

Feasibility of a Simplified Version of Guided Autobiography in Community-Dwelling Older Adults: A Pilot Study

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This study developed a shortened version of guided autobiography (GAB), which consisted of four sessions in which participants wrote a weekly autobiographical essay and shared it with others. This intervention study aimed to help community-dwelling older adults find a meaningful life, and we tested its feasibility. In the final session, instead of an autobiographical essay, they created an autobiographical collage using photos and letters and shared it with others. Among those who participated in all sessions, ego integrity increased, and mental health tended to improve after the program. This study suggested that the shortened GAB can be feasible for positively accepting the self and finding meaning in life among Japanese older adults.

Keywords: guided autobiography; ego integrity; well-being

According to Erik Erikson's (Erikson, 1982) stage theory of psychosocial development, older adults encounter the “ego integrity versus despair” stage to accept and complete their lives. Ego integrity involves confronting and accepting past conflicts while reflecting on one's life, acknowledging the finite nature of life, and

maintaining a positive self-image (Erikson, et al., 1986). This acceptance leads to ego integrity, but if older adults are unable to achieve this acceptance, they may experience despair. In other words, high ego integrity indicates an adaptive state in old age. Specific ways to increase ego integrity include reminiscence (Erikson et al, 1986). Haight and Haight (2007) proposed the structured life review, a method aimed at enhancing ego integrity by recalling memories from childhood to old age in accordance with Erikson's developmental stages. The structured life review, conducted by a trained listener, has been shown to alleviate depressive and hopeless feelings and to improve well-being (Haight, 1988; Haight & Dias, 1992). While the structured life review primarily focuses on individuals, Guided Autobiography (GAB) developed by Birren and Cochran (2001) is a method that encourages reminiscence for groups.

GAB comprises a structured, thematic, group approach to life review (de Vries et al., 1995). GAB typically consists of 10 to 15 weekly sessions, with each session lasting two hours. Each session is led by a group facilitator and often divided into two parts. The first part is a didactic session focusing on the concept and theory of life review, the origins of GAB, and the introduction of specific themes to guide. The second part is the experiential session, where individuals in the class are further divided into small groups of approximately 4-6 persons to engage in the structured life review group activity under the guidance of a facilitator (de Vries et al., 1995). During the group activity, participants prepare about two pages of the report on an assigned theme prior

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to that week's session and read that report, or a portion of the report, as a group. Each session covers a different life theme, such as branching points, family, money, work and career, health and body, philosophical or spiritual journey, death and dying, and goals and aspirations (de Vries et al., 1995). These themes are not fixed and can be changed according to the participants.

Previous research has shown that GAB has improved ego integrity (Kuhl et al., 2001; Mori, 2005), healing power, and reduced use of analgesics (Shaw, 2001). GAB is widely used for helping older adults review and appreciate their life stories and move forward with a meaningful life. Applying the full version of GAB is most desirable to enhance ego integrity in a group setting. However, GAB typically consists of 10 to 15 sessions, and aging providers may have staff and time constraints. This study aimed to develop a simplified GAB program and evaluate its effectiveness to make it more accessible and usable in various settings.

In developing the 4-week simplified GAB program, we maintained the effectiveness of ego integrity as much as possible to encourage participants to reminisce on themes that allow them to talk or write about as much as possible. Our research team carefully selected themes to be discussed by reviewing existing literature. According to Birren and Birren (1996), who examined the frequency of life project narratives across different themes, women tend to talk more about family and career. In contrast, men are more likely to talk about personal achievement and career development. Mori (2005) reported that "branching points" and "family" are easy to introspect and write about, based on a survey of ease of writing an autobiography across nine themes. These themes of "branching points," "family," and "career and major life work" are also considered to deal with more basic life issues and are themes that are presented early on in GAB (Shaw, 2001). We selected these three themes for our simplified GAB program.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited through advertisements in civic facilities such as community centers, libraries, hospitals, and pharmacies in the urban area where the program was implemented. Among the 20 participants, eight were excluded due to absence from one or more sessions because of poor health or other reasons, and data from 12 participants who attended all four sessions were analyzed. The mean age of the participants was 70.4 years ($SD = 5.6$), with a range of 62 to 81 years. Of these, 92% were female, 75% lived alone, and 66% were vocational school graduates or higher. None of the participants were employed.

Intervention

This pilot study was conducted in Tokyo from October

to November 2021 and used a one group pre-post test design. The program consisted of four weekly sessions of two hours each. The first hour consisted of an explanation of the theme by the trained facilitator and exercises related to the theme. During the next hour, participants were divided into small groups of approximately five members. Each small group was guided by a separate facilitator. Each week, participants wrote a one- to two-page personal report on a pre-assigned theme (homework) and discussed it in the group. The theme of the first session was "branching points," the second was "family," and the third was "career and major life work." The final session included creating a collage using actual photographs and letters to deepen reminiscence and assist in visualizing personal stories. Table 1 presents a summary of each session's contents. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology Institutional Review Board.

Measurements

Data were collected before the program started and after the program was completed. This study assessed the following efficacy measures:

1) Ego Integrity: The Ego Integrity subscale of the Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory Japanese version (Nakanishi & Sakata, 2001) was used. This scale solicited responses to seven items, including "I spent the last two weeks in a cheerful and pleasant mood," using a 5-point scale (1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree). Scores were calculated as the sum of seven items, with response scores ranging from 7 (low ego integrity) to 35 (high ego integrity).

2) Well-being: In addition to evaluating ego integrity, we have assessed well-being as an indicator, as GAB is also believed to contribute to psychological adaptation (Kenyon, 2002). The Japanese version of the WHO-5 Well-Being Index (Awata et al, 2007) was used. This scale solicited responses to five items, such as "I spent the last two weeks in a cheerful and pleasant mood," using a six-point scale ranging from "0 = always" to "5 = not at all." WHO-5 Well-Being Index scores were calculated as the sum of the scores of the responses, ranging from 0 (the worst imaginable well-being) to 25 (the best imaginable well-being).

3) Reevaluation of negative life events: The Reevaluation Tendency Scale for Reminiscence (Nomura & Hashimoto, 2001) was used. This scale solicited responses to seven items, including "I think that even unpleasant things will become good memories later," using a 5-point scale ("1 = strongly agree" to "5 = strongly disagree"). Scores were calculated as the sum of the response scores for the seven items, ranging from 7 (low reevaluation) to 35 (high reevaluation).

Table 1

Content of Each Session

	Contents	Homework
Session 1	<p>Theme: "History of your major life branching points"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction. Explain the organization and structure of the workshop • Introduce concepts of guided autobiography Group exercise: Preparing a life graph • Sharing of impressions and overall reminiscence. • Recap the tasks to be completed before the next session 	<p>Complete a life graph.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write two pages on branching points.
Session 2	<p>Theme: "History of your family"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the significance of reflection on the "history of our family" <p>Group exercise:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activation of autobiographical memory using Clustering • Sharing autobiographical reports • Sharing of impressions and overall reminiscence. • Recap the tasks to be completed before the next session 	<p>Preparing participants' pictures.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write two pages on "My family."
Session 3	<p>Theme: "History of your major life work/career"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the significance of reflecting on "life's work." <p>Group exercise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-expression using metaphors • Autobiographical report shared with actual family photos • Sharing of impressions and overall reflection. • Recap the tasks to be completed before the next session 	<p>Write two pages on "My life work."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparing participants' pictures and letters.
Session 4	<p>Review of previous sessions</p> <p>Group exercise: Sharing Autobiographical Reports</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describing and creating an autobiographical collage <p>Group exercise: Sharing autobiographical collage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing of impressions and overall reminiscence. 	<p>Write two pages on "My life work."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparing participants' pictures and letters.

There was good reliability for all measures ($\alpha > 0.85$). SPSS version 22 and R statistical software were used for analysis.

Results

Table 2 shows the pre- and post-program means (standard deviations), t-values, and effect sizes (Cohen's d statistic) for the three dependent variables. Since normality was confirmed by the Shapiro-Wilk test, a paired t-test was performed for all three measurements.

Ego integrity scores collected after completion of the program ($M = 27.1, SD = 5.5$) were significantly higher than those obtained before the program ($M = 25.0, SD = 5.5$), $t(11) = 2.36, p = .03, d = .68$. Well-being scores collected after completion of the program ($M = 15.5, SD = 5.7$) showed a trend towards statistical significance comparing their difference from scores obtained before the

start of the program ($M = 17.2, SD = 6.4$), $t(11) = 2.08, p = .06, d = .60$. The Reevaluation Tendency Scale for Reminiscence did not show statistically significant differences between the completion of the program ($M = 43.9, SD = 8.9$) and before the program ($M = 43.3, SD = 8.5$), $t(11) = 0.40, p = .70, d = .11$.

Discussion

The simplified 4-week GAB program was found to be effective in improving ego integrity. Mori (2005), who evaluated GAB using an ego integrity scale similar to our present study, also reported significant improvements in ego integrity. In particular, Mori (2005) conducted a 7-week GAB program, slightly fewer than the full version, similar to the simplified GAB program in the present study. However, a simple comparison of effects was difficult because of the different study designs and the lack of effect

Table 2

Pre- and Post-test Means of Effect Outcomes

Variables	Pre	Post	<i>t</i> (<i>p</i> -value)*	Effect size <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)		
Ego Integrity	25.0±5.5	27.1±5.7	2.36 (0.03)	.68
Reevaluation Tendency Scale for Reminiscence	43.9±8.9	43.3±8.5	0.40 (0.70)	.11
WHO-5	15.5±5.7	17.2±6.4	2.08 (0.06)	.60

*Note: Analyzed with paired t-test.

sizes and standard deviations in Mori's (2005) study. The effect size in the present study was almost the same as that of Reker et al. (Reker et al., 2014), who examined the effect size of GAB on ego integrity. Although simple comparisons are difficult because of the different scales and study designs, the effect sizes for improvement in ego integrity were larger than in previous studies, suggesting that our program is also effective. Being reevaluative regarding reminiscences is the most important factor in ego integrity and life acceptance of past events (Haight & Haight, 2007). In the simplified GAB program, the experience of reminiscing, sharing with others, and receiving feedback encouraged reminiscence and may have had some impacts on ego integrity. This effect may have been supported by creating autobiographical collages incorporated into this program, engaging in journaling activities, and sharing the participants' personal reports with other group members. Although there was a limited number of sessions and topics, the autobiographical collage in the final session facilitated a visual reaffirmation of participants' accomplishments, roots, and interests, making it easier for them to share their experiences with others. The collage activity may have positively contributed to ego integrity and fostered a feeling of a well-lived life.

On the other hand, well-being tended to improve at the end of the program. The effects of GAB include positive changes in measures of psychosocial function (Birren & Cochran, 2001) and the promotion of psychological adjustment such as self-actualization (Kenyon, 2002), but there was no clear effect on well-being in the present study. It may have been influenced by the fact that some of the participants had depressive tendencies that were well below the cutoff point at the pre-test. In other words, while the well-being of other participants showed improvement, this effect was not easily observed in the case of participants who began the study with very low levels of depression. Consequently, the overall impact on the well-being of all participants may not have been as apparent.

Our study did not find changes in the reevaluation of

reminiscence. It may be due to the influence of the measurement scale. The rating scale used in this study asked about the extent to which participants reevaluated the unpleasant event. Because the number of sessions was limited, it is possible that participants recalled negative memories and did not reach the point of deep introspection. Further study is needed to improve the simplified GAB program.

There were some limitations in our study. First, there was no control group. The effects observed in this study could be attributed to the attention that participants received by participating in the activity. Second, this study was based on a small sample size. Therefore, the generalizability of the results should be treated with caution. Since 90% of the participants were female, further verification is needed to determine whether the same effect can be obtained for males. Finally, although this program was offered over four weeks, four participants missed at least one session. The high number of absentees may be attributed to the program being conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Future Directions

Future studies will be necessary to establish a control group, recruit a larger number of participants, and examine the factors associated with the dropout rate. It is also important to conduct additional follow-up evaluations to assess whether the program's effectiveness is recognized in the long term.

Conclusions

In this study, a simplified four-session GAB program retained the mechanism for reflecting on one's past and sharing it with others and showed a similar effect as the previous GAB studies (Mori, 2005; Reker et al., 2014). Our findings showed that participants' ego integrity increased, and their well-being improved. Despite the limitations, this study revealed that the simplified GAB program might enhance the positive psychological aspects of living life to the fullest in the "third age" (Laslet, 1996), which is the prime years of life after retirement from active service and the period of achievement and completion when life is divided into four segments.

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