This memoir is as close to actual events as the vagaries of time will allow. Memories fade, identities quickly merge, dates mix up, names are misspelled, past heated conversations are dulled, and epiphanic moments morph into the mundane. Therefore, I have embraced this flow of time with some abandon.

This echoes narrative literature, wherein it is acknowledged that memory "…is an act of imagination, a creative process of crafting meaning from the remnants of time" (Cole & Winkler, 1994, p. 11). The truth within the gathered memoirs, for our authors thereof, has little to do with verifiable facts. It is an emotional truth (Schwartz, 1998), or an aesthetic truth: "...it is a truth less of facts than of feelings, less of events than of insights" (Randall & McKim, 2008, p. 159).

Emotional (or aesthetic) truth allows the author to privilege their own memory, even if that memory is flawed—perhaps especially in that instance, because often in writing one is trying to make sense of an unresolved thought, event, or situation (Pennebaker, 1990). Schwartz (1998, p. 37) justifies this practice using the permissions of Joan Didion—that if you [the author] remember it, it's true:

> *Perhaps it never did snow that August in Vermont; perhaps there never were flurries in the night wind, and maybe no one else felt the ground hardening and summer already dead even as we pretended to bask in it, but that was how it felt to me, and it might as well have snowed, could have*

> *snowed, did snow. (Didion, 1968, 'On keeping a notebook, p. 134)*

Many of our participants cited this same claim to truth in their authorship. Others, like Charlotte, claimed they were writing their truth—but they were well aware that others' truths (and memories) of the same events and storylines would be very different:

> My memoir is literally my experiences as I recall it. From when I was a small child, and my parents' background as much as they told me. And then my life with my children. Which is funny, because...I told my sons...a story I was writing. I related the story to them. My oldest son said "Mom, that didn't happen that way" and I said, "Oh, ok, tell me how it happened." So, he told me. My other son said, "That didn't happen that way." So just three of us, all with a different perspective of what had happened... So, I said, this is my book. You know? If you want to change it, you can, but this is the way I saw it.

Further reflecting on the role of truth in memory, another participant (Edith) stated: "My memories are not that great, by the way. I know that dreams can become part of your memories or things your parents told you but… it's still me even if I'm imagining…"

Deliberately blurring the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction within storytelling can also be done to protect anonymity of narrators and characters within the stories told (Netolicky, 2015; Schwartz, 1998), thereby constructing boundaries protecting the author from potentially harmful emotions (e.g., guilt, embarrassment, shame). Several of our participants engaged in this practice, either in the original writing or in their polishing thereof: "I've edited them a little bit… Taking out things that might offend... if it's going to hurt somebody's feelings or something" (Edna). Such practices included shifting details and adjusting character traits so as not to alienate friends or family. Similarly, Ursula described being conscious of her audience/readers—either changing what she writes (and the level of identifiable detail) or restricting who she chooses to share her stories with: "...I've written a lot that I would never—in fact, I don't think anybody's—I let my daughter read one and she started to cry and I never let her read another one." Yet another participant, Margaret, revealed that many of her stories dated back to her involvement with organized crime, but instead of writing directly about those experiences she deliberately disguised characters, settings, and the like, and instead wrote about themes like power and control to express these memories.

Still others recounted using memoir as a way to discover 'truth' — about themselves, or about the past—and so practiced writing in a more reflective or "speculative" way (Chandler & Ray, 2002, p. 90). As Gertrude describes about one of her writing practices:

> I wanted to write a retrospective on 2015. I wanted it to be poignant and thoughtful and heart-felt. The problem is, I don't remember much of it! When I look back in my mind through the past year, not much really stands out. Maybe that's just as well. Anyway, I am just going to do a stream of consciousness thing and see what happens.

This openness to unearthing not just previous experiences, but the meaning of those experiences, ties back to the practice of dynamic reminiscence (Chandler & Ray, 2002)—wherein remembering has the capacity to lead to the "...discovery of something new inside of us, through a reconfiguration of the relationship between our past and our present, and between specific episodes and the story of my life as a whole" (Randall & McKim, 2008, p. 203). The next section regarding the self (and self-discovery) will take up this idea in more detail, exploring participants' reflections about themselves, their stories, and their past, present, and future.

Self-Wise: Who was I? Who am I now? Who can I be?

As the previous section concluded, though they had different impetuses for doing so, many of our participants were engaging in a very deliberate exploration of the self in writing, or in practicing the writing of, memoir. In Bruner's (1994, p. 53) words, "...self is a perpetually rewritten story," and as such it is difficult to define. Certainly, some memories are what Randall and McKim (2008, p. 159) call "self-defining", in that they are seen by the rememberer as formative. But these memories still are not:

> "…straight recordings of actual occurrences, devoid of bias or interpretation and with all of the details intact. They are stories – big or little, long or short – that we weave (and re-weave) around original occurrences to invest them with personal significance… They are edited, interpreted renditions of past episodes (positive or negative) as viewed through the lens of our agendas in the present in light of our expectations for the future." (Randall, 2011, p.23)

Writing memoir allows for the deliberate revisitation of these formative, self-defining memories—not to record them in indelible ink or render them un-editable—but for the author to find out more about themselves and how, or if, that memory fits with their conception(s) of self. There are countless examples of this in our data: recollections of childhood Christmases (and other holidays), colourful neighbourhoods and characters, first days of school, experiences of bullying or friendship or heartbreak. These stories are a mixture of fact and affect, but the self-reflection is quite evident. For instance, when recounting moving into her first apartment, Sylvia's final sentence is: "And I miss that feeling of absolute confidence and infinite possibility that only comes with being young and your first

taste of independence." From such a statement, it is possible to infer that the young adulthood 'self' that Sylvia is writing about is quite different to her current self and experience(s) of independence.

Further, Flannery comments on how engaging in writing practices and responding to writing prompts can be a process of self-discovery:

> The stories that you write about something are intimately tied with who you are as a person and where you came from as a person… who your parents were and how you interacted with your parents... Where you lived, what kind of house you lived in, what school was like, whether you had friends and what you did when you were a child… I think for a lot of women in the writing group, it helps them come to terms with the losses that they've had, the things that were good about their lives and so on, to just sort of trace the path… that's why I think the forced writing [exercise] is interesting because you'll be asked to write about something and say, "Pick a line from this poem that means something to you." And it leads back to a story from when you were a child or it makes you think about an experience that you had.

Writing, and writing memoir in particular, helped our participants to get to know themselves better. Another of our participants, Beth, explained that she enjoyed writing so much partially because it helped her learn about herself:

> I just think it's a nice thing to do, to review things and it kind of helps you bring things together. Kind of like, "Well, yes. I'm very much like my father in that way." Or you know what I mean? I just think it's - people always say to me, "How did you end up here?" Well, that's a bit of a story in itself... It's nice to pass that on, I think...I think it's just I like - I don't know, order or it just makes sense to me to kind of do that... for me, I guess writing is a way to make sense of things...For me, I find it kind of organizes my mind by being able to write it down. Maybe I'm remembering things that I haven't thought about in a long time and you're putting two and two together. Or you say, "Oh yes, I see a little bit of a - there's a theme here running through all of these." All of these things or you might just get one little thing from a word or from a visualization or something but then that might expand into something else…I think it just makes you be honest with yourself or it just kind of reinforces what you maybe knew but it wasn't in the front of your mind... It just kind of crystallizes things like that… It just kind of reinforces it and I guess it gives you ownership of that. It makes you realize that, yes, that is important to me. You think you'd know that, but you don't always.

In this way, writing has enabled Beth to learn about her past selves, make sense of her present selves, and (re)imagine her future selves.

Often, our participants illustrated their shifting perspectives and developing selfhood(s) through and via descriptions of their leisure participation across the life course. For example, in her memoir, Iris writes about how her gardening practices have shifted over the years with her changing, aging body:

> It happened gradually. First, my knees began to whine, then howl; soon my back joined in, and before I knew it, my body felt like a badly tuned heavy metal band. Condo living didn't appeal, so I opted for Plan B: a low-maintenance garden.

She goes on to outline strategic plant choices for maximum aesthetic effect and simultaneous ease of care. Throughout, she employs metaphors to juxtapose the adaptation of the garden with changes within her person (or the garden as an extension of herself). Similarly, Ursula's memoir traces her experiences with cooking from early childhood with her mother, through transitions marking phases of life (moving out, finishing school, raising children, divorce and single parenting, empty-nesting, and being a grandmother). Self-development is emphasized in Ursula's cooking memoir, as she writes about lifelong learning, confidence, openness to new foods/adventures, and to new and changing family roles and living arrangements.

Time-Wise: Entering the Past, Imagining the Future

Picking up the temporal dimension (and temporal complexity) of autobiographical memory, Randall and McKim (2008) outline that memory is complicated in terms of both levels and modes of time. As mentioned in the previous section, present in Ursula's culinary memoir was the division of time into lifetime periods. This is a commonly practiced means of carving up memories into levels of time for presentation, in a memoir or similar account (Conway, 1995). Lifetime periods can overlap with one another, and within each lifetime period there are any number of both general events and specific events (Conway, 1995). The point, for memoir writers, is that it is possible to enter the "thicket of the past" (Randall & McKim, 2008, p. 152) from more than one direction. Certainly, these levels of time are well illustrated within our data—with participants starting with a specific event and expanding in breadth to lifetime period, or starting with a broad trigger and recalling *progressively* more specific events.

For instance, when asked if she writes about any memories from her childhood, Joanne shared how through the general event of riding the bus, she recalls multiple

specific events from her past tied to where the bus physically and metaphorically takes her:

> *Joanne*: What I should do, when I go on a bus, is take my pen and pencil with me, and I always forget it. Because the memories I have on the bus are... 'Cuz I lived [*location*] until I was 18. Well, I was 19, we lived on [*street*] when we got married and then moved...when I was pregnant with my son. [*Blank*] Road was a dirt road when we moved on to it in 1950, uh, …'53. Went to school and then I got a job at [*blank*]. So, I had to walk up to...get the bus to go downtown. But they put a[nother] bus in… And then one morning I slept in. And there was a knock on the door. It was the bus driver. He knew I had to go to work. And he stopped the bus and he come [*sic*] and knocked on the door. And, and, I thought, what a nice person that he would do that. He was an older gentleman. I can still see his face. But I didn't know who he was. But, I thought, whoa. And just, going around the different areas where I've lived. Just brings back.
>
> *Interviewer*: So, just riding around the bus brings back those memories of where you lived?
>
> *Joanne*: Yes. Yeah, all the memories come back. Some aren't good, but... I lived on [*road*]. I was 9. They were, um, paving [*another street*], so the bus had to come around by us. So, a friend and I said, let's get on the bus and go for a ride. We pretended to put our money in. I mean, we must've been 7. We went for a little ride. [*laughs*]. The bus driver didn't say anything to us, so. You know? Just little things like that. ...You just talk about one thing and then another thing comes up.

Triggered by riding the bus, Joanne describes memories as 'bringing her back' and 'just coming up—recalling both lifetime periods (early marriage and pregnancy), general events (taking the bus downtown for work), and specific events (the bus driver knocking on her door).

Conversely, several participants in this study offered stories of specific events, which they then generalized to broader periods in their lives as well as to historical periods. For example, Shirley wrote about a specific summer day as a child when she wanted to go swimming but was told she was not permitted due to the polio epidemic (a more general event in her story). Pivoting, she then detailed the epidemic's impact on children around her age living in her neighbourhood. A second example is offered by Mary, who wrote about the birth of her first child, which is set in the general period in her life as a young mother, with an abusive spouse who was opposed to vaccines. Her story jumps ahead in time to include several specific, relevant events: births of subsequent children; illnesses, specifically focused on measles; and interactions with healthcare professionals. Describing her rage with the life-long damage wrought by the virus on herself and her children, Mary concludes: "Measles was a scourge on my family, but, strangely and thankfully, it was also the motivation for finding the strength to get the kids and myself away from danger." In both of these examples, the events are contextualized by the emotions (fear and rage, respectively) these women recalled.

Modes of time are typically conceived as linear: past, present, and future—and these are present but complicated within our data. When writing about events, the authors manipulate the modes of time as a storytelling device. From these shared examples (Joanne's, Shirley's, and Mary's), we can see that time is not treated as a wholly linear concept. The authors might, for instance, skip through time, going forward and back to fit the narrative, rather than present the story chronologically. Westlund (2011, p. 395) writes about this quest to place memory fragments within a larger, coherent narrative structure: "...the autobiographer writes as though from a future perspective on his or her own life as a completed whole, in which the contingency of the present is transformed into the fixity of the past and the end is prefigured in the beginning." However, this sort of fixity is provisional and, in fact, eludes us as long as we continue to live (Westlund, 2011).

When the writers skipped through time, they often playfully wrote from the perspective of another (i.e., as parent or similar) or of a past self (self-as-child). In doing so, they would integrate a mixture of present and past social norms. Emily presents a good example of this in her piece, "Early Memories and Other Stories." She would have been five at the time of the tale she is recounting, but rather than telling the story from the present-day perspective, she tells it as if she is age five. Much like the teller at the age being represented, the stories deliberately lacked development. In so doing, she is purposely trying to depict events and memories as she experienced them, rife with misunderstandings, disjointedness, and confusion—rather than trying to make sense of them, or fill in gaps, retrospectively. As Randall and McKim (2008, p. 155) write: "Each time we remember... we do so from the midst of a different present and from a different stage in the history of our self." Realistically, Emily was likely still deconstructing and processing past (aged five) memories from her present-day lens—but that does not make the process, or the practice, any less valuable.

Writers would also gaze backward in time through the lens of their own socio-historical period when writing memoirs about friends and family members. In so doing, they would impose an anachronistic set of modern social norms on historical time periods, a concept called presentism. For instance, Elizabeth wrote a reflective piece about her mother, a woman she lauded as an exemplary carer of family members, friends, and community members. At her mother's funeral, as told by Elizabeth, her family laments that "she would have been a designer, an executive, or perhaps a nurse or a doctor," if only "she had been born a generation later." The result, in this case, of

this presentism is discounting her mother's vital social contributions.

In Elizabeth's example, and in others shared by participants, stories demonstrated relationships between modes of time by situating relationships in and across time. For example, participants shared that some people and events (past and future) are close, but also far away, and writing is a way to hold these people and events closer. This is exemplified by Anne, who often wrote about family and, in particular, her late daughter: "I hate to say it was therapeutic, because I'm not sure about that…. but it was a way of keeping my daughter close to me." Likewise, via her writing, Anne reached into the future to connect later generations with those that had passed: "My hope is to connect family…. So, my granddaughter liked the story, and it gave her a sense of her genealogy also." Our participants demonstrate that our lives in past, present, and imagined futures are closely and inherently linked with those of others. The expression of these generative and/or relational urges will be taken up in the following, final section.

Other-Wise: Who Is This Story For?

The author is never the sole character in a written memoir. Others shape the stories we live and the stories we revisit in writing. Others also implicate how we tell the stories we tell. According to Randall and McKim (2008), autobiographical memory has a complex relational dimension that is particularly visible when we consider the themes of how relationships elicit selves and how environments evoke memories. These themes are present and expanded upon with our data.

For our participants, relationships elicited selves in a variety of ways. Interpersonal relationships were integral in every memory recalled, every memoir crafted. Significant others were present and influential during both lifetime periods and memorable events, whether they were parents, siblings, friends, significant others, bosses, doctors, politicians, etc. These others, whether in close relationship with participants or not, shaped how they viewed and experienced the world—and thus also shaped the stories they told. There is not a memoir within our data set that does not demonstrate the role and influence of relationships on the author, some mundane and others emotive: the loss of a sister (David), an homage to a father (Ursula), the joys of grandparenting (Anne), Sunday dinners (Mary), and tales of fishing (William) highlight just a few. Also relevant to this idea of relationships eliciting selves is that interpersonal interactions can act to elicit certain memories (both in everyday life and within the writing groups in question). Writing prompt exercises were both observed and recounted to us by participants as being ways into a story, and, more often than not, it was another group member's story that stirred up a memory, which was subsequently written about. This resonates with Randall and McKim's (2008, p. 163) observation that "stories breed stories."

Interpersonal interactions also have the capacity to silence both specific memories (i.e., trauma) and the telling of certain stories (or not) to particular audiences. Accordingly, depending upon the situation and the audience, some stories are more tellable than others (Norrick, 2005; 2021; Smith & Sparkes, 2008). In her interview, Sylvia described how she makes decisions both about what to write about and what (of that writing) she might choose to share with others:

> There are certain things I probably wouldn't [*write about*]– especially when you're sharing it with a class full of people or people who are critiquing it. That's always in mind like, "Do I want people to read this?"...Sometimes I think it's an exercise for me and that's good enough to put it down and play with it and try to get it as good as I can, that I'm happy with it and think if no one else reads it, there was fun working on that and it brings up different ideas and different things you remember. Sometimes it makes you think of something that maybe you don't really want to – if I'm looking at it like funny stories that are the good parts from my family and my childhood and then sometimes I think, "I'm not going to talk about that one." [*Laughter*]. Then, I wonder, like, "Am I going to do that someday and deal with that?" ...if I'm putting little stories together for people to read, that probably won't go into it but maybe it's something you would write to work it out for yourself… It's interesting… I think sometimes it is personal and I don't want to maybe go too deeply into it and maybe take ownership for things. [*Laughter*]... and then again you think like that might hurt people if they saw that, and that wouldn't be my intention. I think I'd lean more towards the funny stories than maybe something brutally honest that would hurt someone down the line. Like when they joke when people say, "Two more people have to die before I can publish my memoirs," I don't want to do that. [*Laughter*].

Sylvia's reflections on writing practice demonstrates that tellability is consistently negotiated by author/teller and listener within particular contexts (Norrick, 2021; Ochs & Capps, 2001). As Norrick (2005, p. 327) describes, there are two sides to the notion of tellability:

> Some events bear too little significance (for this teller, this setting, these listeners) to reach the lower-bounding threshold of tellability, while others are so intimate (so frightening) that they lie outside the range of the tellable in the current context.

Perhaps because they were members of writing groups, our participants recounted a hyper-awareness of the potential feelings and reactions of the audience (or listeners) that

implicated which stories they chose to share—whether that be with family, within the writing group, or in general.

Relationships also elicited selves, in that the act of reminiscence is not always undertaken in isolation. Our participants recounted forms of collaborative memory-making, wherein stories become intertextually (and inextricably) intertwined with stories (and memories) of others. For example, one participant described how her foray into memoir writing had brought her together with her previously estranged brothers:

> *Interviewer*: You mentioned collaborating with your brothers. Is that more about stories that you wish to tell, or is this – or are you thinking with writing your memoirs that there would be a collorative effort?
>
> *Flannery*: It's more like do you remember this or do you – I remember mom this way, or do you remember this incident, or how do you remember this. We're all different ages and so we experience things differently. That's really – I mean I started with both of them maybe 10 years ago or so for birthdays. They don't live anywhere near here. We don't get together. Presents were not a thing. I started writing stories about home or memories and that really appealed to both of them.

Remembering alongside others affects both *what* we remember and *how* we remember it—and this interrelationality elicits certain remembered selves. As Randall and McKim (2008, p. 164) write: "... with every person in our circle, we share a distinctive history, and running through that history is, inevitably, a distinctive set of themes. Moreover, we will have laid down memories not just of ourselves but of ourselves with that particular individual."

Relationality also comes into the motivation for engaging in narrative practice such as memoir. Participants spoke of wanting to write about themselves, and their lives, so that those to come after (e.g., children, grandchildren) might know them better. Posterity and generativity were thus common motivations for engaging in narrative practice via memoir (see Griffin et al., 2019)—a desire to pass on knowledge(s) and experiences to others. For some participants, like Dorothy, writing was about educating future generations; about lives lived, mistakes made, and lessons learned:

> Now that both of my parents are slipping into dementia, it's a question of trying to get those stories out of them and with some sort of degree [of] comprehension I guess, so that they make sense for younger generations and the generation below that doesn't seem to be interested, but maybe they will be later.

In other cases, participants described writing in order to revisit and reframe traumatic experiences, including toxic or damaging relationships with significant others. These writings are often very raw and sometimes very clearly still 'in progress'—where the author is exploring themes of absolution and exoneration (for both themselves and for others), and for some, imagined reconciliation. This was the case for Margaret, who wrote about anti-semitism after reading about a person who was killed at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and Gertrude, who used the anonymity of blogging to deconstruct failed relationships with lovers and children, engage in reconciliation with children and grandchildren, and deal with mental illness and disability.

Also ubiquitous within our participants' writing and narrated experiences was the certitude that particular environments evoked particular memories. As in Randall and McKim's (2008) observations, this process was not a predictable one—but rather, places and spaces became suffused with meaning as participants recollected interactions or experiences in that specific environment or one similar to it. These memories are often multi-sensory, and thus embodied—perhaps drawing from what Freeman (2002) calls the "narrative unconscious," in that they are not rehearsed or polished story excerpts but are viscerally evoked by the writer's physical/contextual being-in-a-space. Examples from our data include stories triggered by: the smell of pine needles (a story of playing by the roadside); the feeling of wind through hair (story of riding bicycles with friends through the neighbourhood); the slow immersion into cold water (a story of learning to swim in the bay). Similarly, landscapes, cityscapes, neighbourhoods, and buildings each invited storied responses, based on participants' actual or imagined locatedness in that space or place.

For Freeman (2002), such memories even need not be one's own—an individual can also be prompted by a particular environment to draw from a vast realm of social, collective, or cultural memory to narrate some aspect of self/selfhood. In her writing, Margaret provided an example that demonstrates how the elements of time, place/environment, and self are overlapping and relational (tied to past, present, and future generations in her family):

> A passenger and I, me and myself, bump slowly down Rock Island Lake Road, off Highway 69s beaten track. The two and a half miles, with windows down, affords us the laden scents of pines, blue spruce and cedar. The multitudinous displays are truly a vision of scarlets, mesmerizing yellows and flame oranges. The inhalation, along with the stunning views herald the changing of this season. There is a culmination of the waltzing rhythm of the woods: and wildlife - a tango in communication. Slow...down. It's Thanksgiving and I'm appreciative of this phasing away of summer which my dear parents have been able to witness again and again. Their cherished sight-line of the pine on the point is indelibly captured on canvas

> by a talented young painter...a scene that acknowledges a view my parents have had decades long. They've drawn strength from and communioned with, in this, their sacred space. As leaves may be pressed between pages of a weighty book for preservation, so this painting stands. As the branches of their time are breezed along, the comfort and healing of seeing what their eyes saw is relayed. And the same healing, as my mother so poetically, potently shared, may be transferred to an eldest daughter, indeed to all her daughters. A legacy endowed by a creator our mother knew and believed in. How could one not pause and insufflate, feel the drifts of loving care and concern, etched, while we touch our earthly home, a creation gift for humankind.

For Margaret, the making of meaning from this engagement in story (memoir) telling is not a singular, straightforward matter-of-fact process. Rather, narrative practice - such as that involved in the writing of memoir—is a dynamic and ever-unfolding practice of meaning-making, one with developmental, retrospective, contextual, and cumulative properties (Randall & McKim, 2008). Our participants, Margaret included, demonstrate each one of these properties in both their stories and their reflections on memoir writing.

Discussion

Relating our data to Randall and McKim's (2008) four overlapping angles of *truth*, *self*, *time*, and *other*, we have noted throughout the importance of *emotion* within our participants' memoirs themselves, and in their reflections on telling and writing those stories. Our data illustrated how writers' recollections were affected by their emotions, but also how writers would deliberately construct, or edit, their narratives to elicit, or avoid, particular affective states (Habermas, 2018; Schwartz, 1998). As such, the author's feelings became enmeshed in their stories and the *truths* they desired to portray *(truth-wise)*. Not only did writers explicitly and implicitly construct particular truths about events but also about themselves. As Flannery in our study noted, this process of self-discovery was 'intimate,' and could help writers "come to terms with the losses that they've had, the things that were good about their lives, and so on…" Consideration of the emotional dimension when engaging in dynamic reminiscence thus offers much potential in learning deeply about the *self* (*self-wise*). As was evident when taking up the *temporal* (*time-wise*) dimension of autobiographical memory, reminiscence enabled the revisitation of past emotionally-laden memories, which would both evoke past sentiments and stir up new emotions. In reflecting on past pandemics, Shirley's fear turned into gratitude at escaping illness, and Mary's terror and rage transformed into a feeling of safety. We also presented the example of Anne, who wrote about her late daughter as a way of keeping her metaphorically close. Anne falls short of calling this process therapeutic, but reminiscence did facilitate the transformation of her grief, even if momentarily, as she remembered more joyful experiences from her daughter's life. Anne's example not only exemplifies the angle of time, but also of *relationality* (*other-wise*). The memoirs that were shared with us were often about beloved people and places. Some works were intentionally written to evoke laughter, while other stories, as Sylvia described, went unwritten or were highly edited to shield the readers, and thus protect the writers, from difficult emotions. Given the centrality of emotion in writing about memory, and the centrality of narrative in eliciting, processing, and communicating emotions (Oatley, 2011), we contend that an emotional dimension (/angle) of autobiographical memory would add much to Randall and McKim's (2008) conceptualization.

In doing so, we add to the body of literature that positions memory (and memory work, like memoir writing) as a portal into self-exploration rather than something that is measurable, or something that can be evaluated (as good or bad, extensive or shallow, more or less accurate, etc.). As Randall and McKim (2008, p. 207) write, "If we learn not only to tell our stories but to listen to what our stories tell us...we are doing the work of memory. To do the work of memory is to read our lives…". In reading our lives, Randall and McKim (2008) are referring to the process of habitual life review—the narrative practice, so to speak, of living an examined life. Viewing life through a memoirist's eyes means continuously engaging in, and practicing, dynamic reminiscence. From this viewpoint, the more we seek to write/tell, reflect upon, witness, expand, and edit our stories, the more we can know ourselves, and the more capacity we have for growth. This requires engaging in dynamic reminiscence as a process, rather than as an end point or an achievement (Chandler & Ray, 2002; Ray, 2000), and is itself emotionally-laden as well as infused with multiple truths, multiple selves, relationality, and non-linearity. Like Ray (2000), we argue that this process is accentuated when it occurs in community (in a group), when we bear witness to both our own stories and the stories of others. Of course, this does not mean that every memory (or story crafted) leads to growth or healing or wisdom. However, it does make the transformation of experience into meaning more explicit, and, with respect to the emotional dimension of memory, has the capacity to help us become increasingly attuned to our feelings, aware of our reactions in assorted situations, and open to a broader range of our emotional nature. This, in turn, allows us to nurture some of our stories while relinquishing or transcending others once they have done the emotional work that we need them to do.

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