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# ‘Story of my life?’ The contents and functions of reminiscing

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**Abstract**

In this paper we address three interconnected issues arising from the question: ‘how to support reminiscing?’ The first issue examines why people reminisce, looking at the functions it serves both for the individual and the social group. The second issue relates to the types of stories people recollect and share, which may sometimes be difficult or distressing events in their lives and how to deal with these. This connects to the third issue examining the process of choosing materials such as photographs and artifacts to stimulate people to recollect and recount their personal stories. Our contributions to the workshop will be of interest to a wide range of researchers engaged in developing reminiscence systems, broadly defined, as we (i) draw on our experience with groups of younger and older adults from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds to address these three issues and (ii) offer suggestions arising from this work for how to deal with them.

**Keywords**

Life course, defining events, narratives, emotion

**ACM Classification Keywords**

K4.2 Social issues

**General Terms**

Human Factors, Theory, Design

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## INTRODUCTION

Reminiscing is a uniquely human activity that emerges early in life and plays an important role in shaping self-identity and social relationships. Interest in reminiscing as an enjoyable and beneficial activity is increasing across a wide variety of disciplines, not least HCI where there have been a number of developments exploring the potential of technology to support people to reminisce. This paper considers three related issues – why reminiscence is important, what people reminisce about, and how the answers to these questions influence the selection of materials, particularly in the context of cross-cultural and cross-generational interactions. These questions arose for us in the context of our own work on designing and customizing a software program to support reminiscence-based conversations for people with dementia. However, we believe that they involve much broader issues that are relevant to anyone who is involved in selecting materials for reminiscence, irrespective of purpose, on behalf of any user group. It is in the context of this broader perspective that we discuss the functions, contents, and selection of materials to support reminiscence.

### Functions of reminiscing

Story telling about events we experience emerges early in life and serves a number of important functions. First, the act of recollecting and sharing stories contributes to the development and maintenance of individual identity. The stories we tell about ourselves, i.e. the way we present our personal experiences to others, goes beyond mere recounting of events. Everything involved in telling our personal stories, from deciding what to share through the presentation of the information to the emotional tone and the way oneself is portrayed, all contribute to the importance of reminiscing.

Story telling also provides a way to process and deal with emotional experiences, by allowing us to reflect on what has happened to us. “Our past experiences are emotionally saturated: we recount and reminisce about particular events because they are personally significant and emotionally meaningful” ([5], p39). The experiences children have early in life of talking about emotional events provide a framework for dealing with similar information in later life.

This is particularly important for dealing with stressful events, another key function of reminiscing ([3]). Recalling and recounting distressing personal narratives is important for good mental health and enabling people to come to terms with negative experiences ([8]).

The human tendency to reminisce about both negative and positive events in life has implications for anyone involved in choosing reminiscence materials on behalf of any user group. For example, we have found that people with dementia are just as likely to recount negative or distressing memories as part of their life histories as are people without dementia, young and old. This raises at least two issues for consideration: on the one hand, some materials may be associated with inherently negative events (some so powerfully negative that one cannot imagine including them); on the other hand, it must also be kept in mind that *any* image can stimulate negative emotions for a specific individual. Such questions are important not only in selecting contents for a program but also in thinking about how, why, and with whom the program will be used.

While the foregoing discussion has focused on the individual, another key function of recollecting and sharing our stories is that it enables us to connect with one or more other human beings. By seeking to find points of connection

we establish and maintain relationships, a model established in the earliest parent-child interactions. Thus reminiscing is an inherently social activity that provides topics of conversations and a model for interacting with other people that lasts throughout life. This could involve participants both within and across cultures and generations.

In this context, reminiscing as a social activity also has a function in being part of a collective story or history. This is important for dealing with events of cultural significance such as wars or public incidents such as the assassination of John Kennedy in Dallas in 1963 or the attack on the Twin Towers in New York in September 2001. Sharing stories about where people were when they heard the news, so-called 'flashbulb' memories' ([2]) is a way of making connections but also of validating individual experiences as part of the collective whole. For migrants or people displaced by natural or man-made disasters, participating in shared collective reminiscing may serve to maintain cultural identity. Equally important in this construction of cultural identity, however, are the small things of life – the songs one sang as a child, the locally favourite picnic spot, or the television programs one watched every Sunday night.

In our own work, we have found that reminiscing provides the same social, emotional, and identity functions identified above for people with dementia, for whom speaking about events from their pasts is much easier than speaking about the present. As well as providing a means of connecting with and getting to know other people, sharing stories from one's life is both validating and enabling for people with dementia as it allows them to keep using their conversational skills ([1]). Furthermore, their participation in shared collective reminiscing can facilitate a sense of community membership ([7]).

### **Contents of reminiscing**

When asked to recall their most important or most vivid memory or the first memory that comes to mind when prompted with a cue word, adults produce a disproportionate amount of memories from the period between 10-30 years of age ([10]). This 'reminiscence bump' ([9]) has been consistently demonstrated using a variety of stimuli and techniques and is commonly attributed to the significance of that lifetime period as a time of change and new experiences. Consequently 'bump' memories are "more novel, more important for identity development, more distinct, and more likely to involve developmental transitions than memories from other age periods" ([4], p708).

Given the importance of emotional content in reminiscing, other significant events, particularly traumatic or highly stressful ones are also likely to be recalled irrespective of lifetime period. For example, migrants tend to recall more memories from the period around the time of the move than those in the 'bump' period, perhaps because this is a 'traumatic' event ([11]).

Additionally, difficult historical, social and cultural events that occur in communities must also be considered including, for example, disasters such as the 2004 Tsunami in Indonesia or the Chernobyl nuclear accident in Ukraine in 1986 and, of course, wars. Such experiences are likely to form not only a significant part of an individual's self-identity but also the identity of the wider community. This raises important questions for supporting reminiscing in respect of careful selection of materials to stimulate reminiscing and sensitive treatment of information that may be recalled. Such questions warrant particular consideration in multicultural contexts, where people from different cultural backgrounds could be engaged in reminiscence together.

For example, many older adults may reminisce about the Second World War. This may be because it was during their 'bump' years but also because it was a hugely significant period in most people's lives. Many of our British participants recount the loss of loved ones during the War. Yet the majority of stories present a positive view creating the impression of a fondly remembered life-defining time.

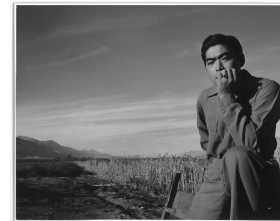
By contrast, the memories of other groups who lived through this time will undoubtedly be different. For example, among our Canadian participants are people of Japanese descent who were confined in internment camps in British Columbia during the Second World War. Their recollections of this experience, as well as their feelings towards their government and fellow citizens, particularly, as their property and resources were sold off whilst they were in the camps, highlight some of the complexities of cross-cultural reminiscing. The issue is further complicated by questions of how, when, and with whom members of communities subjected to such systemic persecution could benefit from opportunities to reminisce. The answers to such questions are at least in part dependent on sociopolitical factors such as formal apologies and reconciliations, exemplified by the Japanese Canadian Redress Agreement.

### Choosing materials

In designing reminiscence systems that involve selecting materials on behalf of someone else, one must consider what to include. In making a decision, researchers may be guided by instinct or intuition, which may inadvertently lead them towards selection of personally-relevant items. Similarly, these mechanisms will likely lead to trying to select positive or at least emotionally neutral items, but avoiding negative ones. However, as stated above, many people who have experienced traumatic events consider

these as some of their most life-defining events. Additionally, recollecting and sharing them is an important part of coming to terms with these experiences.

An alternative approach to having researchers identify materials for inclusion is to collaborate with communities for whom the program will be relevant. Work currently underway in British Columbia with groups of older adults is seeking to address some of the foregoing questions in identifying materials for a software program to support reminiscence with people with dementia. For example, findings from a focus group of older participants from the Japanese-Canadian community interned in the war have drawn attention to the importance of context and perspective in selecting and presenting photographic images. For instance, to what extent does a particular photograph capture the perspective of "insiders", as in the photograph on the left by Ansell Adams<sup>1</sup>, versus that of an outsider documenting a process on behalf of a government, as in the photograph on the right by Leonard Frank<sup>2</sup>:



Are there differences in the way in which they prompt

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<sup>1</sup> Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Ansel Adams, photographer, [reproduction number, LC-DIG-ppprs-00245].

<sup>2</sup> Vancouver Public Library, Historical Photographs Collection, Leonard Frank, photographer, [VPL accession number 14916].

reminiscence and, if so, what are the implications of these differences, particularly for cross-cultural and cross-generational interactions? These are empirical questions which we are addressing in our current research; the answers to them will help to determine who should be involved, and how, in identifying the kinds of materials that can best support shared reminiscence with older adults – particularly older vulnerable adults such as those with dementia.

Another strategy for identifying materials on behalf of an individual could be to consult with that person's family but here too cross-generational issues can be relevant. For example, in the case of dementia there has been quite a lot of interest in developing systems to support reminiscing. Various forms of creating life stories have been explored including digital presentations of old photographs and cinefilm or video footage (e.g. [6]). Although these could be limited in part by what, if anything, is available in family collections, a more important concern is that these will by definition be selective accounts of an individual's life history, chosen by family members to present a certain image of their relative with dementia. Additionally where life stories are compiled by the offspring of a person with dementia, their knowledge of what happened in their parent's life, particularly during the memorable 'bump' period may be limited or non-existent.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Our work is based on an understanding of reminiscence as playing an important function in self-presentation and self-image for individuals across the life span. Similarly, telling

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work possible. We are also grateful to the EPSRC who supported part of this work through grant number GR/R27013/01 to the first author and to the British Columbia stories from one's past, whether with one other person or within a group, contributes to the development of shared identity within communities. This may be supported particularly through the recollection and re-telling of emotionally salient events and experiences, which in itself is an important function of reminiscence. We recognize that people's most significant memories tend to be produced from the period of adolescence through early adulthood. In addition to this "reminiscence bump", traumatic or other singular events may also be readily recalled. In fact, some of people's most important memories may be sad or distressing, and those engaged in supporting or encouraging reminiscing as an activity need to consider how to respond to these types of stories.

These understandings of the function and content of reminiscence influence how we go about identifying materials to serve as reminiscence prompts for a software program. We have developed approaches to collaborating with community groups of older adults, working with them to identify the critical events in their collective lifetimes, exploring which topics and aspects they are likely to recall and want to talk about, and seeking their guidance on selecting appropriate and acceptable material to stimulate reminiscence-based conversation. We are not contending that these approaches are necessarily relevant or appropriate for all projects involving selection of materials on behalf of a particular user or user group. Rather, we are proposing that the questions underlying them are relevant for consideration in any such project.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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