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# Passing on Memories in Later Life

**Siân Lindley**

Microsoft Research Cambridge  
7 JJ Thomson Avenue  
Cambridge, CB3 0FB, UK  
sianl@microsoft.com

**Abstract**

Findings from home interviews with older adults who consider themselves to be 'recording their memories for posterity' are presented. Two practices are described: the archiving and preservation of existing family content, and the creation of new artefacts as a way of recording one's own memories. Findings that are highlighted include recipient design when recording stories, memory as an authentic resource for the past, and the frustration of wishing to pass on one's stories but feeling that there is a lack of opportunity to do so. In the context of the workshop, these could provide an interesting contrast to studies of specific technologies for reminiscing, and reminiscing practices associated with younger cohorts.

**Keywords**

Reminiscence, archive, recipient design, memory, storytelling, older adults, cross-generational communication.

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

**General Terms**

Design, Human Factors.

## **Introduction**

HCI has explored the topic of memory through avenues such as how it is drawn upon in storytelling, how it might be triggered by objects ranging from the mundane to the poignant, and how it can be called upon to support reminiscence or reflection on the past. Implicit in much of this work is the notion that memories are personal, precious and worthy of preservation, yet there has been little research in the field of HCI to investigate the ways in which people explicitly attempt to pass on their memories to others or record them for posterity. So while researchers have examined objects as diverse as photos [1], sentimental objects [3] and heirlooms [2], few have explored the creative undertakings that people engage in while trying to preserve and pass on their memories to younger and future generations, or the reminiscence that this engenders. This topic seems timely, given current debates surrounding lifelogging, heirlooms and the digital vestiges that people leave behind.

In this position paper, findings from recent fieldwork are used to consider how artefacts pertaining to the past are organised or otherwise crafted with the explicit intention of 'passing on' one's memories to others. To be more specific, a series of interviews were carried out with eight older people (five women and three men), who considered themselves to be 'recording their memories for posterity'. Participants were recruited at an event run by a local age-related charity and interviewed in their own homes. The focus of the interviews was on their reasons for recording their memories, their intended audiences, and their use (or lack of use) of the type of media that might serve as a trigger for remembering during this process (photos, letters etc.). It is worth highlighting that, for some

participants at least, the motivation driving the creation of these records was the notion that there were insufficient opportunities to reminisce with others in daily life, and especially with younger generations. Consequently, the process of recording their memories was a means through which they felt they could pass on their stories to future generations.

## **Fieldwork: Emergent Themes**

In what follows, key themes that emerged from analyses of interview transcripts, using open and axial coding techniques (as described by [5]), are presented. Findings that are highlighted include the maintenance of existing content vs. the creation of new artefacts, the motivations driving this activity, the notion of audience and importance of recipient design, and the role of one's own memory in creating an authentic record.

### *Archiving existing artefacts vs. creating new ones*

One observation that was immediately apparent was the distinction between two complementary processes that the participants engaged in. The first of these was the archiving of existing content such as photos and memorabilia, which was often viewed as belonging to one's wider family as opposed to being owned personally. This can be contrasted with the creation of entirely new artefacts, such as through the writing of one's memoirs. Relating to the former, participants who were undertaking this activity viewed themselves as 'family archivists', a temporary role that was adopted alongside the inheritance of a body of material relating to the family's past. Such content was expected to be eventually passed on to other family members, and so the work that was undertaken in relation to it tended to centre on its preservation for future generations.

Photos in particular were described as requiring 'processing', an activity that might take the form of reformatting, conducting research about what they depict, or adding descriptions to them.

In contrast, writing one's memoirs or creating books out of rediscovered letters were personal projects, embarked upon at a particular point in one's life, undertaken for a limited period of time, and concluded when some object was produced. Unlike the archives, these were not intended to be altered or updated by future family members. Further, while archives were maintained for the family in general, books of reworked letters and memoirs were created with specific audiences in mind. This was reflected in the production of limited numbers of copies (for example, sufficient copies might be produced to allow one per grandchild), as well as in their titles, with examples including 'Granddad's Memoirs' and 'Letters to my Grandchildren'.

#### *Motivations for passing on memories*

At a superficial level, the motivation for creating these documents about the past was simply described as taking the opportunity to tell stories about one's life, and in one case, to set "the record straight". However, a closer inspection of the data reveals a number of reasons as to why this was felt to be important. Frequently mentioned was the desire to help grandchildren understand "where you come from", a topic mentioned explicitly by participants with family abroad, but also apparent in explanations of those with family in the UK. In these cases, participants wanted to tell stories that would supplement what others knew about either themselves or their families. For example, stories about one's own children might give one's

grandchildren a different perspective of their parents. Also bound up with this was the wish to pass on traditional songs and stories that had been heard in one's childhood, described as "doing what was done to me". Such songs had often been learnt from parents and grandparents when the participants were children themselves. However, it was noted that opportunities to pass these on were difficult to accomplish in daily life, with interactions with grandchildren often being infrequent. Consequently, participants expressed a desire to pass these on in some other format, and writing, while not being ideal, was a way in which this was felt to be achievable.

#### *Countering a lack of interest*

Writing also entailed other advantages. A view often expressed was that the intended audience (normally grandchildren) would not be interested in one's personal history now, but might be later. Writing down stories preserved them for when this moment might arise. Relatedly, choice of topics was also guided by what was felt to be of interest to the intended audience. For example, in one participant's memoirs, directed to her grandchildren, topics were chosen specifically because they might be of direct interest to them:

*"I started by writing about the war because at a certain stage in key stage two they do a project about the war, and the older girls had asked me, they had sort of interviewed me on the phone to help with their homework project questions, so I knew that the younger ones would at some stage be doing something about the war, so I wrote first of all my memories of the war."*

Recipient design is an overarching theme in the above: stories were told that were suitably short and featured topics of interest, they were embellished with images in order to increase understanding or convey context, and they were presented digitally where this was felt to be the medium of choice for the audience. There was also a wish to make stories relevant to the present, by highlighting family resemblances (such as in photos) or by drawing on parallel experiences. For example, one participant converted a series of letters that he had written to his parents whilst travelling around India (and recently re-inherited) into a book, to coincide with his own daughter's visit there.

#### *Writing from memory*

A final point relating to the process of writing pertains to the associated freedom of expression and choice of topic. Writing was described as allowing one to "vent" and "prophesise", as being "therapeutic", and as allowing one to pass on "values" and to "reflect" upon, "reinterpret" and come to "new understandings" of the past. In all cases, the writing of one's memoirs was undertaken from memory, with very little referral to source material, even where this was available in the form of personal journals or other records. The participants claimed they had no difficulty in relying on memory to reconstruct the past, and some commented that it was actually important that this was the way in which they approached recording their stories:

*"I've done it all from memory, because one of the things I've put in the introduction is that memory actually decides who we think we are, and so by doing all from memory and not researching anything I have actually, hopefully put over some of my character and*

*some of the reasons why I might have done certain things certain ways."*

In the few instances where research was conducted, it was done in order to support a remembered story. For example, one participant sought out a number of images from the web using image search tools in order to augment his own memoirs, commenting that he had few photos of mundane aspects of his life from his childhood. However, content such as photos, drawings and other images, whether one's own or found online, were generally felt to be supplementary to stories, rather than central to them.

#### **Links to Workshop Goals**

These findings suggest a number of points for discussion pertaining to the recording of and telling stories about personal and what we might consider to be 'family' memories. Resonating with previous work by Petrelli et al. [4], many of the memories that our participants wished to pass on were not clearly represented in photos or other sentimental objects. Just as Petrelli et al.'s participants felt the need to create objects to serve as 'future memories', the older adults in our study were interested in making their stories accessible to younger generations by *creating new artefacts*. These efforts were often motivated by the wish to communicate with a *specific audience*, and were *designed accordingly to suit their interests*. Furthermore, the avoidance of source material was felt to add to the *authenticity* of the end result, told from a particular point in time and conveying an individual's character. This can be contrasted with items representing the broader family, which were processed to ensure accuracy and general accessibility, often

being made digital as a way of safeguarding them for the future.

This project has clear links with a number of the workshop goals, most obviously those relating to understanding current practices around reminiscing and supporting social aspects of reminiscence. It represents an attempt to understand reminiscing in a specific context, that of revisiting the past with the aim of passing on one's memories to others. The findings we have highlighted demonstrate the importance of recipient design, the difficulties of finding a context in which to tell stories about the past and the felt importance of doing so, avoidance of source material when writing about one's memories (which might be contrasted with episodes of reminiscing around content such as photographs), and the lack of content that can be used to illustrate stories that one specifically wants to tell (such as photographs of the mundane, in the case of older generations).

These results highlight obvious possibilities for technological innovation, for example, using web content as a non-personal resource for reminiscing, or creating interfaces to support the browsing of personal collections of media to enable the drawing of parallels across family members. They also raise questions regarding how lifelogging tools might be used to pass on stories about the past. For example, how could archives of logged content be revisited to support reminiscing in the context of telling stories to a specific audience? And how might they change notions of accuracy and authenticity in the context of revisiting the past?

It is hoped that the work will offer an interesting contrast to workshop submissions that focus on other user groups, for example younger cohorts, or particular technologies, such as lifelogging or storytelling tools. Much of the research related to reminiscence focuses on how younger people make use of new technologies, with the aim of predicting what it will be like to draw on them in the future, or explores reminiscing in the context of relatively short timeframes. Alternatively, technologies have been created to support reminiscing where memory is failing. These areas can be juxtaposed with the current research in interesting ways. As a final remark, it would be of interest to consider these findings in light of theories of memory, as a way of coming to a richer set of design implications based on the current work.

### **Author's Background**

Siân Lindley is a Researcher at Microsoft Research Cambridge with a background in the social sciences. She has an interest in how technology can be designed to support the needs and values of older adults, and has previously published on their attitudes towards communication technologies.

In addition to the work presented here, which highlights her recent interest in reminiscing and storytelling in later life, she has a broader interest in technologies that support reflection on personal experience. In particular, she has undertaken a study exploring the use of SenseCam when deployed with families and couples, with the aim of understanding the experience of revisiting the images captured in a social context both shortly afterwards, and after a period of 18 months. Details of her publications on this topic can

be found at:

<http://research.microsoft.com/people/sian/>

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