

Guided Autobiography Experiences of Senior Gerontology Bachelor Students in Türkiye

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During a professional practice course, the author conducted a Guided Autobiography (GAB) workshop with 31 senior bachelor's degree students in gerontology at Muş Alparslan University in Türkiye. Due to time limitations the themes were reduced to a four-session workshop. In addition to the introductory session, the themes Branching Points, History of Family, Death and Ideas About Death, and Aims and Meaning of Life themes were selected for subsequent sessions. At the conclusion of each session students' opinions regarding GAB were collected through focus groups. The GAB process affected students' perspectives on themselves and their classmates. They also believe that GAB may help gerontologists and other professionals in the aging field avoid misunderstandings and communication problems by revealing unknown stories behind a person.

Keywords: gerontology education; guided autobiography; professional practice; narrative

The biographical approach allows practitioners to better understand aging individuals and their needs. It helps them make appropriate planned care decisions (Clarke et al., 2003). Interacting with aging individuals—primarily providing services—requires knowledge of existential realities that go beyond medical or care-oriented perspectives. Entering the world of older adults and understanding the reality of their experiences, personal burdens, and challenges can pave the way for meaningful support (Laengle, 2001). Therefore, various studies show the importance of life stories and self-awareness in education related to age and aging (Dhavenas, 2023; Gattuso & Saw, 1998; Lee et al., 2020; Lun, 2019; Villar et al., 2014; Wolf, 1991).

Gerontologists are professionals who work with older adults, but studies on gerontologists and other aging-related professionals are limited (Gerlitz, 2011; Kenyon & Randall, 2016; Lawler et al., 1999; Mader, 1995). In addition, if life storytelling is used as an intervention method, training or previous experience in this subject is recommended (de Vries et al., 1995; Rosenthal, 2003). In this sense, the direct experiences of prospective gerontologists and the examination of their opinions may

also be of practical value for their professional development.

Narrative gerontologists Gary Kenyon and William Randall (2016) begin their chapter in *Restorying Our Lives* by saying that the restorying process is a way to help adults and “biographical coaches” become agents of restorying and coauthors in other people's life stories. Randall (2019) also suggests the importance of “narrative self-care” before providing narrative care for others. Therefore, assisting people not only helps them but also helps us to restory our lives. Guided Autobiography (GAB) is a form of educational, existential, and spiritual restorying (Kenyon & Randall, 1997) created by gerontologist James Birren to serve this purpose (Birren & Deutchman, 1991). This study aimed to evaluate the senior students' experiences of a GAB course.

Method

Guided Autobiography (GAB), developed in the 1970s, is a structured method for exploring psychosocial issues in adult development. It functions as both an educational and research approach based on reminiscence and life review, and it helps individuals write their life stories in two page segments (De Vaney, 2016; de Vries et al., 1995; Pinho-França & Amorim, 2017; Thornton, 2008; Svensson & de Vries, 2018). During the professional practice course, a GAB workshop was offered to and facilitated for 31 senior gerontology bachelor's degree students at Muş Alparslan University in Türkiye by the author, who had previous experience with GAB. Since the number of students was high and the course was limited to 15 weeks, the themes of GAB were reduced to four based on students' preferences. In addition to the introductory session, the selected themes for subsequent sessions were Branching Points, History of Family, Death and Ideas About Death, and Aims and Meaning of Life.

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After each workshop, students' opinions regarding their experiences were collected through focus group discussions. The classroom was divided into three groups according to the rotation list of the professional practice course¹. Although it was initially planned to include 5–6 students per group—as suggested in the literature and based on the facilitator's previous experience—the students preferred to share their stories within their assigned rotation groups. As a result, the final numbers of participants in each workshop and corresponding focus group were 10, 10, and 11, respectively. Table 1 presents the list of themes. Following the standard procedure of GAB, the first theme was Branching Points, which generally includes elements of other themes. The subsequent themes were selected by students from the classical flow of GAB.

Table 1

Selected Themes

Session	Writing Themes	Stimulating Exercises
1	Introductory Week	N/A
2	Branching Points	Lifeline Chart
3	History of Family	Drawing of Childhood Home
4	Death and Dying	Clustering
5	Aims and Meaning of Life	Vision Board

Limitations in conducting GAB workshops in this study

The workshops were conducted in the aftermath of the February 6th earthquakes. The city of Muş, where the workshops were held, was among the areas that felt the tremors. Most of the participating students were from the city center or nearby provinces directly affected by the disaster. As such, the experiences they shared during the sessions may differ significantly from those of students living in unaffected regions.

The author served as both facilitator and researcher during the workshops. In accordance with de Vries et al.'s (1995) guidance, personal disclosures were kept to a minimum to maintain a reflective space for participants and to uphold the integrity of the GAB method.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Ethics Committee of Muş Alparslan University. The participants provided informed consent for inclusion in the study. In addition, during the introductory weeks of the GAB classes, verbal consent was obtained from the students to photograph their drawings and collages and to use them for scientific purposes.

Analysis

The opinions of the students during the focus groups were transcribed and thematised phenomenologically.

Findings

The mean age of participants was 22.9. Most of the participants were 23 years old. Twenty-two participants were female and nine were male. Twenty-nine participants were single and two were married. Eighteen participants were members of the Hanafi (Sunni) religious section, 12 were members of the Shafii (Sunni) sect, and one participant was a member of the Alawite sect. The reason for asking about religious sects was to highlight the heterogeneity of religious backgrounds in the classroom, which is also essential for professional practice and for understanding the diversity of aging.

General View of the Sessions and Shared Stories

During the **Branching Points session**, all students shared their experiences with the university selection examination process. Because many of them were from cities affected by the February 6 Kahramanmaraş and Hatay earthquakes, another important branching point they discussed was their experiences during and after the quakes.

In addition to thematic writing, the students drew childhood homes and shared them with the class during the second session (see Figure 1). An interesting point that emerged during the **History of Family session** was the impact of gender roles on male students. They shared experiences of hegemonic masculinity within their families, often involving an older relative (such as a brother, uncle, cousin, or father) and the expectation of being protective toward female family members. Other stories focused on divorce of parents, dominance of grandparents within the family, the loss of loved ones such as siblings or parents, and the mental health challenges of

¹The other rotation settings included a research group and a hospital. Accordingly, each group spent five weeks in each setting.

parents. Two students shared their life experience of having parents with psychiatric disorders.

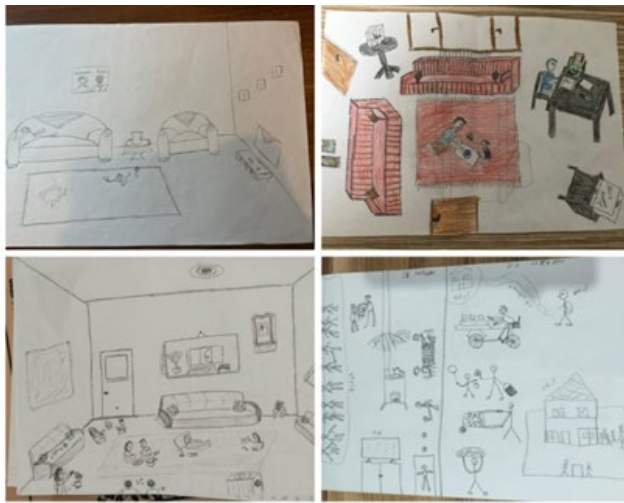


Figure 1. Childhood houses drawings of some students.

The Death and Dying session was mainly a more detailed extension of the History of Family and Branching Points writings. Only two students shared experiences about the death of pets. In this session, a clustering exercise was conducted to help participants describe a significant person in their lives.

During the **Aims and Meaning of Life session**, students gave each other good-wish cards, read their future plans aloud, and prepared vision boards. Figure 2 shows examples of the vision boards.



Figure 2. Vision boards of some students

Opinions of Gerontology Students Regarding GAB

At the end of each final session, students' opinions regarding GAB were collected through focus groups. The first theme of the findings was the effect of GAB on their perspectives toward themselves and their classmates. This

theme was identified in line with previous GAB studies focusing on self-perception and the perception of group members (Aw et al., 2020; Pamuk, 2024). GAB helped them break down prejudices against one another, establish new bonds, and confront challenges in their own lives. Some statements from students regarding the effects of GAB on themselves and their relationships with classmates are as follows:

"We saw how common stories we have."

"We started for greetings to some friends for the first time in 3.5 years."

"It was interesting to see how two persons react differently to the same problem."

"We had negative opinions towards some classmates, but after this class, we realized that their life road was also not as easy as it seems."

The second theme that emerged from the findings was the perceived contribution of GAB to students' professional lives. To explore this, the author asked participants: *'What do you think about the effect of GAB on your professional point of view as a gerontologist?'* Students believed that GAB may help gerontologists and other professionals in the field of aging avoid misunderstandings and communication problems that arise from the unknown stories behind a person. It also raised awareness among students regarding encounters with older adults from different cultures, religions, beliefs, and traditions, which they felt would help them be more flexible in their professional roles as gerontologists. For older adults, students thought that GAB may strengthen bonds among seniors living in residential homes, serve as a guide to resolving past problems, and help them develop a vision for the future. These findings also parallel studies with older adults and professionals.

"Writing our autobiographies and listening to others helped us to understand that there are different kinds of lives, problems, and backgrounds. So, as gerontologists, we became more aware that we should consider the possibilities of differences between us and the older adults we serve."

"This helped us to see the person behind the story."

"I wish we had this class in the first year of gerontology education; if I knew this side of aging, I would embrace it with four hands since the beginning."

As a result, the GAB experience—as both readers and listeners of autobiographies—supported positive views

among students not only toward their classmates but also toward their professional lives.

Discussion

Autobiographical methods have been used as a consulting practice for gerontologists. For this reason, various studies have shown that such courses help increase students' counseling skills and gerontological knowledge (Gerlitz, 2011; Lawler et al., 1999). Even when some studies did not directly use autobiographical narratives, applications that foster self-awareness and empathy also demonstrated the development of students' ability to put themselves in another person's shoes (Lun, 2019). The opinions of students in this study parallel this approach and support the idea that self-awareness and understanding others opens a new window for them regarding the possibilities of working with older adults from different backgrounds.

Conclusions

This study aimed to explore the experiences of senior gerontology students regarding GAB. Because the facilitators need prior experience with workshops for the process to continue effectively, the GAB class provided students with a new perspective on working with older adults, and their awareness of their own narrative identities increased. Thus, an application they experienced first-hand may contribute to their future professional practice. However, this study was limited to one cohort of bachelor's level students in gerontology at a single university in Türkiye. Although, it is possible to suggest GAB as a resource for gerontological education, further studies are needed.

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