

Guided Autobiography Groups With Turkish Older Adults: First Impressions

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During the Covid-19 pandemic, because of the restrictions for people over 65, the Fresh-Distance Projects (Taze Mesafeli Projeler) was initiated online in order to continue the learning processes of 60+ Tazelenme University students and to reduce the negative effects brought on by social restrictions. Fresh Autobiography was one of the projects that was held during the period April 2021-June 2021 with two Guided Autobiography Groups (GAB) with older adults. After defining the themes to be used, an announcement was released within the social media groups of Tazelenme University Students with a poster and applications collected via a Google Forms document. At the end of the application process, two GAB Groups were formed: a Wednesday Group with four participants (three male; one female); and a Sunday Group with six participants (two male; four female). It was observed that participants found the GAB process therapeutic, and it provided opportunities 1) to get to know each other, 2) for new subjects to talk with family members in their daily life, and 3) to gain new perspectives on their life experiences. Also, they requested to continue GAB groups with further themes. These findings parallel the GAB literature.

Keywords: guided autobiography; third age university; gerontology; Turkey

A program for education of older people in Turkey “Tazelenme Universitesi was initiated by Prof. Dr. İsmail Tufan in 2016 (Okur & Oktay, 2021, pp. 69) as a social responsibility project (Birinci, 2021). GeroAtlas 60+ Tazelenme University is Turkey’s first university for older adults as a response from the field of gerontology to support modern society’s expectation for longer and healthier lives of older adults (Tufan et.al. 2018).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, because of the restrictions for people over 65 the Fresh-Distance Projects (Taze Mesafeli Projeler) was initiated online in order to continue the learning processes of 60+ Tazelenme University students and to reduce the negative effects brought by social restrictions (Tiryaki, Tufan & Başbüyük, 2021; Güçlü, et.al., 2021). Fresh Autobiography (Taze Otobiyografi) as one of the projects that was held during the period April 2021-June 2021 with two Guided Autobiography groups with older adults.

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Guided Autobiography

According to Birren and Cochran, “*Guided Autobiography is a semi-structured process for life review that incorporates individual and group experiences with autobiographical writing.*” (Birren & Cochran, 2001, pp.4). Guided Autobiography refers to writing a personal history utilizing a series of life themes. In each session, the leader introduces a theme and presents several sensitizing questions related to the theme (DeVaney, 2016). The themes were selected by considering both universality and uniqueness of lives in order to evaluate both positive and negative experiences to awaken memories holistically (Birren & Svensson, 2006, pp. 115). Guided Autobiography (GAB) consists of four elements that pertain to writing and psychosocial development: exercises related to sensitizing questions, writing on a given theme, small group discussions, and feedback about the writings of group members (Malde, 1988). Birren & Deutschman (1990) stated that despite its therapeutic effect, it was not

intended primarily to be used as therapy. Other studies support this, and GAB is used as a lifelong learning tool (Thornton, 2010) and recreational activity (Botella & Feixas, 1992).

While Guided Autobiography has a long history within the field of reminiscence and life review, there aren't any publications on the application of GAB in Turkey. As Birren and Deutchman stated (1991), it is advantageous for the leader of a Guided Autobiography group to have personal experience with GAB. The author obtained Guided Autobiography training and subsequently offered to facilitate the GAB program at Tazelenme University.

Method

Procedure

Since the application of GAB with the Tazelenme University's population came during the Pandemic and because of potential cultural differences, the traditional themes were discussed with the coordinators of Tazelenme University in order to determine their applicability. Based on feedback from coordinators and participants, the themes were modified. The final themes were determined and are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Selected Themes

Week	Selected Themes	Final Themes Adapted Week by Week
1	Introductory Week	Introductory week
2	Branching Points	Branching Points
3	History of Family	History of Family
4	Career and Money	Career and Money
5	Health and Body	Health and Body
6	Spirituality	Spirituality
7	Aims and Meaning of Life	Death and Ideas About Death
8		Aging
9		Aims and Meaning of Life

In the beginning, including the Introductory Week, Branching Points, History of Family, Career and Money, Health and Body, Spirituality, and the Goals and Meaning of Life themes were selected to be held within seven weeks. However, later the students requested Death and Ideas about Death and the Aging themes, and these were added to the groups. The rationale for the death theme was that the participants had already talked about the experiences with death during the Branching Points and History of Family weeks; and for the Aging Theme, two of the groups shared their mutual opinion as *"We are older people, so why don't we talk about our experiences about aging?"*

Participants and Expectations from the GAB Groups

After defining the themes to be used, an announcement was released within the Social Media Groups of Tazelenme University Students with a poster, and applications were collected via Google Forms documents. During the application process, participants were asked to specify their main expectations to join this group via Google Forms. The answers were (1) to learn about different lives; (2) to socialize; (3) to learn/to try new things; (4) to learn how to write an autobiography; (5) to leave a legacy to children/grandchildren. At the end of the application process, two GAB Groups were formed: a Wednesday Group with four participants (one male, three female); and a Sunday Group with six participants (two male, four female). Numbers in the groups differed given that participants were allowed to self-select groups.

Findings

The author facilitated the GAB groups and took notes week by week via observations in order to identify the key points of the groups. Also, the sessions were recorded after gathering oral permission to use the records of the participants for scientific purposes. The first session included exercises that help participants to reminisce and subsequent sessions included reading the two page writings of participants and discussions of the themes.

The general findings of the weekly observations consisted of participant reflections related to self-perception, death and bereavement, family relations, motivations and continuity of sessions, and drawing exercises during the GAB sessions. Relevant weekly observations are presented that informed the formative evaluation of the GAB offerings.

Self Perceptions

In the 4th week session, participants were asked to complete a version of the Johari Window activity in order to reflect on their perceptions regarding their "ideal self," "social self," and "real self". The Johari Window is a model designed by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham considering human interaction that provides a framework for understanding and improving self-awareness (Luft, 1961; South, 2007; Oliver and Duncan, 2019). The model has four quadrants in order to represent human interactions which are referred to as the "open," "blind," "hidden," and "unknown" quadrants (Luft, 1961, pp. 13). The "open" quadrant includes the traits that individuals and others are aware of, the "blind" quadrant includes the traits that only individuals are aware of, and the "blind" quadrant shows the traits that only other people are aware of. The final quadrant, which is named "unknown," includes the traits that neither the individual nor other people around them

are aware of, such as a dream of the individual (Luft & Ingham, 1961; Feize, 2022, pp. 3). The participants, who expressed that they were not sure about their social self, were told that they could first fill out the form alone and then ask the people they trusted to give them feedback. The next week, each participant stated that they received responses that were compatible with self-perceptions from their relatives, and they expressed that they were satisfied with the feeling of being understood.

Death and Bereavement

Participants shared their experiences related to death and bereavement during week seven, and it was observed that the participants showed less emotional expressions in relation to their losses and bereavement experiences compared to the sessions on Branching Points in the first week and Family in the second week. During the conversations within the group, the participants indicated that during the week of Branching Points and Family, they had addressed feelings of bereavements, and that thinking and writing on it at this time didn't affect them as it had in the earlier sessions.

Sharing with Family

All of the participants expressed that they would share the process of GAB with their family members. Some of the participants only told family members about the weekly themes, and others said they read all of the writings weekly to their relatives. It was shared that the family members who heard the stories of older persons were surprised because they learned new things about their spouse/mother/father. Additionally, it was determined that all of the participants used the themes as new subjects to talk about in their daily life and were satisfied that they had made new connections within their family.

Continuity and Motivation

While the participants were more hesitant about writing, reading, and continuing in the first weeks, their motivation increased, especially with the third week, and they wanted new themes to be added. There were some who stated that they wanted to continue towards the last weeks and wondered if it was possible to participate with other themes or in a follow-up group.

Drawing Exercises

One aspect of the Guided Autobiography classes is activities designed to elicit memories such as completing a personal lifeline of major branching points in life, drawing a picture of a childhood room, etc. In this study, these exercises also were the first week's tasks in these groups. Although participants initially stated that they were anxious about-completing these exercises because they had

not been drawing since childhood, they all completed their drawings successfully.

Strategies Participants Utilized to Engage in the GAB Process

While most individuals were able to participate in class activities with little or no modifications, some needed to make adjustments. For instance, one of the participants stated that she could not hold a pen due to an illness, but could write on the keyboard, and she prepared her weekly writings in a digital environment; another participant stated that he completed the preparations weekly by printing the shared documents in larger sizes that he could see due to his visual impairment.

Two participants wrote on computer, and eight of them completed their assignments via handwritings. One of them asked to receive the documents via e-mail, and the others selected the WhatsApp application for receiving the weekly documents.

Evaluations at the End of the Groups

In addition to the weekly observations that served as formative assessments, the participants were asked to complete an online evaluation form on the GAB Groups, including their opinions and their suggestions. Results of the evaluations are presented below.

At the beginning, writing their life stories was difficult for the students; however, week by week they realized the process of writing their stories made them feel better. This is a common finding in GAB groups in which the process can be very therapeutic, even though it is not therapy. Additionally, the process provided them an opportunity to question and review everything in their life. For instance, one woman participant was nervous every time she started to write on a theme, but after she completed it, she felt better about the subject:

"I'm thinking things I've never thought of. It's hard at first, but then I relax. At the end of every week, it feels good to me. This is my story, but it could also be yours."

An additional finding was that listening to others helped them to realize that the other people have had similar life experiences providing them an opportunity to look at it from a different point of view. Therefore, they found that GAB supports people to understand their life better, and also they implied GAB was an opportunity to get to know other people deeply which would be impossible in everyday life.

Discussion and Conclusion

In a similar study with online GAB and elderly individuals, it was found that some participants left during the process, but those who continued wanted to add different themes, which made the process more acceptable and satisfactory (de Vries & Thornton, 2018, pp. 24). In this respect, the desire of the first groups to add extra themes and their motivations for possible follow-up groups can be seen as similar. Additionally, group members interpreted the activities as therapeutic (Birren & Cochran, 2001). The emergence of a sense of closeness is another finding. Again, in studies in which GAB was applied, it was stated that a sense of intimacy developed among other participants along with their story sharing (Aw et al. 2020; McKenzie, 2018). There are many studies in which GAB is used as a lifelong learning activity (Thornton & Collins, 2010), in which different generations are brought together and compared (Reker, Birren & Svensson, 2014). The application of the technique with larger groups for purposes such as understanding culture-specific differences and coping strategies will be beneficial both in terms of applied gerontology and in terms of creating gerontological resources.

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