

Diverse Benefits of Guided Autobiography (GAB) for Older Adults

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April 27, 2022

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Acknowledgements

The completion of this project would not have been possible without the numerous people who took an active role in the Guided Autobiography program. First, I would like to thank Barbara Smith, our Guided Autobiography leader, for her time and knowledge on the subject to run the

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Content

Abstract

Older adults reflect on their lives during Erikson's final stage of psychosocial development, "ego integrity versus despair". Over the years, non-pharmacological interventions were created for older adults in order to achieve this final stage, one being Guided Autobiography (GAB). GAB is typically completed after ten weeks with two-to-three-hour weekly sessions. The older adults would write a two-page paper focusing on a theme before each session. At the session, older adults would read their writings to one another and then have a discussion regulated by an instructor. The current study hypothesized that GAB could improve quality of life, one's presence in their meaning in life, life satisfaction, and self-perceived cognition. Additionally, it was hypothesized that a person's purpose for reminiscence would focus more on one's identity, connecting with others, and teaching others. Ad

Introduction

In the 8th and final psychosocial stage of human development, theorized by Erikson (1968), those aged approximately 65 and older are hypothesized to undergo a period of self-reflection titled “ego integrity versus despair.” In this stage, older adults are said to reflect on their life and arrive at either a sense of accomplishment or a sense of regret. Erikson and other theorists speculated that the outcome of this reflection would impact the psychosocial trajectory of the individual’s remaining years.

Erikson’s theory led to the additional theory, research, and a variety of interventions such as life review. Life review is facilitated by someone who has been appropriately trained can help a person connect the dots in order to create a meaningful view of one’s life (Cohen, 2001). This intervention can be conducted as an individual or group process. Life review was first described in 1963 by Robert N. Butler, with the specific goals of reconciliation, atonement, conflict resolution, and evaluation of one’s life (Reker, Birren & Svensson, 2014); (Butler, 1963). It often takes a significant amount of time after a relationship with a mental health professional has been established (Butler, Lewis & Sunderland, 1998). Butler suggested that life-review can reduce depression and other disorders. Butler, Lewis, & Sunderland (1998) explain that studies have found life-review to improve self-esteem and mood for older adults.

Similar to life review, Guided Autobiography (GAB) was an additional intervention developed from Erikson’s psychosocial stages. GAB does not require as much time. Guided Autobiography (GAB) developed by James Birren, a leading early researcher in the psychology of aging and was perfected with his colleague Cheryl Svensson (Birren & Svensson, 2006). GAB has an extensive track record and scores of trained leaders worldwide (See:

www.guidedautobiography.com). In recent years, GAB has become an empirically validated methodology on universal life themes.

Guided Autobiography most commonly triggers positive and enjoyable reminiscence, thoughts, and feelings. Guided Autobiography has been demonstrated to create a new opportunity for sharing with the group, in turn, increasing social bonding (Birren & Svensson, 2013). Barbara Smith, our program leader notes (Personal Communication, 1/30/22) that:

“The primary purpose for all Guided Autobiography (GAB) classes is to help the participants write their life story. Through the weekly sessions of writing, sharing, and connecting with other group members, they begin to know and understand themselves and others on a deeper level. They learn about themselves through reflective writing on universal life themes, they listen to others’ stories and learn vicariously, and they receive feedback from others that may offer new, additional insights for them. These are all positive benefits. People who join a GAB

with a skilled and certified instructor yields measurable improvements in QOL, life satisfaction, meaning in life, self-perceived cognitive function, and the purpose of one's reminiscence. This is the first study to look at all of these variables in a single study.

Method

This project for distinction assessed the effects of a Six-Week Guided Autobiography Creative Writing Group run online by a certified instructor and assisted by trained breakout room facilitators (online and face-to-face) on quality of life, life satisfaction, depression, anxiety, and subjective memory complaints. The study involved participants in a weekly six-part GAB intervention running from March 8, 2022 to April 12th, 2022.

Participants

Recruitment

General notices about the program were included in SCOSA's [E-News for January and February](#) 2022. The E-News is distributed via MailChimp to 1668 e-mail subscribers and via Stockton listservs to the Stockton University Retirees Association (243 opt-in subscribers) and other Stockton employees (over 1000 opt-in subscribers to Events Posting). Upon IRB approval, a specific notice and invitation to register was distributed to these lists (See Appendices A & B). Additionally, SCOSA community collaborators forward SCOSA notices to their participants.

Screening and Eligibility to Participate

Exclusion criteria included past involvement in GAB or SCOSA "Time to Tell" program, those under the age of 60, and those scoring 5 or above on the Geriatric Depression Scale – Short Form (15 items, yes/no). SCOSA Service Chair, Dr. Christine Gayda-Chelder, a licensed

practicing geriatric neuropsychologist confirmed this as the best screening measure. One minor modification to the scale was made: the question “do you prefer to stay home, rather than going out and doing things?” was excluded because “staying in” can be considered a prudent strategy to mitigate COVID-19 risks, particularly among elders. We were prepared to provide mental health

the demographics survey that gathered information on gender, ethnicity, age, marital/relationship status, and other basic demographic information (see Appendix D).

The Life Satisfaction Scale (LSS) (see Appendix F) helps determine how satisfied one is with their life. There are five items on a 7-point Likert scale. Sample items include “The conditions of my life are excellent” and “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing”. The higher the score, the more satisfied one is with their life.

The Quality-of-life scale (QOLS) (see Appendix G) measures the overall well-being of a person’s life. As previously stated, QOLS assesses health quality of life, social functioning, and emotional well-being. The QOLS is a 16-item assessment using a 7-point Likert scale.

The Reminiscence Function Scale (RFS) (see Appendix H) assesses the purpose of a person’s reminiscing. There are 43 items which all begin with the statement “when I reminisce it is:” then the following is one of the 43 items. There are six possible responses with a corresponding number: (1) “never”, (2) “rarely”, (3) “seldom”, (4) “occasionally”, (5) “often”, (6) “very frequently”. There are eight subscales in the RFS which include, boredom reduction, death preparation, identity, problem solving, conversation, intimacy maintenance, bitterness revival, and teach/inform. The boredom reduction subscale explains that a person will reminisce when there is a lack of engagement in activities and we are under stimulated (Webster, 1997). Sample questions for the boredom reduction subscale include “for something to do” and “because it fills the gap when I find time ‘heavy on my hands’”. The death preparation subscale describes that a person’s purpose for reminiscing is when a person thinks about mortality but uses their memories for a sense of closure (Webster, 1997). Sample questions for the death preparation subscale include “because I feel less fearful of death after I finish reminiscing” and “because it gives me a sense of personal completion or wholeness as I approach the end of life”.

initials and the last four digits of their home or personal phone when signing their consent form.

This code was used when collecting pre-task and post-task measurements. Data information/code information is stored separately in secure online files and by the distinction project faculty chair

Additionally, dependent measures were collected via a Qualtrics account assigned to Professor

Burdick. Qualtrics notes that their level of security meets or exceeds the industry standard. (See

details here:

link to the measurements on Qualtrics were sent to participants. The second set of quantitative measurements will take no more than one hour to complete.

GAB Leader and Break-Out Session Facilitators

Barbara Smith, M.A, a certified E-GAB facilitator from San Diego, CA, with extensive experience in both online and face-to-face programs, led the program. She provided weekly themes, writing ideas/techniques, and led one of the online breakout groups. Break-out facilitators received initial 2-hour training and participated in 30-minute sessions with the leader prior to and after each weekly session. Leaders included SCOSA staff members and faculty members (e.g., Gina Maguire, MSW, LSW, and Cindi Graham had extensive experience in GAB-like programming, and Karen Rose, Ph.D. is a trained psychologist). Breakout room facilitators guided the discussions and essay sharing among group participants and ensured the discussion stayed relevant to the week's theme.

GAB focuses on a theme or period of life each week for participants to write a two-page story about. For this project, five themes were selected by the leader:

- No theme, social bonding (Week 1)
- Branching Points (Week 2)
- Family and Home (Week 3)
- Your Health and Body (Week 4)
- Role of Money (Week 5)

there were discussions among the group which the assistants guided members to stay on theme and reel the group on the topic. The co-investigator (Project for Distinction Student) floated between breakout rooms solely to observe.

During the last 20 minutes of the meeting, the whole group reconvened for concluding thoughts and further questions. The facilitator, Smith, will conduct this part of the session.

Hypotheses

Based on the review, the hypotheses for this study will investigate the possible benefits of GAB.

It is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1: Participants' Life Satisfaction Scale (LSS) scores will increase after the six-week GAB course.

Hypothesis 2: Participants' Quality of Life questionnaire (QOLS) scores will increase after the six-week GAB course.

Hypothesis 3: Participants' Meaning in Life questionnaire (MILQ) presence subscale will increase after the six-week GAB course.

Hypothesis 4: Participants' Reminiscence Function Scale (RFS) identity, conversation, and teach/inform will increase after the six-week GAB course.

Hypothesis 5: Participants' Memory Complaint Scale (MCS) scores will decrease after will six-week GAB course.

Table 3). I found that there was not a significant difference between pre- and post-task MILQ Presence scores, $(1, 13) = .248, \eta^2 = .627, p = .019$. Interestingly, there was a decrease in scores after the GAB course, which was opposite of what was predicted.

Although not the focus of the hypothesis, This researcher found that there was not a significant difference between pre- and post-task MILQ Search scores $(1, 13) = .007, \eta^2 = .934, p = .001$. There was an increase in scores after the GAB course.

To test the fourth hypothesis that reminiscence identity, conversation, and teach/inform (RFS Identity, Conversation, and Teach/Inform subscales) would increase after GAB participation, a repeated measures ANOVA was used to test for a change in on the Reminisce

significant change in pre- and post-task MCS scores, and the effect size showed a weak change pre to post, $(1, 13) = .374, \eta^2 = .551, p = .028$. Although a weak effect, there was a decrease in MCS scores after GAB.

GAB Evaluations

The researcher I found that the participants were very satisfied with the GAB course (see Table 5). On all the questions that used a 7-point Likert scale, all the averages were above a 6, where 7 is most positive. When comparing the in-person and Zoom participants on their GAB experience scores using mixed model ANOVA none of the p values were significant, indicating that online was just as desirable as in person. As is noted in Table 5, positive ratings were provided for GAB leader knowledge, enthusiasm, and preparedness, as well as breakout room leader knowledge and preparedness and room management. Finally, GAB overall experience was very positive, as was the ability of GAB to meet the needs of participants.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the diverse potential benefits of GAB for older adults. To be more specific, the study considered life satisfaction, quality of life, subjective assessment of cognition, reminiscence, and meaning in life. Although there were no statistically significant results, the changes on the dependent measures were generally in the direction hypothesized. For example, life satisfaction and quality of life increased after the six-week GAB program. This finding is still important to the research community because it shows that GAB had some benefits. Perhaps with a longer program or larger sample size, the benefits would show statistically significant results.

It is important to note that there was no statistically significant difference in GAB satisfaction based on Zoom versus in-person participation. All participants indicated satisfaction and enjoyment in the program. This is an important finding because online was particularly useful during the COVID-19 pandemic and this evidence suggests that online GAB could be particularly useful in reducing isolation and loneliness in a future pandemic lockdowns. Online delivery also allows for more diverse samples since GAB can involve anyone with access to a computer and a dependable internet connection.

Effect Size Importance

Several dependent measures in this study had small to moderate to effect sizes. First, both Life Satisfaction and Quality of Life showed changes that approached moderate effects. This suggests that participants may have experienced improved quality of life after the reminiscing during the GAB program.

There was a moderate effect size associated with a decrease in scores on the RFS Identity subscale between pre- and post-task scores. RFS subscales identify different reasons why people reminisce. Thus, higher or lower scores reflect a change in content and reasoning, rather an increase or decrease in ability. This suggests that after GAB, participants' reminiscing

memories with others. Participants were more likely to reminisce in order to share their information with others.

Interestingly, a large effect size emerged from the RFS Death Preparation subscale between pre- and post-task scores. This suggests that participants were less likely to consider preparing for death after they engaged in the GAB course because the means decreased. Also, a moderate effect size emerged from RFS Intimacy Maintenance subscale scores between pre- and post-task scores. This suggests that participants' reminiscing after the GAB course did not do so to maintain intimacy. There was a moderate effect size for RFS Bitterness Revival subscale scores between pre- and post-task scores. Since the means decreased, it suggests that after the GAB course participants were less likely to be upset at a past memory.

Limitations

Although the literature notes that GAB is typically done for ten weeks (Thornton, 2008), shorter programs exist and our program was restricted to six weeks, in part due to costs and constraints based on an academic semester and timing for presentation of a distinction project. This may have limited the power of the program to yield a significant change. In fact, some participants in our program have already made plans to continue working together on their own.

The efficacy of an online and/or shortened program would be more accurately measured in follow-up studies with larger sample sizes.

This current sample was somewhat homogeneous; predominantly women, retired, and from a limited age-range, thus limiting generalizability. Additionally, longitudinal research is known to experience attrition. In the study, out of the 23 beginning participants, 21.74% ($n = 5$) withdrew, resulting in a loss in sample size. There were two participants who registered for the

course who mainly wanted writing help on memoirs where they already made extensive progress. Another two participants who withdrew were worried that unpleasant memories would be brought up. The last participant had a family emergency and was unable to continue with the program. Those who were more likely to drop out may have had immense writing experience or were unprepared for distressing memories. This combination of setbacks resulted in \$ MMMM

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Tables

Table 1

Demographics Table

		M	SD		
		75.50	6.26	Age	
				n	%
Gender					
		Male		12	85.70
		Female		2	14.30
Number of Other Household Members					
		None		5	35.70
		One		7	50.00
		Two		2	14.30
Employment Status					
		Full-time		0	0.00
		Part-time		2	14.30
		Unemployed		1	7.10
		Retired		10	78.60

Table 3

Comparison of Pre- and Post-Task Quality of Life Measures Using Repeated Measures ANOVA

Scale	Pre-task		Post-task		F	p	Effect Size ²
	M (SD)	SD	M (SD)	SD			
Life Satisfaction	27.43 (5.18)	5.771	30.67 (6.056)	6.56	1.723	.111	.053
Quality of Life	91.21 (7.04)	7.04	92.29 (7.84)	7.84	7.23	.011	.053
Meaning in Life	10.07	3.32	10.01	3.32	18.32	<.001	.053
Subjective Memory	10.07	3.32	10.01	3.32	18.32	<.001	.053

Table 4

Comparison of Pre- and Post-Task Reminiscence Function Scale Factors

		Pre-Task		Post-Task		F		p	
		M	SD	M	SD				
		Factor							
11	Freedom Reduction	2.95	2.07	3.17	1.44	10.14	(3.79)	11.1	
16	Death Prompts	6.57	(3.36)	5.36	(5.33)	3.56		10.19	
15	Teach/Inform	15.57	(4.40)	16.57	(3.76)	3.25		.10	.20
10	Intimacy Maintenance	16.57	(3.24)	15.83	(4.00)	1.49		.27	
18	Bitterness Revival	11.71	(4.25)	10.57	(4.03)	1.92		.19	
15	Teach/Inform	17.57	(3.78)	18.64	(3.46)	2.35			

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.

Table 5

GAB Satisfaction and Experience Ratings

GAB Evaluation	In-Person	Zoom	Overall Mean (SD)	Significance
GAB Leader Knowledge	6.67 (1.00)	6.60 (.89)	6.64 (.93)	.904
GAB Leader Enthusiasm	6.67 (1.00)	6.60 (.89)	6.64 (.93)	.904
GAB Leader Preparedness	6.67 (.71)	6.80 (.45)	6.71 (.61)	.712
Breakout Room Management	6.56 (1.01)	6.80 (.45)	6.64 (.84)	.622
Breakout Leader Knowledge	6.44 (.87)	7.00 (.00)	6.64 (.93)	.302

breakout leader on their preparedness; GAB Overall Experience = an evaluation of the total experience; GAB Meeting Needs = rating the extent to which the course met their needs; GAB Course Satisfaction = rating their satisfaction of the course

Appendices

Appendix A

Recruitment Script

To whom it may concern/Dear [name],

My name is Nicole White, and I am an undergraduate student in the school of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Stockton University. I am conducting a research study examining the diverse benefits of guided autobiography, particularly the association between guided autobiography and perceived quality of life. If you agree, you are invited to participate in six two hour weekly guided autobiography sessions ran by official E-GAB instructor, Barbara Smith. For each guided autobiography session, you will complete a two-page narrative focusing on a theme. You would discuss your writing and create an engaging discussion with other participants. Additionally, two sets of questionnaires will be completed outside the guided autobiography sessions and is anticipated to take no more than one hour each. One questionnaire set is completed before guided autobiography program and one is completed after.

Participation in this study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the study at any point. The data you provide will keep your identity confidential.

If you have questions or would like to participate, please contact me at whiten10@go.stockton.edu or Dr. Burdick at David.burdick@stockton.edu.

Thank you for your participation,

Nicole White
Stockton University
School of Social and Behavioral Sciences
Undergraduate student

Appendix B

Stockton Undergrad Researcher Seeks Participants in Guided Autobiography Study:

You may be eligible to participate in a research study on guided autobiography run by Stockton student Nicole White. Guided Autobiography (GAB) is a memoir writing class designed to help people document their life stories. We are living through extraordinary times and telling our stories of times past and present becomes a powerful process of self-discovery that can lead to a greater appreciation of one's own life and the lives of others.

Stockton has hired an official E-GAB instructor to ensure the quality of the program. Barbara Smith is a certified Guided Autobiography instructor with the Birren Institute for Autobiographical Studies. She has taught writing classes at the adult school and college level for over 30 years. Her articles and photographs have been published in numerous newspapers and magazines.

In this class, participants are led through themes and priming questions each week and then write two (2) pages on that week's theme. Participants will share their writing each week in our Zoom meetings with others. Additional questionnaires will be a part of this program to analyze the benefits of GAB.

You are eligible if:

- Over the age of 60
- Not previously been a part of a reminiscence program (including Stockton's kbfek euudirn's ksf α kssss

If interested in learning more or participating, please use [LINK](#) to provide your name and contact information as directed noting your interest in the Guided Autobiography study. If you have questions, please contact SCOSA Director at David.Burdick@stockton.edu or whiten10@go.stockton.edu

Appendix C

January 20th, 2022

Consent form

Research Purpose:

You are invited to participate in a study looking at the effects of Guided Autobiography on older adults.

Guided autobiography is a creative writing program that allows for reminiscence. Guided autobiography has been associated with a higher s B

Appendix D

Demographics Form

What is your gender? Male Female Other

What is your age? _____

What is your marital status? _____

What is your highest degree earned?

Please check one:

- Less than high school
- High School
- Some college
- Associate degree / vocational schooling
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctoral degree

Appendix E

Geriatric Depression Scale (short form)

Geriatric Depression Scale (short form) **Tools may be copied without permission**

Instructions: Circle the answer that best describes how you felt over the past week.

1. Are you basically satisfied with your life? yes no
2. Have you dropped many of your activities and interests? yes no
3. Do you feel that your life is empty? yes no
4. Do you often get bored? yes no
5. Are you in good spirits most of the time? yes no
6. Are you afraid that something bad is going to happen to you? yes no
7. Do you feel happy most of the time? yes no
8. Do you often feel helpless? yes no

21 - 25 Slightly satisfied

20 Neutral

15 - 19 Slightly dissatisfied

10 - 14 Dissatisfied

5 - 9 Extremely dissatisfied

Appendix G

Quality of Life Scale (QOLS)

Please read each item and circle the number that best describes how satisfied you are at this time.

Please answer each item even if you do not currently participate in an activity or have a relationship. You can be satisfied or dissatisfied with not doing the activity or having the

Appendix H

Reminiscence Function Scale

When I reminisce it is: (please circle one number per question).

1. to teach younger members what life was like

2. to help me remember my own life

3. to help me remember my family

4. to help me remember my community

5. to help me remember my country

6. to help me remember my life

7. to help me remember my friends

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100. to help me remember my life

NEVER	1
RARE	
SOMETIMES	
OCCASIONALLY	
OFTEN	
VERY FREQUENTLY	6

Appendix J

Meaning in Life Questionnaire

Please take a moment to think about what makes your life and existence feel important and significant to you. Please respond to the following statements as truthfully and accurately as you can, and also please remember that these are very subjective questions and that there are no right or wrong answers. Please answer according to the scale below:

Appendix K

Statement of Confidentiality and Attendance

