LIFE REVIEW WITH STUDENT COUNSELLORS: EXPLORING THERAPEUTICALLY

MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES IN A GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY GROUP

by

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Abstract

This narrative inquiry explored the meaning that graduate students in a counselling psychology program ascribed to the experience of life review. Life review is defined as an evaluative process of intentionally revisiting past events and memories in order to integrate these experiences into the present. The particular method of life review employed in this study was guided autobiography, a group-based approach to life review in which participants write autobiographical stories, read the stories aloud in a group setting, and receive comments and feedback from fellow group members.

Previous research in the life review literature has predominately focused on investigating the use of life review with older adults nearing the end of life, has relied heavily on quantitative research methods, and has identified the outcomes of life review, rather than explored the process. The current research contributes to the literature by exploring life review from a qualitative perspective with a younger demographic, by focusing on the underlying meaning-making processes of life review, and by exploring therapeutically meaningful experiences fostered in a guided autobiography group.

Participants' narrative accounts of their experiences in a guided autobiography workshop are presented in this document, and contribute to understanding the viability of life review to promote personal change in the lives of adults in young to mid-adulthood. Twelve thematic findings were generated in this research, which confirm and extend prior research. Novel contributions to the literature include identifying key therapeutic processes that occurred in each phase of the guided autobiography process and the frequency with which they occurred. The most frequently occurring therapeutic processes were a sense of connection, new awareness and insight, and making sense or new meaning out of past experiences.

Based on these findings, the study concludes that life review is beneficial for a younger population and suggests it can promote experiences that support personal change in the lives of individuals in young to mid-adulthood. Specific recommendations are made for the therapeutic application of life review, most notably the proposal that an individual follow-up interview be added as a final phase to the guided autobiography process to enhance therapeutic gains.

Preface

This research was approved by the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board. The Certificate Number of the Ethics Certificate obtained was H10-00980.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Our personal stories are what make us human. They are a record of everything we have ever experienced. Each life can be seen as a series of events that when put together form a full, rich, and unique story. Just like a fingerprint, no two life stories are exactly alike. The individuality of each person's story is mapped in part by what family they came from, their career or major life's work, their loves and hates over their lifetime, the struggles they have encountered, and their life goals and aspirations. Yet in our fast-paced modern world of social media and technology, these life stories may rarely be told or listened to and hazard becoming dusty and forgotten. There is a risk of forgetting who we are, where we come from, and where we are going, if our life stories are not recounted and kept sacred.

Background

In the field of adult education and lifespan psychology, there has been a movement towards valuing and remembering life stories through the process of life review. A seminal article by Butler (1963) first presented the concept of the life review, which he defined as the necessary and spontaneous progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, particularly unresolved conflicts, which may be reviewed and reintegrated into the present life story. Butler argued that if the reintegration is successful, the person engaged in life review may find new meaning in her or his life.

Since Butler's (1963) influential work, a number of techniques have been designed to guide people through the process of remembering, recording, and reintegrating past experiences into their current life stories. One such life review method that has been used in a number of educational and healthcare settings is guided autobiography, developed by Birren and

Deutchman (1991). Guided autobiography is a semi-structured, thematic, group approach to life review. It is an educational process which combines individual and group experiences by engaging members in private reflection, writing of life stories on selected themes, and sharing these life stories with a group. The authors of the guided autobiography method claim that it allows for a grasp of the fabric of one's life which can make significant contributions to well-being and finding renewed meaning in life (Birren & Deutchman, 1991). Engaging in guided autobiography is a structured way to remember, honour, and share the life stories which make us human.

Current practices conceptualize guided autobiography as an educational process, rather than a therapeutic one, despite the fact that this method has its origins in the education, journaling, narrative, and life stories disciplines. The developers of guided autobiography clearly state that this life review method should not be used as formal therapy because it does not seek to promote change in clients' lives, and is not actively directed towards the amelioration of a disease or a social or emotional problem (Birren & Cochran, 2001; Birren & Deutchman, 1991; de Vries, Birren, & Deutchman, 1990; 1995). De Vries and colleagues (1990) make the distinction clear by stating that guided autobiography "is *not* a form of therapy…it is an educational process of bringing one's understanding of the past into the present in order to integrate the experiences of a lifetime" (p. 4).

Although not designed to be a formal therapy, evidence from the literature suggests there are numerous therapeutic benefits associated with participating in a guided autobiography group (e.g., Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Birren & Cochran, 2001; Haber, 2006; Serrano, Latorre, Gatz, & Montanes, 2004). Similarly, the developers of guided autobiography acknowledge that although the activity was not designed to be used as formal therapy, it has healing powers and

can, in fact, be therapeutic (Birren & Cochran, 2001). Birren and Deutchman (1991) asserted many things can be therapeutic without being therapy per se. These authors distinguish guided autobiography from therapy for the distinct reason that it does not actively pursue change in behaviour or emotions; yet they also stated that positive changes may result due to the experience. It is postulated that a key component of the therapeutic effect of this method is the deep personal learning, or transformative learning, that occurs with participation in a guided autobiography group (Brown-Shaw, Westwood, & de Vries, 1999; Thornton, 2008).

Research Problem and Relevancy

Despite the documented therapeutic outcomes of guided autobiography, few studies have attempted to capture the therapeutic essence of guided autobiography and its potential as a group therapy to promote personal change in clients. A concern is that due to the focus on the psychoeducational component of guided autobiography, the varied healthcare communities that employ this method may be underestimating its therapeutic abilities. The underlying problem is that practitioners may be deemphasizing the therapeutic capacity of guided autobiography due to a lack of studies in the literature which seek to explore the ability of guided autobiography to promote personal change in group members.

In the life review literature, there is a request for researchers to explore the therapeutic potential of guided autobiography. For example, Thornton (2008) calls for more studies that examine changes in group members, such as participants' changes in goals, newly learned abilities, and changes in general health and well-being as a result of their experience with guided autobiography. Furthermore, Rekker (as cited in Thornton, 2008) recommends that in addition to assessing outcomes, more research is needed to understand the underlying meaning-making process inherent in life review. These examples emphasize the need for further research that will

study the phenomenon of therapeutic change in the context of a guided autobiography group and the meaning participants make of the experience.

An additional deficit in the life review literature is the dearth of studies that explore the experience of guided autobiography from the perspective of adults in young to mid-adulthood. The vast majority of studies focus on guided autobiography with older adults, in the later stages of life (Haber, 2006). There is a need to understand the experience of younger adults in a guided autobiography group to generate knowledge about the therapeutic potential of life review within this demographic. The proposed study addressed these deficits by focusing on meaning-making experiences for younger adults and adults in midlife in the context of a guided autobiography group. The specific population of this inquiry was a group of counselling psychology graduate students who are in the life stages of young to mid-adulthood.

Purpose of the Study

The intent of the proposed study was to explore the meaning that student counsellors in a counselling psychology graduate program at a large western Canadian university attributed to the experience of reviewing their life through participation in a guided autobiography workshop. Additionally, the purpose was to discover whether participants experience therapeutic change processes from participating in a guided autobiography group, and at what phase of the group these therapeutic processes are occurring. Due to the constructivist paradigm this research resides in, therapeutic change was not defined by the researcher in order to allow participants themselves to construct their own meanings and definitions of therapeutic change. Instead, as participants told the story of their experience with guided autobiography, the researcher was sensitive to any references of change, transformation, improvements, or differences participants attributed to the life review process.

Research Question

The research question that guided this narrative inquiry is: what meaning do student counsellors ascribe to the experience of a life review, and what is happening for participants that is therapeutically meaningful at each phase of the guided autobiography process?

Implications of the Study

The present study has six major implications. First, it sheds light on the ambiguity in the literature of whether guided autobiography can or cannot be considered a therapeutic modality. Second, it provides practitioners, clinicians, and educators with knowledge about the ability of guided autobiography to promote personal change. Third, it provides novel information about what therapeutically meaningful experiences are occurring during each phase of a guided autobiography group. Fourth, it contributes to the life review literature by generating data on a demographic that has been largely left out, namely younger adults and adults in midlife. Next, it contributes a qualitative perspective to the life review literature that explored meaning-making in guided autobiography. Finally, it provides information regarding the value of including life review and guided autobiography groups in counsellor training graduate programs.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

This chapter explores the literature relevant to the research topic of life review and guided autobiography. This overview provides an in-depth discussion of life review, including its historical beginnings, its contemporary definition, the theory behind it, therapeutic outcomes of life review, how it has been combined with distinct psychotherapies, and how it has rarely been applied to a younger demographic. Subsequent topics discussed in this chapter will focus on guided autobiography, which is the method of life review being explored in the current study. The different components of guided autobiography are described, and an overview of the empirical research using this particular life review method is outlined. An overview of the theory and outcomes of therapeutic writing concludes the chapter, since participants in the present study will be involved in a reflective writing component as part of their life review experience. Each section will situate the present study's topic and research questions in the literature, detailing how they relate to each other and what unique contributions to the existing literature the present study will offer.

Life Review

Historical Beginnings. The concept of life review first appeared in an article by Robert Butler, a geriatric psychiatrist, in 1963. The article was written in contention of the prevailing opinion regarding the occurrence of reminiscences in an older demographic. Reminiscing, which is the act or process of recalling the past, was generally viewed as living in the past, a form of escapism done purposefully by elderly people to obscure the present and fill the void of their current lives. Therapists tended to identify reminiscences as a sign of psychological deterioration, a position that Butler challenged. Butler argued that reminiscences should not be devalued and their significance diminished. Rather, he viewed reminiscing as part of a larger

process of reviewing one's life, or engaging in a life review. Butler believed reminiscing and reviewing one's life to be "a naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and, particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts; simultaneously, and normally, these revived experiences and conflicts can be surveyed and reintegrated" (Butler, 1963, p. 66). In Butler's (1963) opinion, reviewing one's life is a universal and natural part of the aging process, one that should not be devalued or discounted. Butler stated that therapists should pay attention to the reminiscences and life review of their older clients, because how these phenomena manifest can directly impact mental health and well-being. He explained that as the past is reviewed, it is also surveyed, observed, and reflected upon.

Depending on the individual, personal, and environmental circumstances of the person engaged in life review, Butler (1963) maintained it could manifest itself in three different ways: adaptive and constructive, adaptive and defensive, or psychopathological. An adaptive and constructive manifestation of a life review occurs when previous experiences and their meaning are reconsidered, resulting in a revised or expanded understanding. This reorganization offers a more valid picture or perspective of past events, and can provide new meaning to life. New meaning also dissipates the fear and anxiety of approaching death, thereby contributing to a sense of renewal and well-being. Butler stated the life review can also include adaptive yet defensive aspects, such as illusions or fantasies of "the good past" (p. 69), which serve to defend against the realities of the present. Although not constructive, Butler thought these manifestations of life review could maintain the status quo of psychological functioning. In contrast to the adaptive expressions of life review, Butler described the psychopathological aspects of life review in terms of obsessive ruminating, severe guilt, regret, despair, and

depression. Butler asserted that either one, or a combination, of these manifestations may be present in the life review of any one individual.

Butler (1963) associated the act of approaching death as a significant trigger in initiating the life review process. He hypothesized that the life review mechanism is a response to the impending biological and psychological elements of death; setting in motion a looking back process. This hypothesis made Butler focus his life review research on the elderly and terminally ill, but more recent investigations have found that impending death is not a necessary condition for life review to occur (Haber, 2006), suggesting a life review can be relevant at different stages across the lifespan. Butler (1963) concluded his seminal article by urging practitioners and researchers alike to be aware and respectful of the vital process of life review so that the elderly will be better tolerated, listened to, and understood, and so that their reminiscences will be treated as valuable and significant.

Butler's (1963) work on life review has had a major impact on how memories and reminiscences are conceptualized today. Haber (2006) views Butler's most significant contribution as the removal of the stigma associated with reminiscence in older adults, so that currently the act of reviewing one's life is valued and seen as a normal process that emerges from a desire to enjoy, grow, change, or cope.

Current Concepts of Life Review. This section explores the contemporary definition of life review since Butler's initial impressions in his 1963 publication. Haber (2006) described life review as an evaluative process that is typically structured around life themes and engaged in for either educational or therapeutic purposes. Haber explained that an educational life review can teach or inform others by passing on knowledge to another generation, whereas a therapeutic life review can help people cope with loss, guilt, conflict or defeat, or encourage meaning to be

found in life. Haight and colleagues (2000) reported that for a life review to have substantial impact on a person's life, the process must include a sufficient investment in time (at least the equivalent of 6 sessions), scope (from birth until present), intimacy (listening by others to stories of the past), and evaluation (analysis and synthesis of events and experiences).

An article by Jenko, Gonzalez, and Alley (2010) postulated there are three additional helpful factors inherent in a life review, which they named recontextualizing, forgiving, and reclaiming unlived life. The process of recontextualizing is about reframing self-defined mistakes and failures so these events are seen in a more positive light. Rather than seeing oneself as a victim of past circumstances, recontextualizing offers the awareness that one is often in control of life experiences and can change painful memories based on the perception of the experience. The second component of life review is forgiving oneself and others. The act of forgiveness diffuses anger and resentment, thereby allowing energy to be redirected towards positive thoughts and attitudes. The third component, reclaiming an unlived life, involves exploring feelings of regret about an opportunity earlier in life that was never realized. Jenko et al. asserted that regret is a common theme for people in the later stages of life, who may have thoughts of "if only" or what might have been. These regrets can poison the present and take away from the meaning of the life truly lived. By reflecting on past opportunities that were never used through the process of a life review, the pangs of regret are often alleviated. Jenko et al. included a quote in their discussion that touches upon the powerful nature of reviewing one's life,

> What frees us from the tyranny of the past is the understanding that
>
> time is stretchable, not linear, so we can reframe and reshape it using
>
> contemplative techniques. If we think that time is linear, an event

happens only once, the outcome is irreversible, and there is no way to

reenter it with awareness for the purpose of repairing it. But spiritual

insight reveals that time is multidirectional. Because it interpenetrates

past, present, and future, we can reach back into the past and repair

events and relationships that we perceive as failures or

disappointments. (Schachter-Shalomi & Miller, as cited in Jenko et al.,

p. 21)

By using the construct of time in relationship to the life review, Jenko and colleagues are

suggesting that in some respects life review is a way to reach back into the past and change how

we perceive and feel about experiences over the life span. This may be an essential healing

quality of the life review.

The current study defines life review as an umbrella term used to describe the process of

intentionally looking back on past events and memories in order to examine and evaluate how

past experiences can be integrated into the present and contribute to a sense of meaning in life.

After reviewing the literature, it was found that this process can take many forms, but usually is

elicited through a series of interviews with a trained healthcare professional. The literature

demonstrates that life review can occur one-on-one, or in groups; that memorabilia, such as

photo albums, music, and significant objects are often employed to elicit memories; and the

process usually involves an element of sharing stories generated by the life review, either with

fellow group members or family members.

Life Review versus Reminiscence. Butler (1963) distinguished between reminiscence

and life review stating, "Life review is not synonymous with, but includes reminiscence" (p. 67).

Life review and reminiscences can be viewed as two separate phenomena. Reminiscing is a

spontaneous and passive activity, simply the recall of memories, which is likely a universal experience from at least the age of ten onwards (King, as cited in Haber, 2006). In contrast, a life review is not passive, it is a structured and systematic process deliberately implemented by willing participants (Haber, 2006). Haber noted that a key feature of the life review is that it is an evaluative process, characterized by people examining how past experiences contribute to the meaning of their present lives. In contrast, reminiscence of a life history is characterized by people detailing the events of their life in a descriptive, rather than an evaluative, fashion.

Staudinger (2001) elaborated on the distinction between reminiscence and life review. She said that reminiscence is the process of reconstructing life events from memory, whereas life review is the reconstruction of life events with the *intent* to further analyze (explain and evaluate) these events. Rather than simply asking "What transpired?" Staudinger listed some typical questions a person would ask about an autobiographical memory if intentionally engaging in reviewing her or his life. For example, "How did the event come about, how does it fit my life plans, how did I feel about it and why, how can I avoid a similar event in the future, and how can I make those events happen more frequently in the future?" As can be seen from these questions, the key element of a life review is the intentional evaluation of autobiographical memories, with a focus on integrating them into the present life. Staudinger suggested that the level of analysis deepens as people begin to look for overarching themes and characteristics in their evaluations of life events, and that by detecting themes, further insight into self and life is gained. Staudinger further clarified this differentiation by explaining that the function of reminiscence is related to boredom reduction, passing on oral history, or conversational pleasure, whereas the function of life review is focused on more therapeutic goals, for instance, alleviating depression, solving a problem, enhancing self-understanding and self-insight, or enriching life insight and wisdom.

Theoretical Explanations of Life Review. Theorists within the field of lifespan and developmental psychology offer insight into the theoretical framework of the life review. One of the most cited theories in the life review literature is Erikson's (1959) stages of psychosocial development. Erikson theorized that a healthily developing person, from early infancy to late adulthood should pass through eight stages of development. At each stage, a challenge is encountered and hopefully resolved, with each stage building on the successful completion of earlier stages. Erikson's final stage, ego-integrity versus despair, is frequently cited in the literature to justify and explain the importance of a life review. In this final stage of life, ego-integrity is defined as a basic acceptance of one's life as having been inevitable, appropriate, and meaningful. In opposition, despair is associated with resentment, guilt, and regret over the life that has been lived. Erikson's eighth stage has been used to support the importance of a life review, designating it as a viable way to attain ego-integrity and ward off despair by integrating and accepting one's life experiences.

A criticism of Erikson's (1959) model is that the stages he described do not necessarily occur sequentially or in order. For example, Melia (as cited in Haber, 2006) argued that ego-integrity is a challenge that arises across the life span, not just in later adulthood. She studied the lives of adult women and found that in her sample, ego-integrity was never established definitively but needed to be grappled with throughout adulthood. According to her findings, losses that her participants suffered, for example the death of a significant other or health problems, were events that brought the struggle between ego-integrity and despair to the forefront. This finding suggests that a life review may be particularly helpful at times of suffering and loss throughout adulthood. This conclusion applies to the present study by

suggesting that a life review may help people attain integrity and avoid despair at different stages across the lifespan, not just in later life as Butler (1963) concluded.

Staudinger (2001) provided a useful overview of traditional developmental lifespan theorists' concept of the life review. She began by outlining Jung's (1971) understanding of the life review, a process he saw as being associated with the second half of life. According to Jung, the first half of life for an individual (until thirty-five or forty years of age) is focused on developing the personality type that is best suited for mastering environmental demands. Then in mid-life, the individual shifts his or her orientation from the outside environment to the inner world of self, drawing attention inwards. Jung claimed that this shift might create tension and psychic imbalance, experienced as dissatisfaction with life, especially if the person attempts to carry the psychology of the youthful orientation into midlife. In Jung's opinion, life review begins at the transition from the first to the second half of life in order to resolve psychic tension and restore psychic balance. Although Jung differed from Erikson in his opinion of when the life review naturally begins to take place (midlife compared to the end of life), both theorists viewed the life review as having a beneficial, integrating, and balancing impact on an individual.

Staudinger (2001) then discussed Neugarten's (1968) concept of life review. Neugarten, like Jung, associated the life review with the stage of midlife. Neugarten maintained that a major restructuring occurs during the lifespan stage of midlife, including the process of gradually beginning to orient towards time-left-to-live rather than time-since-birth, as well as when new conceptions of the self and of death evolve. For Neugarten, this restructuring in midlife is a time of potential crisis, where people can feel their life course runs counter to societal expectations or norms, creating a sense of being "off-time." Being "off-time" is the sense that one is not where one should be in terms of significant life events, such as not yet fostering a meaningful spousal

relationship, having children, or developing a satisfying career. Neugarten claimed that a reevaluation and reflection of life (i.e., a life review) could provide an avenue to address a sense of being "off-time," resulting in acceptance of one's life course at its midpoint.

Levinson's (1986) theory of life span development is included by Staudinger (2001) to further explain the theoretical framework of life review. Even though Levinson did not use the term life review, he discussed a process of examining and assessing the life structure, which Staudinger likens to the concept of life review. Levinson conceptualized lifespan development as a series of alternating stable and transitional periods. According to him, it was during periods of transition that people tend to analyze and critically examine their life by asking such questions as, "Am I satisfied with my life, am I satisfied with my personal relationships, and are there things that are missing?" Levinson saw at least three major life transitions that take place throughout the life cycle: transitioning into early adulthood, transitioning into middle adulthood, and transitioning into late adulthood. According to Levinson, it was at these points of major transition that people are most likely to review their life. What is unique about Levinson's theoretical explanation of life review is that he saw it as occurring across all stages of life, in contrast to the traditional view that applies life review solely to later life moments.

Haber (2006) took a different approach than the traditional developmental theorists to explain the theory behind life review. He called his theoretical explanation of life review "a coming to terms perspective" (p.158). Rather than an activity that occurs in the last stages of life, he saw coming to terms (or life review) as an ongoing process throughout adulthood, a repeated experience that is a psychological readjustment to life events. Based on his research of life review projects completed by his students over many years, Haber determined that adults come to terms, or fail to come to terms, with their past in three ways: (1) by valuing the good

things, where adults look back on their lives and recognize the good things they have achieved in all the domains of life; (2) by coming to terms with the difficult things, where adults can come to terms with most of the major challenges in their lives; or (3) by failing to come to terms with the difficult things, where adults are not able to come to terms with some aspects of their life and may obsessively ruminate about the perceived "good old days," or fixate on failures or conflicts in the past and present. Haber contended that by engaging in a life review at any point and time during one's life cycle, an individual is more likely to successfully come to terms with past events.

Regardless of the theoretical differences explaining the process of life review and its application to different life stages, the general consensus is that reviewing one's life is a beneficial and potentially universal occurrence. More importantly, positive outcomes such as enhanced integrity, finding meaning in life, diffusing psychic tension, feeling "on-time" with significant life events, navigating life transitions, and coming to terms with life events are theorized to occur if an individual engages in a guided and structured life review.

Therapeutic Outcomes. Since Butler's seminal article in 1963, a number of empirical studies have looked at the therapeutic outcomes of life review. The present body of literature indicates that there has been a movement towards designing methods of life review that strive to improve quality of life and well-being. The following section provides an overview of the body of literature that explores the therapeutic outcomes of experiencing a life review.

Life review research has focused considerably on the issue of depression in older people. For instance, Bohlmeijer, Smit, and Cuijpers (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of twenty controlled outcome studies to determine the effectiveness of life review on late-life severe depression. An overall effect size of 0.84 was found, indicating life review is a statistically and

clinically significant treatment for depression. These authors noted that the effect size is comparable to pharmacotherapy and psychological treatments, demonstrating that the life review may be as effective as medication and psychotherapy for depression in older adults.

Mastel-Smith et al. (2006) were concerned that depression is the most common mental illness and one of the leading causes of disability for older adults, yet only a few older adults receive adequate treatment for depression. The purpose of their study was to assess the efficacy of life review to decrease depression among fourteen home-dwelling older women. Participants were tested for depression before and after a six-week life review intervention. Participants reported less depression immediately after completion of a life review, as well as in a follow-up test four weeks later. These results provide documentation that life review can improve the quality of life and mental health of a population that is disproportionately affected by depression.

Serrano et al. (2004) discovered that life review provided relief from clinical depression in older adults. Participants reported less hopelessness, improved life satisfaction, and enhanced ability to retrieve specific memories and events from their past after participating in a standardized life review program. An interesting finding of this study was that getting practice in autobiographical memory retrieval of specific events was among the components of life review that accounted for its effectiveness, suggesting that the act of memory retrieval, in and of itself, is therapeutic. In a similar study, Korte, Bohlmeijer and Smit (2009) found that life review not only reduced depression, but was also effective in diminishing anxiety symptoms in older adults. Life review proved to significantly decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety over a longitudinal period of three, six, and twelve months after implementation, indicating that the life review has long-lasting effects. Davis (2004) employed life review to alleviate depression in older adults who had suffered strokes. This researcher noted that the inability to adjust is a key

reason for depressive symptoms to arise after suffering a stroke. It was found that incorporating a life review group as part of the individual's therapy aided the adjustment process, decreasing depression and increasing life satisfaction in older adults who had experienced a stroke.

In addition to depression, a number of studies have investigated the impact of life review on various aspects of well-being and quality of life. For example, Ando and colleagues (2008) used life review to address the problem of a lack of interventions for terminally ill cancer patients who were experiencing spiritual distress. These authors observed numerous factors that contribute to the distress of terminally ill cancer patients, including for example, a lack of meaning or purpose in life, problems associated with relationships, depression, and anxiety about death. The central purpose of this study was to assess the efficacy of a short-term life review group on the spiritual well-being, anxiety, depression, suffering, and happiness of terminally ill cancer patients. Thirty-five patients with incurable cancer were recruited from the palliative care unit of two general hospitals. The life review process used in this study was conducted by a clinical psychologist and involved two steps: first participants reviewed important past events in their life, and then engaged in a process of re-evaluating, re-constructing, and appreciating their life. A pre-test post-test design was employed, and participants were assessed using a number of psychological measurements. Findings demonstrated a significant increase in spiritual well-being and happiness, as well as a significant decrease in anxiety, depression, and suffering for participants. These results are indicative of the therapeutic benefits of life review for a population suffering from a terminal illness. The strength of this study lies within the assessment of several variables, demonstrating the powerful impact of life review across five psychological constructs.

Erlen et al. (2001) explored life review as a means of helping people living with AIDS deal with the uncertainty of their illness and enhance their quality of life. A sample of twenty individuals, with a mean age of forty-three years, participated in a life review program. Compared to a control group, participants in the life review group scored lower on a depression measure, and higher on measures of self-esteem, purpose in life, and quality of life. Participants were reassessed twelve months later, with results demonstrating continued attenuation of depressive symptoms, and continued gains in self-esteem and quality of life. The researchers concluded that life review is a feasible intervention to be used with people living with AIDS. A noted strength of this particular study is the collected written evaluations from the participants who were involved in the life review group. All reported that life review was helpful to them, and specific comments included, "It helped to get issues out that were stored up in me for a while," "It allowed me to see myself better," and "It made me think about past and present." By asking for participants' personal reflections, this study qualitatively confirmed the positive outcomes of life review.

In a study that addressed the issue of quality of life in elderly Chinese veterans, Chiang et al. (2008) evaluated whether an eight week life review program improved the self-esteem and life satisfaction of the participants. The sample consisted of seventy-five elderly Chinese men from a Veteran's Home. Results indicated that self-esteem and life satisfaction improved significantly in the experimental group when compared to the control group; and that one month after the intervention, self-esteem and life satisfaction continued to improve when compared with pre-intervention levels. These results signify that life review is an evidence-based practice that can improve the health and quality of life for elderly men. As well, it demonstrates the efficacy of life review in a non-Western cultural context.

Life review has also proven beneficial when conducted in unorthodox and new arenas. For example, Wise et al. (2009) implemented an on-line self-directed life review educational program delivered via the Internet for people living with cancer. The website offered instructional materials and expert consultation to help people write and share their stories. In-depth interviews with participants illustrated that this web-based form of life review was beneficial for people living with cancer. In another example of using life review in a unique manner, medical students conducted a life review with elderly adults to develop and hone their listening and communication skills (McFarland et al., 2006). The faculty evaluated this educational experience using transcribed interviews of the life reviews, students' reflection papers, and interviews with students. They concluded that the life review experience enhanced students' comprehension of how psychosocial, cultural, spiritual, and life-changing events affect health and health behaviours, contributing to the students' abilities to become empathic and effective physicians. These two studies portray the powerful impact life review can have across a range of implementation styles, populations, and goals, adding to the well-documented evidence of the benefits of life review.

Life Review with Younger Adults. A comprehensive search of the literature yielded very few studies that specifically explored the use of life review with people who are not nearing the end of life, either due to age or illness. Because the present thesis study explores the experience of life review with participants in young to mid adulthood, it is important to make note of the unique contributions these studies have made to the literature. Three articles were located and will be outlined as follows. The first article (Staudinger, 2001) principally disagreed with Butler's (1963) position that life review is a process that occurs primarily in late adulthood. Staudinger asserted that the process of reflecting on life (life review) is a fundamental action that

emerges in the first two decades of life, and is a crucial and basic tool for the regulation of healthy development across the lifespan. Furthermore, she explained that the ability to effectively reflect on life emerges in conjunction with the developmental milestones of one's working memory capacity, abstract reasoning skills, emergence of an integrated and coherent sense of self, and refinements of theory of mind, all events which developmentally occur by mid to late adolescence.

To test the proposition that life review occurs across the lifespan and serves different functions at different ages, Staudinger (2001) conducted sixty semi-structured interviews with young, middle-aged, and older adults, ranging in ages from twenty-five to eighty-five years old. Participants were asked how often they think back over their life (frequency), why they do this (function), and what they do when they are engaged in reviewing their life (process). Counter to Butler's (1963) assumption, Staudinger found no difference in frequency of life reflection across ages. In fact, all participants reported engaging "often" in reviewing their life. However, age differences were found when asked about the function of reviewing one's life. Younger adults were more likely to report reviewing their life to gain enhanced insight into who they are, or to find a solution to a pressing life decision. In contrast, older adults reported engaging in life review in order to feel balanced and integrate the life they had lived into the present. In terms of process, or what participants reported doing when reviewing their life, age was not a significant factor. Instead, it was found that greater insight was gained by participants who were more likely to consider the emotions associated with past events, rather than simply reminiscing about a past event. In conclusion, Staudinger explained that life review is a process that supports adaptation to the developmental tasks at different life stages and periods. Staudinger's inquiry is helpful because it demonstrates that young people frequently engage in life review for the purposes of

solving problems and gaining insight, and that the most insight is gained when emotional aspects of past events are reflected upon.

A second article that explored life review with younger adults used life review to tackle the problem of an increase in the incidence and severity of student mental health problems, demonstrated by the increase in need for counselling services on college campuses (Arkoff et al., 2006). These authors noted that life review has proven helpful for older adults making the transition into retirement, yet remark on the fact that very little attention has been paid to what life review may offer younger adults beginning college, also a massive life transition. The purpose of Arkoff and colleagues' inquiry was to determine the degree of interest and helpfulness first year college students might find in a life review program, and the effects such a program would have on the students' psychological well-being. The sample consisted of sixty-six first year college students enrolled in an intro-level psychology class. The sample was divided into a group of students who completed the life review, and a comparison group of students who did not experience life review. Results indicated the life review students made significant gains on two scales of a psychological well-being measure, namely, self-acceptance and environmental mastery. There were no significant changes in the control group's scores from pre-test to post-test.

The results of Arkoff et al.'s (2006) study indicated the life review program provided students with an enhanced view of themselves and of their ability to deal effectively with their environment. Additionally, students were asked what they liked and disliked about the life review program. The closeness that was developed amongst group members and the encountered relief at finding their concerns and feelings being widely shared amongst the group was reported to be the most significant benefit of the life review group. The dislikes were unremarkable and

merely concerned the early hour at which the life review group was conducted. Most notable was the finding of enhanced support due to the group-based nature of the program. These results are important because they indicate that life review, an intervention primarily employed with older adults, was reported to be helpful for younger adults.

The third study that explored life review with a younger population addressed the issue of psychological trauma in young men who had survived a severe illness or accident resulting in time spent in a hospital's intensive care unit (Jones, Lyons, & Cunningham, 2003). These researchers wanted to provide a holistic, rather than an illness-oriented, psychotherapeutic approach to address the risk of depression and loss of self-esteem that is often experienced after recovery from a severe accident or illness. Jones et al. suggested the well-documented therapeutic effects of life review for elderly people may be transferable to young men traumatized by life-threatening illness or severe accident. A case study design was chosen to explore the potential therapeutic use of life review with eighteen young men following critical illness. Part of the sample participated in six weeks of a structured life review, where individuals reviewed their life experiences from early childhood until the time of the illness or accident. The rest of the sample participated in a home visit treatment that consisted of six visits where participants were simply asked about their progress with recovery. Interviews were conducted with all 18 young men about their experience with the life threatening illness or accident shortly after being discharged from the hospital, and before the life review or home visit interventions. Evidence of distress, for example negative themes of death anxiety and frequent bizarre frightening dreams, emerged from the initial set of interviews of all participants.

After the life review or home visit interventions, all eighteen participants were again interviewed about the experience of their critical illness or accident. When asked to reflect upon

their brush with death, participants in the life review group reported more positive outcomes than the home visit group. For example, participants in the life review group talked about integrating and accepting life style changes forced upon them by their illness or accident, feeling special and unique, having positive self-appraisals, and having the ability to reflect on personal qualities with insight. In contrast, themes that emerged from interviews with the home visit group were more negative, consisting of preoccupation with the critical illness or accident episode, negative ruminations of never being able to lead a normal life, frustration with physical limitations, worries about future financial and job prospects, and a reported lack of direction and sense of feeling lost.

Jones et al. (2003) noted the dramatic differences between how the life review group talked about their illnesses or accidents as compared to the home visit group who were not given the opportunity to review their lives. These researchers stated that by engaging in a life review, participants were enabled to reflect on their experiences with illness in a structured and integrative manner. Jones and colleagues explained that the rehabilitation phase after severe illness or injury is often fraught with confusion and frustration, as well as a search for meaning and a need to understand past events. They concluded that life review encouraged their participants to reflect upon and contextualize past experiences into their present identity, helping participants through the difficult rehabilitation period.

For the purposes of the present proposal, the most salient finding by Jones et al. (2003) is that the benefits of life review so often observed with the elderly appear to readily transfer to a younger population. They reported these benefits as seeming to focus on four major areas for young people: contextualizing (placing events in their proper place in life and making priorities), realizing (breaking down negative dysfunctional thoughts by finding no life evidence for them),

understanding (making past-to-present comparisons), and growing (reaching a state of cognitive completion and successfully integrating emotionally). In addition to these beneficial factors, Jones et al. claimed that life review with younger adults can serve as a "prophylactic intervention" because it equips the young person with reflective skills to draw upon which act as a buffer against future stressful life events. This study is important because it demonstrates the beneficial and potentially preventative effects that life review can contribute to a younger population.

Combining Life Review with Distinct Psychotherapies. Another area of interest in the life review literature consists of investigating the ability of a life review to enhance other therapeutic techniques. For instance, Butler (as cited in Haber, 2006) proposed that life review may be a valuable component of family therapy, because it can facilitate consensus and clarification of family issues. Haight and colleagues (2003) also contended that life review can be a useful therapeutic technique when combined with family therapy. These researchers guided people with dementia and their familial caregivers through life review sessions. After the intervention, they found improvement in both members of this family dyadic unit. For instance, the mood and behaviour problems of participants with dementia improved significantly, and caregivers felt significantly less burdened.

Brown-Shaw, Westwood, and de Vries (1999) discussed the viability of using a life review technique in the context of group psychodrama. They viewed this combination as particularly therapeutic because the life review can be used as a tool for self-exploration and self-examination, and the group psychodrama used as a method for making the internal representation of self, discovered through life review, external and concrete. Difficult memories and critical events are aired through life review; then with therapeutic enactment and group psychodrama

these critical negative events can be re-storied and enacted, leading to such positive outcomes as integration rather than despair.

Puentes (2004) suggested that life review can be integrated with and strengthen cognitive therapy through reviewing major themes in one's life and examining them for cognitive distortions. Puentes combined life review with cognitive therapy to address the problem of adjustment disorder and depression in older adults caring at home for spouses with Alzheimer's. Puentes observed that lifespan issues contributed significantly to pathology in this population. Based on this observation, Puentes supplemented his cognitive therapy approach with life review techniques, by developing a twelve week group program that enabled participants to review twelve life themes and then analyze their life themes for cognitive distortions. By the end of the program, six of the seven group members had achieved symptom relief and were discharged from treatment. Puentes concluded that life review enabled participants to resolve the conflict between their role as spousal caregiver and the feelings of bereavement they were experiencing due to losing the spouse they had known and loved. This resolution was achieved by breaking down the over-idealization (cognitive distortion) of the ill spouse and developing an acceptance of their present spousal relationship and their lives as they had been lived. This study indicates the effectiveness of integrating life review with cognitive approaches to maximize client-healing outcomes. The aforementioned articles demonstrate that life review is a versatile technique, one that can be successfully added to other psychotherapeutic approaches to deepen and enhance client healing.

Guided Autobiography

     Definition. Guided autobiography is a specific technique developed to guide the process of a systematic and structured life review. This method was developed by Dr. James E. Birren in the 1970s as a way for older adults to gain perspective on their life story and to find, clarify, and deepen meaning in the accumulated experience of a lifetime. Birren and Deutchman (1991) call this the process of exploring and strengthening the fabric of life, stating that a grasp on the fabric of one's life can make a significant contribution to well-being. What is unique about guided autobiography as a life review method is that it was designed to combine individual and group experiences by incorporating three components: private reflection and writing of life stories on pre-selected life themes, reading these life stories and sharing thoughts in a mutually encouraging group, and group interaction facilitated by a group leader to generate new perspectives on life issues.

     Guided autobiography is defined as a semi-structured, thematic, group approach to life review, an educational process that brings understanding of the past into the present so that a person can integrate the experiences and events of his or her lifetime (de Vries, Birren, & Deutchman, 1995). Birren and Cochran (2001) defined guided autobiography as a semi-structured process of life review that incorporates individual and group experiences with autobiographical writing. These authors offered a helpful quote that captures the spirit of guided autobiography,

> Writing about our life experiences and sharing them with others gives
>
> more meaning to our lives by helping us more fully understand our
>
> past and present. The process puts the contradictions, paradoxes, and
>
> ambivalence we might find in our past lives into new perspectives. It

helps us understand how our personal identity has been shaped by the

crosscurrents in our lives. (p. 4-5)

The Life Themes. A unique feature of guided autobiography is its structured nature

around nine life themes. Birren and Deutchman (1991) stated that the reason to use

predetermined themes is that life review is most productive as part of a guided process that

directs attention to major areas of life that all people experience and share. These are the nine

themes that are typically used in a guided autobiography group: (1) the major branching points in

life; (2) family history; (3) career or major life's work; (4) the role of money in life; (5) health

and body image; (6) the loves and hates of life; (7) sexual identity, sex roles, and sexual

experiences; (8) experiences with and ideas about death and dying and other losses; and (9)

influences, beliefs, and values that provide meaning in life. De Vries et al., (1995) explained that

guided autobiography is structured in such a way because certain themes generate the most

salient memories, and the specific nine themes were designed to elicit reminiscences in areas of

life that are likely to be the most evocative and emotional. The order in which the themes are

presented is important, because they represent an order of life that flows from the most basic life

issues to the more abstract and philosophical ones. The order also insures that more sensitive

themes occur later in the group, when the most trust and intimacy has been formed. The nine

themes are thought to be the common threads in all individuals' lives, themes that are universal

because they cross cultural, economic, racial, and gender barriers (Birren & Cochran, 2001).

The purpose of the themes is to focus people's attention and thoughts on the central

issues of life and the major changes, adaptations, and accommodations that are made over the

lifetime. They also serve as a guard against obsessive rumination on singular topics, and they

expand perspectives and productively channel attention towards completing an expansive life

review (de Vries et al., 1995). Additionally, Birren and Cochran (2001) explained that the use of the nine themes frees people from the constraints of strict chronology as they conduct their life review, and underscores the fact that our lives are not composed of a single thread but rather of a complex matrix of events, relationships, and experiences.

In addition to the themes, there are a series of sensitizing questions for each of the nine themes. The purpose of the sensitizing questions is to remind people about memories not otherwise easily recalled, to offer a wider range of perspectives to address the theme, and to guide and stimulate thought about the issues. The sensitizing questions are designed to ensure that no structure is placed on thinking and that no specific answers are elicited. The themes and sensitizing questions have been developed over seventeen years of experience in conducting guided autobiography groups (de Vries et al., 1995). Birren likened guided autobiography "to a nine-sided prism refracting the light (life story) differently, depending on which side (theme) is showing" (as cited in de Vries et al, 1995, p.168). This analogy explains that the use of themes is how guided autobiography encourages creative and divergent thinking about oneself and one's life.

Autobiographical Writing. The written component of guided autobiography is done individually, in preparation for each group meeting. De Vries et al. (1995) described the process by explaining that group members use individual journaling to facilitate in-depth self- reflection to evaluate the past and to gain appreciation for the tapestry of their life. Additionally, personal writing is an integral aspect of guided autobiography because it stimulates further recall of past events, organizes one's thoughts, allows rehearsal of what will be shared with the group, and highlights experiences that are more central or affectively/emotionally charged, thereby

optimizing the time spent in group interaction. Group members then select two pages of their

journaling about the week's theme to read aloud and share with the group at each group meeting.

Reflecting on the autobiographical writing component, Birren and Deutchman (1991)

stated, "Personal, private reflection and the motivation to delve deeply into the banks of memory

are summoned by the task of writing down one's recollections" (p. 57). Similarly, Birren and

Cochran (2001) affirmed that guided autobiography is about the thrill of self-discovery for group

members so that "as life flows through them onto the page, they are likely to feel very much

alive, challenged, and ultimately capable" (p. 20). However, writing is just one part of the

process, and reading life stories aloud to the group is as important as the personal journaling.

Birren and Cochran (2001) said that sharing life stories with others is where the most insight

occurs, because it is in the combined process of writing and sharing that we can reprogram the

way we experience incidents in our lives.

The Group Process. A typical guided autobiography group occurs over a series of nine

meetings, one meeting or session for each of the nine themes or during an intensive weekend

workshop (Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Westwood & Ewasiw, in press), and usually consists of

six group members and a group leader. Guided autobiography is conducted in the context of a

group for a number of reasons. For instance, what is difficult to write may paradoxically be more

easily expressed in the group context, new associations with old memories may arise from the

group discussion, participants are enriched by the opportunity to review similarities in

experience and develop a sense of universality of lives, the group gives the opportunity to see

oneself in the lives and stories of others, the group helps with recalling events that might have

been forgotten and facilitates the expression of events that were thought to be inappropriate, and

confidence and trust in the group enhances recall (de Vries et al., 1995). These authors added

that the group is essential to the process of life review because group members can serve as agents of social support and feedback. The fact that attention is distributed evenly across group members can reduce pressure on any one member, making it easier for members to deal with potentially painful memories. Birren and Cochran (2001) said the group is important because reading life stories in front of an encouraging group of people who are also sharing their experiences takes members to a higher level of insight and understanding than could be achieved through writing alone.

A key dimension of the group process in guided autobiography is the concept of *developmental exchange.* This is a term Birren and Deutchman (1991) used to describe the incremental and mutual exchange of personally salient and meaningful information among group members. Members move from tentatively sharing and alluding to important life events to progressively more open sharing of significant memories. As one member shares increasingly personal information, other members will be encouraged to do so as well, creating an exchange of deeply personal historical and emotional events. The developmental exchange builds on itself, leading to greater self-disclosure as trust in the group is further established. Birren and Deutchman stated that the developmental exchange is essential because the exchange of one's past with trusted others reinforces and sustains the motivation to review one's life.

An additional benefit of the group is known as the "oh phenomenon" (de Vries et al., 1995). This occurs when a person comes to a guided autobiography group with what he or she perceives as a dark secret, usually some act or feeling that has made the person feel separate, unacceptable, or ashamed. Yet, when the secret is eventually revealed in the group, it is typically received with social acceptance. Group members are neither shocked nor surprised, and may even reveal very similar "secrets." This experience is incredibly helpful for members who have

been stuck on some painful past experience, and can result in the decrease of shame and the ability to move forward.

The importance of the group component of guided autobiography is highlighted by a study conducted by Mori (2005). Mori compared results between two groups, one that was involved in a guided autobiography group, and another that only engaged in the writing component of guided autobiography. It was found that although writing on the guiding themes alone was effective for promoting acceptance and integration of one's life as meaningful, the guided autobiography group, which involved a group process, was additionally able to enhance energy and maturity, and it allowed group members to gain a sense of fullness of life. These findings emphasize the importance of the group experience for enhancing benefits for participants.

Benefits of Guided Autobiography. Through years of experience with guided autobiography, the developers of this approach to life review have become aware of its numerous benefits. De Vries et al. (1995) asserted that guided autobiography encourages people to identify their strengths and weaknesses, to develop a sense of coherence in their lives, and to accept their lives as they have evolved. Birren and Cochran (2001) added that guided autobiography teaches us to value our individuality as well as our connections to others. They stated that guided autobiography shows us that part of our humanness is our ability to survive and that reflecting on our past shines a light on the very strengths that allow us to endure. This empowers us so that we experience a sense of enthusiasm and confidence as we consider our futures.

In a section of their book, Birren and Cochran (2001) sum up the benefits reported by older adults in their guided autobiography groups over the years. These include increased self-esteem and a greater sense of personal power and significance; greater awareness of past

adaptive strategies and ways in which these might be applied to current problems and conditions; resolution of past resentments, pain, and negative feelings and a sense of reconciliation; renewed interest in past activities and hobbies; ability to differentiate between the roles of enduring internal motivations and external societal motivations in making life choices; development of friendships and confidante relationships with other group members; an increased sense of meaning in life; appreciation for the developmental work one faces at each stage of life; a greater sense of accomplishment and fulfillment; and a stronger, more positive view of the future. As can be seen by these reported results, the benefits of guided autobiography are abundant and span numerous dimensions of life.

A slightly different, but equally important benefit of guided autobiography groups is that they build a sense of community. Birren and Cochran (2001) stated that even if the group only consists of a weekend workshop, members tend to develop a strong sense of community with each other. "The autobiography group is a small but vibrant community that provides individuals with support, recognition, and a context in which to better understand the significance of their life experiences" (p. 18).

After a search of the recent literature (since 1990), it was found that there are very few empirical studies that seek to investigate the therapeutic outcomes of guided autobiography. And there were no located studies that sought to focus on meaning-making and the experience of change due to a guided autobiography group. The following section provides an overview of these research projects that contribute to our knowledge regarding the outcomes of this method of life review.

McLean (2001) used guided autobiography to tackle the issue of personal development in graduate students in a Master's counselling program. She defined personal development as

particular personal attributes or qualities, the enhancement of which are relevant for counselling others. The purpose of her study was to discover what impact guided autobiography had on the personal development of participants. Her rationale was that counsellor training institutions need programs that will promote and enhance the personal development of students; she therefore wanted to see if a guided autobiography group could fulfill this need. McLean sought to answer the research question: what benefits to their personal development did the participants attribute to the guided autobiography group experience? A qualitative case study approach was used to explore the experience of five graduate students in a guided autobiography group. The following benefits emerged after analyzing in-depth interviews with participants: students felt the group was a safe venue for experimenting with self-disclosure, students learned about counselling others and leading groups, peers in the guided autobiography group became a support network, students gained new awareness and acceptance of self, students learned from each other's experiences, students were able to experience the reframing and resolution of negative life events, and students discovered aspects of self that could be explored further. McLean concluded that a number of these results suggest guided autobiography offers a means to facilitate personal development in students as a component of counsellor training, and recommended that guided autobiography be offered as a course within the counsellor education curriculum. McLean's study is unique because it explored the experience of guided autobiography from the perspective of a younger population, which is very rare in the literature. Her findings provide evidence that life review has positive outcomes for adults who are younger, and not in their last stages of life.

Hunter (1997) wanted to better illuminate how guided autobiography affects older adults in order to determine whether it is a promising group design for counsellors and other professionals working with this population. An ethnographic case study was used to gather

evidence for or against the outcomes of guided autobiography reported by Birren and Deutchman (1991) in their book about guided autobiography. Seven older adults participated in a version of a guided autobiography group that focused on the theme "major branching points of my life," and were then interviewed about their experience. Results showed evidence to support the following outcomes reported by Birren and Deutchman: reconciliation with the past and resolution of past resentments and negative feelings, resurgence of interest in past activities or hobbies, and development of friendships with other group members. However, no evidence was found in support of the following outcomes: sense of increased personal power and importance, recognition of past adaptive strategies and application to current needs and problems, and a greater sense of meaning in life. In addition to findings from Birren and Deutchman, Hunter identified new outcomes: recognition that one's life is not yet completed, satisfaction with one's life course, a new perspective and/or appreciation of one's life through comparison with others, and a new awareness or heightened awareness of one's contributions and/or abilities. An explanation for not finding evidence to support all of Birren and Deutchman's findings is that only one theme was explored in this group. Nonetheless, the study contributes to the body of knowledge by discovering new outcomes of guided autobiography with older adults, and finding support for some benefits reported by Birren and Deutchman.

Pearson (2005) used guided autobiography to tackle the issue of burnout and stress in family physicians in Canada. She pointed out that contributing to this problem is the fact that self-care, disclosure of personal difficulties, collegiality, and help-seeking have not traditionally been an accepted aspect of the medical culture. The purpose of her study was to gain an understanding of whether a guided autobiography group was a viable means of enhancing well-being for family physicians that were currently experiencing distress due to their careers.

Pearson's goal was to illuminate the potential benefits and drawbacks of guided autobiography within participants' personal experiences and professional context. She organized a seven session guided autobiography group with six physicians and a group leader. Pearson's findings indicated the guided autobiography program was an effective way to promote self-care, mutual support, a sense of community, and enhanced sustainability at work among family physicians. One of her most salient findings was that participants benefited deeply from building relationships and creating community with each other due to membership in the group. Participants expressed great satisfaction at having been heard and understood by their colleagues and appreciated being able to listen to each other without the usual burdens of documenting the facts, diagnosing the problem, and proscribing a solution. The benefit of this collegial support resulted in the normalization of participants' career frustrations and concerns. As can be seen from Pearson's results, the community building ability of guided autobiography was experienced as a powerful benefit and much needed way to move physicians out of isolation and into connection.

A recent article (Westwood & Ewasiw, in press) explored the therapeutic potential of combining guided autobiography with therapeutic enactment, a distinct group-based modality that involves re-enacting a significant event in a person's life in order to permit the re-experiencing and re-storying of the self (Westwood & Wilensky, 2005). The authors explained that engaging clients in life review using the guided autobiography technique provides a starting place for delving into the therapeutic enactment. Westwood and Ewasiw used Prochaska, Norcross, and diClementi's (1994) Transtheroretical Model of Change to provide a framework for understanding how combining guided autobiography with therapeutic enactment can support the process of change for clients. Westwood and Ewasiw explained that the writing phase of guided autobiography increases awareness as new thoughts and feelings surface. This increased

awareness is likened to the *contemplative stage* of Prochaska and associates model of change. The next phase of guided autobiography, which involves the sharing of life stories and interaction and feedback among group members, marks the transition into the *preparation* phase of the model of change, as clients grow increasingly more insightful and aware. Through this guided exploration of their lives, clients are able to choose an incident, event, or an on-going situation that has shaped their beliefs about themselves and perhaps restricted their spontaneity and personal fulfillment. This self-selected event becomes the centre of the therapeutic enactment, where the client is able to move into the *action stage* of the model of change; moving from language to doing, acting, experiencing, and reacting. Westwood and Ewasiw explained that this movement from thinking and reflecting to action and experiencing can be transformative for clients. Following the life review and therapeutic enactment, the therapist guides the client to integrate and transfer this new way of experiencing the self into their present life. This marks the *maintenance and termination phase* of Prochaska, Norcross, and diClementi's Stages of Change Model.

Westwood and Ewasiw (in press) cited research that has demonstrated the therapeutic benefits of combining guided autobiography and therapeutic enactment. The outcomes include a decrease in post-traumatic stress symptoms, depression, shame and guilt; an increase in self-esteem and motivation; enhanced ability to manage anger and irritation; and enriched relationships and improved home life (Westwood, Black, & McLean; Westwood, McLean, Cave, Borgen, & Slakov, as cited in Westwood & Ewasiw, in press). Westwood and Ewasiw view guided autobiography as a "self-diagnostic phase, where, through increased awareness from reflecting, organizing, writing, sharing, and giving and receiving feedback, the client identifies where change needs to occur in order to move forward in life" (p. 17). This article contributed to

the current research topic by demonstrating that guided autobiography, when combined with another modality, can effect therapeutic change in clients. The present study adds to Westwood and Ewasiw's perspective by asking if guided autobiography alone can promote therapeutic change in group members.

These studies demonstrate the therapeutic power of guided autobiography; however, the fact there are so few studies indicates a need for further research in this area. The present study aims to fill this gap by exploring therapeutic change and meaning-making in the context of a guided autobiography group with student counsellors.

The Contention: Is Guided Autobiography Therapy? Despite the numerous benefits and therapeutic outcomes of guided autobiography, the developers of this life review method make it clear that it is not to be considered a therapy per se, because it is not problem-focused and does not seek to promote change in participants. Birren and Deutchman (1991) asserted,

> Guided autobiography is not designed to be used as formal therapy since
> it is not actively directed towards the cure or amelioration of a disease or
> a social or emotional problem. It does, however, have therapeutic value
> as a by-product that occurs naturally. (p. 3)

To explain the difference further, Birren and Deutchman compared the therapeutic quality of guided autobiography to other activities that are considered therapeutic but not formal therapy, for instance physical exercise, gardening, playing a musical instrument, going for a walk, or spending time in nature. They stated that not unlike these other activities, guided autobiography has "healing powers" (p.3). Yet, the authors go on to say that guided autobiography's healing powers are also a result of its ability to help people reconcile longstanding issues and rediscover their passions and interests. This appears to be a discrepancy, because if reconciliation and

rediscovery have occurred, then has not a significant and powerful change also arisen within the individual? The question is an important one for the topic of the present research, because its purpose is to explore change experiences in the context of a guided autobiography group.

The developers of guided autobiography designed this method of life review to fulfill an educational purpose. They stated, "It is an educational process of bringing one's understanding of the past into the present in order to integrate the experiences of a lifetime" (de Vries et al.,1990, p. 4). Rather than solely an educational exercise, Thornton (2008) viewed guided autobiography as a learning experience, but one that can be both educational and therapeutic. He stated that guided autobiography was not designed to be undertaken as therapy with the purpose of changing the storyteller or the story; nonetheless, in his experience he has noticed that change often does occur. Thornton acknowledged the tenuous distinction between the educational or therapeutic impact of guided autobiography by saying, "The basic differences between a 'therapeutic effect' arising in a learning experience or in therapy are, at best, fuzzy" (p. 158). A major goal of the proposed study is to explore the therapeutic essence of guided autobiography so this "fuzziness" in the literature diminishes and the issue becomes clearer. By interviewing participants about the meaning they attribute to their experience in a guided autobiography group, and analyzing participants' narratives for evidence of personal change experiences, the proposed study aims to explore Thornton's observation that change does in fact occur.

The Role of Learning in Guided Autobiography. The therapeutic effects of guided autobiography have been attributed to the deep personal learning, known as transformative learning, that occurs during the experience of reviewing one's life (Brown-Shaw, Westwood, & de Vries, 1999; Thornton, 2008). Thornton explained there are three main learning strategies that people employ, including learning to learn, learning for growth, and learning for well-being.

Learning to learn is the domain we are most familiar with, learning that occurs through numerous cognitive activities such as school, reading, or working. Learning for growth includes strategies that challenge and reorganize personal narratives as individuals develop and change their life story, such as meaning-making and gaining wisdom. Thornton identified learning for growth as the domain of guided autobiography and life review. The third learning strategy, learning for well-being, seeks access to behavioural processes that effect emotions, perceptions, and psychological or physical stress in order to enhance personal well-being; this is the territory of therapeutic interventions and psychotherapy. Thornton saw learning for growth and learning for well-being as related learning strategies, because learning about ourselves enhances well-being. This link is how Thornton conceptualizes guided autobiography's healing impact. Essentially, new learning occurs through growth, and well-being is enhanced; thus, guided autobiography initiates a "therapeutic effect."

Thornton (2008) said that learning experiences are embodied and embedded in guided autobiography and brought about by the activities of reflecting on, telling, listening, and writing life stories. He claimed that most of the transformational learning and therapeutic effects of guided autobiography occur in the interactions among group members. Thornton likened the developmental exchange discussed by Birren and Deutchman (1991) to small group learning dynamics in which group members are encouraged to explore and share a number of concepts, such as who we are and who we are becoming, the experiences that brought us to where we are, the purposes and goals shaping our present, and the pathways and possibilities for developing our future. Guided autobiography groups offer fertile ground to explore these common questions.

To further investigate transformative learning in guided autobiography, Thornton (as cited in Thornton, 2008) asked participants to write on the thematic topic of "what I am learning

in this guided autobiography workshop." Included in forty-six responses were the following themes: I am learning to trust, I am learning not to judge others, I am learning to have faith in myself, I am learning to forgive myself, I am learning to have better self-esteem. I am learning to love myself, I am learning to love others, I am learning to let the small stuff go, I am healing the past, and I am looking forward to the future.

These results sum up the power of guided autobiography as a learning experience and clearly validate its ability to promote transformative learning. Thornton (2008) reiterates this point by stating,

> The guided autobiography method with its developmental exchange
>
> provides one of the most robust, well-rounded learning activities an
>
> adult educator might imagine…and is associated with finding purpose
>
> and meaning in one's life, to staying connected in fragile and
>
> fragmenting communities. (p. 170)

Brown-Shaw et al. (1999) also discussed the ability of guided autobiography to elicit transformative learning. They defined transformative learning as the kind of learning that changes people's frames of reference by transforming meaning schemas and perspectives. This type of learning can change assumptions about ourselves that were previously thought unchangeable; therefore, changes in frames of reference can lead to positive outcomes. Through professional and research experience, these authors noted that with its ability to promote transformative learning, life review in general and guided autobiography specifically, can create the forum for these changes and positive outcomes to occur in an effective way. By relating learning to change, Thornton (2008) and Brown-Shaw et al. help to explain how personal changes may occur for group members in a guided autobiography group.

Therapeutic Writing

Another unique feature of guided autobiography is the inclusion of an individual self-reflective process of writing autobiographical essays on life themes. A body of literature exists that explores the therapeutic advantages of writing. The following section will provide an overview of this literature, focusing on the work of Pennebaker (1993, 1997), a prominent researcher in the field of therapeutic writing. By discussing this body of research, the benefits of the written component of guided autobiography will be considered.

The Basic Writing Paradigm. Pennebaker's (1997) basic writing paradigm in numerous research projects across different contexts and populations has found that confronting deeply personal issues through writing promotes physical health, well-being, and selected adaptive behaviours. The basic writing paradigm involves asking a group of participants to write for fifteen to thirty minutes a day for three to five consecutive days. The group is divided into two, with one half asked to write about superficial topics, such as their daily routine, and the other half asked to write about their deepest thoughts and feelings about an important emotional issue that has affected them and their lives. The two groups are then compared to determine the impact of writing about emotional experiences. Pennebaker's initial findings were powerful; participants, from children to the elderly, from honor students to maximum-security prisoners, disclosed a remarkable range and depth of emotional experiences. In particular, lost loves, incidents of physical and sexual abuse, and tragic failures were common themes. His findings demonstrated that the vast majority of people readily disclose personal issues through writing when given the opportunity to do so. Similarly, participants overwhelmingly described the process of writing about emotional issues as valuable and meaningful. Pennebaker concluded, "Translating important psychological events into words is uniquely human" (p. 165).

Outcomes of Therapeutic Writing. When participants in the emotional writing group were compared with those in the superficial writing group, important biological, emotional, and behavioural differences were observed. For instance, Pennebaker (1993) found that writing about traumatic experiences resulted in a drop in healthcare centre and physician visits in the six months following writing, an increase in liver enzyme functioning, and a boosted immune system. Emotional benefits of writing about personal experiences included an overall sense of enhanced well-being, long-term improvements in mood, and significant reductions in distress. In addition, positive behavioural changes included improvement in university students' grades, getting new jobs more quickly for people who were laid off, and fewer absentee days for staff at large universities (Pennebaker, 1997). A very interesting finding was that writing about personal issues can actually influence the way in which people interact and talk with others in their social sphere. Due to partaking in the basic writing paradigm, there was evidence of significant changes in patterns of speech, increased use of self-references, and increased use of emotion words. These changes in styles of interaction were found to help people better express emotional experiences, which resulted in becoming more socially integrated within their social networks and experiencing closer, more fulfilling social interactions (Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001).

Despite these powerful outcomes, Pennebaker and Graybeal (2001) caution that therapeutic writing, although helpful, is not a panacea. Overall effect sizes in predicting better health outcomes are medium sized (0.45-0.70) and comparable to other traditional forms of therapeutic interventions. Findings do suggest that because writing provides a controllable and relatively safe avenue to express difficult emotional content, some people benefit more from therapeutic writing than others, for example people with high hostility and/or alexithymia (low awareness of emotional state). Pennebaker and Graybeal concluded that writing about emotional

issues is beneficial for most people but may be especially helpful for people who have experienced severe traumatic events that are difficult to talk about with others. More recent findings corroborate these results. In a study exploring the benefits of expressive writing for people who suffer depression, it was discovered that individuals who recognize having negative emotions but who are ambivalent about expressing them, who attempt to inhibit or avoid them, or who have intrusive thoughts and worry are most likely to benefit from disclosure through expressive writing (Gortner, Rude, & Pennebaker, 2006). Gortner et al. concluded that because writing provides a forum for expression, the benefits of expressive writing are highest for individuals who are apt to suppress emotional and psychological experiences.

Mechanisms of Therapeutic Writing. It is apparent that writing about emotional and traumatic events can provide beneficial outcomes, although less research has been devoted to discovering why. Nevertheless, a few underlying mechanisms of therapeutic writing have been theorized. An early explanation was inhibition theory (Selye, 1976), which postulated that failing to express feelings and thoughts about psychological events takes some form of physiological work and imposes long-term low-grade stress on the autonomic and central nervous systems. Pennebaker (1997) explained that constraining thoughts, feelings, or behaviours linked to an emotional upheaval is stressful on the body, and letting these go by writing about them should reduce the stress of inhibition and result in physical health gains.

A more recent theory identified the underlying mechanism of therapeutic writing as the enhancement of self-understanding (Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001). It is beneficial for people to have some degree of awareness about their own motives, thoughts, goals, and feelings. Some form of self-understanding is essential for healing. By writing about past emotional events, people gain insight into how they felt and why, as well as an understanding of why they behaved

in a certain way. Pennebaker and Graybeal explained that part of healing from a traumatic experience involves changing one's perceptions about the event, and since the medium by which people alter their self-perceptions is language, writing about emotional topics affects the way people think about their trauma, emotions, and selves. Therefore, writing is therapeutic because it allows people to achieve a greater self-understanding and a more positive perception of themselves and past emotional events.

A thoughtful article by Wright and Chung (2001) provided an additional explanation for why therapeutic writing is so powerful and meaningful for people. These authors focused on the ability of writing to empower clients in therapy. They took a social justice stance and declared that writing about personal problems is empowering and inclusive because it allows clients to become the expert in their own lives and emotional issues, challenging boundaries between "expert [therapist] knowledge" and "local [client] knowledge" (White & Epston, as cited in Wright & Chung, 2001). They asserted this can be particularly important when working with disempowered populations such as women or clients from minority backgrounds. The empowering nature of therapeutic writing is reaffirmed by Rasmussen and Thom (as cited in Wright and Chung, 2001) who said, "Perhaps there is no other system of psychotherapy in which the client has so much control over the rate, depth and intensity of his or her personal therapeutic work" (p. 278), and by Bolton (as cited in Wright and Chung, 2001) who said,

> Writing is a kind and comparatively gentle way of facing whatever is
>
> there to be faced. You can trust it to pace itself to your needs and
>
> wants rather than to anyone else, such as a therapist. It can be private
>
> until you decide to share it. (p. 278)

Wright and Chung (2001) cited a number of circumstances from the literature where therapeutic writing has proven beneficial, for instance with people who are, or perceive themselves to be, powerless; such as with people who are not using their first language in the face-to-face therapy and are able to use their first language in their writing; with people who, for cultural or other reasons, are silenced by shame or other inhibiting emotions and feel unable to speak; with people who are in inner turmoil and need to unpack the mind, and externalize and organize their thoughts and feelings; and similar to Pennebaker's paradigm, with people who need to disclose and purge a particular memory of stressful or traumatic events.

The research surrounding therapeutic writing was discussed because it helps explain the power behind the written component of guided autobiography where group members write personal stories based on life themes. The benefits of writing are amplified in guided autobiography as members read aloud and share their personal stories with trusted fellow group members. After completion of a guided autobiography group, members have accumulated many pages of rich personal life stories. This written account of a life as it has been lived can be kept private, shared with family members, left behind as a legacy, or even inspire the conception of a novel or published memoirs.

Conclusion of the Literature Review

This review of the literature presents an overview of the different areas of research that relate to the telling, sharing, writing, and recording of life stories. The goal was to provide the reader with background on the research and knowledge surrounding life review that has been called upon to inform the current study. The focus was to explore the concept and definition of life review, providing examples of evidence-based research that demonstrated the impact of this approach. The literature reveals that life review is an umbrella term used to describe any

intentional and structured means of reviewing and integrating important past events into the present; and within the literature there exist numerous methods, strategies, and procedures to help clients engage in this process. The specific method of life review under exploration in the present study is guided autobiography, a method that is evocative and unique due to its reliance on group experiences, reflective individual writing, life themes, and the sharing of personal life stories.

The main purpose of reviewing the literature was to guide the research question and subject matter of the present study by pointing out the gaps that exist in the body of knowledge surrounding life review. The three most notable gaps identified in the literature are the lack of studies that specifically explore the experience of therapeutic change for participants after completing a life review group, the lack of qualitative studies that inquire about the underlying meaning-making role of life review, and the lack of studies that explore life review with individuals in young to mid adulthood. The present study addressed this missing information and contributes to the literature by exploring the potential of life review and guided autobiography to help people make changes at the therapeutic personal level, by employing a qualitative narrative research methodology to explore the topic of life review, and by demonstrating how the life review method is experienced across different ages, rather than restricting its use to an older population.

Chapter III

Method

This study explored the experience of life review using the guided autobiography method and the meaning this experience had for individuals in young to mid-adulthood. This was the specific research question: what meaning do student counsellors ascribe to the experience of a life review, and what is happening for participants that is therapeutically meaningful at each phase of the guided autobiography process?

Research Paradigm

A philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research that fits with the current topic is social constructivism, a perspective that views reality as being socially created, rather than being an objective truth existing outside individual and social interpretation. The research study shares a similar perspective as that expressed in social constructivism. This philosophical worldview assumes individuals develop multiple and varied subjective meanings of their experiences, which they construct through interaction and discussion with others, so that subjective meanings are always negotiated socially and historically (Creswell, 2009).

Crotty (as cited in Creswell, 2009) identified three assumptions that guide research based in a constructivist paradigm. The first is that human beings construct meanings as they engage with the world they are interpreting; thus, researchers tend to use open-ended questions so participants can share their views without restriction. The second assumption is that because each person is born into a world of meaning that is bestowed upon them by their culture, humans engage with their world and make sense of it based on their social perspectives; thus, researchers are deeply interested in the context or setting of their participants, and are also aware that they themselves make interpretations based on their own specific background. The third assumption is

that meaning is always generated socially, never arising in isolation, but always in and out of interaction with a human community. These assumptions that guide constructivist research result in a largely inductive research process, with the researcher taking a key role in generating meaning that is collected from the field. The methodology of this study was shaped by constructivism in a number of ways, and the following characteristics of the proposed study reflect a social constructivist worldview: the lack of an *a priori* hypothesis, the focus on subjective meaning as the phenomenon of interest, the use of interviews and open-ended questions, the belief that knowledge is generated by an interaction between teller and listener in a research interview, and the conviction that meaning is fluid and contextual, not fixed and universal.

Research Design

This research employed a narrative inquiry as the research methodology. This strategy of inquiry fits with a constructivist worldview because narrative research also views reality as socially constructed, and understands reality as primarily created and relayed through the stories we tell (Riessman, 1993). The following statement explains the relationship between stories and reality, "Stories imitate life and present an inner reality to the outside world, at the same time they shape and construct the narrator's personality and reality" (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, p.7). Narrative inquiry is defined as the study of stories, narratives, or descriptions of a series of events and the meaning ascribed to these events by the narrator (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Fundamentally, it is the study of human experience through story (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Hallmarks of narrative inquiry include the acceptance of the relational and interactive nature of research, the use of the story, and a focus on the particular or specific, rather than the general. Narrative inquiry also recognizes the variable and tentative nature of

knowledge, accepting and valuing the way in which narrative inquiry allows wondering, tentativeness, and alternative views to exist as part of the research account. The recent move towards using narrative inquiry in human science research is characterized by a turn away from the objective position of positivistic realism, and a turn towards a perspective focused on interpretation and the understanding of meaning (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).

As humans are story-tellers by nature, the method of narrative inquiry embraces the assumption that the story is the fundamental unit that accounts for human experience; it also adopts the narrative as both the method and the phenomenon under study (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). A narrative is defined as talk organized around consequential events in an individual's life. The teller, in a conversation, takes the listener into a past time or "world" and summarizes what happened, based on the teller's interpretation of events. Narratives are essentially meaning-making structures because casting events in narrative form is the primary way in which individuals make sense of experience (Riessman, 1993). The argument for using narratives to study experience and meaning is that a narrative provides a portal through which a researcher can enter the world of the participant; it offers a record of how the person's experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Narratives provide researchers with access to people's identities, personalities, and the meanings they ascribe to situations and experiences (Lieblich et al., 1998).

Narrative inquiry is an appropriate method for the current research question because it allows access to the subjective worldview of participants as expressed through their narrative accounts. Through collecting and analyzing participants' narratives about their experience in a guided autobiography group, it will be possible to discover what meaning participants ascribe to this experience, how they interpret its impact on their life stories, and whether they experienced

any personal changes due to reviewing their lives. Additionally, narrative inquiry is suitable for research based in the context of therapy because the development and restoration of the life story through psychotherapy is considered core to the healing process (Epston, White, & Murray, as cited in Lieblich et al., 1998; White & Epston, 1990).

Procedures

Participants. Seven masters level students from a graduate program in counselling psychology were recruited to participate in the current research. The group was comprised of three women and four men, ages ranging from twenty-six to forty years of age. Participants were given the opportunity to choose pseudonyms in order to protect their confidentiality; three chose pseudonyms and four chose to be referred to by their own name. The sample size was limited to seven participants because a larger group might mean members would not get the opportunity to participate meaningfully, and a smaller group could limit the potential for similarities and contrasts to be drawn by group members, which is an important part of the group process (de Vries, Birren, & Deutchman, 1995). Student counsellors were chosen as the sample for the study because this group is a younger demographic in the life stages of young to mid-adulthood; to be an effective counsellor personal development is a necessary activity, and life review has been found to enhance the personal development of student counsellors (McLean, 2001); and a goal of the guided autobiography workshop that was external to the goals of the proposed study was to introduce life review to a group of student counsellors in order for them to learn the method in order to be able to provide it to their clients in the community.

These were the inclusion criteria for the study: participants are currently enrolled as students in a counselling psychology graduate program, are in the life stages of young to mid adulthood, and are interested in experiencing life review for both personal and professional

reasons. The exclusion criteria were that participants could not be in a later stage of life than mid-adulthood and could not currently be enrolled in a class taught by the group leader. The rationale for excluding participants who are in later life is due to the study's focus on exploring life review with a younger demographic. Numerous studies have already investigated life review with adults in the last stages of life (e.g. Bohlmeijer et al., 2003; Chiang et al., 2008; Haight, 2000; Jenko et al., 2010; Korte et al., 2009), and there is a need to understand the meaning of reviewing one's life in younger to mid-adulthood. Current students of the group leader were excluded in order to avoid dual relationships, so that group members were not currently being evaluated and graded by the group leader.

Due to the fact that all participants, the researcher, and the group leader study and work in the same counselling psychology program, dual relationships were unavoidable and group members knew each other through taking classes together and other school related activities. However, measures were taken to address the potential harm of dual relationships. These measures included openly discussing with participants before they consented to participate in the research the fact that they may know fellow group members, the researcher, or the group leader in another context, openly discussing any concerns potential participants may have about dual relationships in the consent process, obtaining informed consent, and letting participants know they were free to leave the workshop at any time if they felt uncomfortable with the level of disclosure and who was present.

Recruitment. Participants were recruited via an email that was sent from the researcher's email account through the department's email list serve and was distributed to all graduate students in the Counselling Psychology program (see Appendix A for the recruitment email). The email described the purpose of the research and provided a detailed outline of what

participating in the study entailed, including a brief description of life review and guided autobiography, research procedures that involved participants, and time commitment. The email also stated that participation was entirely voluntary and no negative consequences would occur should they choose to decline. The email invited potential participants to call or email the researcher to state their interest in participating. The email informed potential participants that only the first seven eligible participants who contacted the researcher would be able to participate in the project due to a limited number of spots in the workshop.

A total of fourteen students responded to the recruitment email. All fourteen fit the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Five students could not participate due to the date of the guided autobiography workshop conflicting with their schedule, and two interested students could not participate due to the group being full. These two students were put on a waitlist, but no spots became available.

Workshop Preparations. One week before the workshop weekend, the researcher emailed participants the five life themes and accompanying sensitizing questions to guide the writing phase of the life review. The remaining four themes were not included due to the time constraints of conducting an entire life review during a weekend workshop. These were the five themes that were chosen to be included in the workshop: the major branching points in life, family of origin, major life's work or career, experiences with and ideas about death and dying and other losses, and goals and aspirations (see Appendix B for the life themes and sensitizing questions). These five themes were chosen because they cover a depth and breadth of topics that include both positive and difficult experiences, and the themes were chosen to be addressed in the order in which they are listed because this ordering provides a natural progression from least to most intimate that paralleled safety and cohesion being built in the group over the two days. In

the email, participants were invited to write as much as they liked for each theme, to let the sensitizing questions guide their imagination, and to answer one or all of the questions based on which sensitizing questions interested them most. Participants were informed that there would only be time to read two pages of typed double-spaced writing for each theme in the workshop, but were encouraged to not let this limit their own personal writing, as they could pick and choose from their writing what two pages to share in the group. In order to dissuade censoring during the writing phase, participants were reminded that they had complete ownership of their stories, and could decide in the moment how much they were comfortable reading aloud in the group during the workshop.

In addition to the life themes, the study's consent form (see Appendix C) was sent to participants in this same email. The goal was to give participants a week to consider the risks, benefits, and commitment of participation before coming to the workshop and providing their informed consent.

Workshop Procedures. A two-day life review workshop was conducted using the guided autobiography method. An expert group psychotherapist and faculty member of the counselling psychology program facilitated the group. The role of the group leader was to ensure that issues of inclusion, intimacy, cohesion, and safety were maintained at optimal levels within the group, while guiding group members through the life review process. The workshop was held in a department staff and faculty lounge on the university campus, and each workshop day was scheduled from 8:00 am until 6:00 pm, with two coffee breaks and a lunch break. Day one of the workshop started with participants signing the consent form, a check-in, and a brief introduction to how the weekend would progress. The life review then commenced.

On the first workshop day, participants read the branching points theme, and on the second workshop day, participants read the family of origin theme and a third theme of their choice. Five participants chose to read the death theme, one chose to read the goals and aspirations theme, and one chose to read the career theme. Although the goal was to cover five themes in the workshop, participants ended up reading three of the five themes they had prepared. This was due to time constraints and because the group leader focused on building group cohesion by deeply processing each of the themes with participants and eliciting rich feedback and discussion among group members

The participants sat in chairs in a circle formation and the workshop unfolded in the following sequence. The first participant read aloud to the group his prepared story on the branching points theme. The other group members listened to the story, and when the reader was finished, they were invited to provide their comments, reflections, and feedback on the story. The group leader facilitated this process, ensuring that communication was safe and respectful and that feedback was clear and direct. During this phase, group members shared with the reader how his story had impacted them, what thoughts or feelings his story had elicited, and how the story may have resonated with their own personal histories. After each group member had commented, the group leader allowed the reader to have the last word by asking him what he was aware of after having heard other members' feedback. This same process occurred for the remaining six participants, until all members had read and heard feedback pertaining to the branching points theme. Following the same structure and sequence, the group then moved to the family of origin theme and then to the third theme of choice. In total, the group witnessed twenty-one stories read aloud. The stories were rich and full of intimate and vivid experiences, events, and memories,

and group members openly expressed their emotion as they read, listened, and reflected over the two days.

At the end of the workshop, participants were each given a notebook and were invited to journal their reflections on the experience of the life review workshop. The group leader suggested that participants structure their reflections by identifying experiences they had in the workshop that stood out, personal awareness these experiences brought up, and the impact of the awareness on themselves and their lives. Participants were invited to journal for the duration of the time between the workshop and the research interview, but were also informed that the journal writing was optional and voluntary. The researcher passed around a sign-up sheet for research interviews to be scheduled, and participants were reminded that the interview was optional and they had the right to decline partaking in the interview. On the sign-up sheet, participants were asked to indicate a date and time that was convenient for them to be interviewed in the two to four week time period after the workshop. The purpose of scheduling an interview two to four weeks after the life review workshop was to allow sufficient time to pass for participants to process the life review experience, to reflect on the meaning it had in their lives, and to observe any impact the experience may have had.

Role of the Researcher. During the guided autobiography workshop, I positioned myself as a participant-inquirer, a role that involves being present at both a reflexive and experiential level and provides a foundation for establishing collaborative peer relationships with participants (Pearson, 2005). This role involved witnessing the life review process of participants by listening and responding to their life stories through offering comments, reflection, or feedback on the stories. I did not write on the life themes nor read my own stories into the group in order to preserve my role as the researcher. In order to witness the life review process from the

perspective of a researcher, it was important to not simultaneously undergo my own life review because this experience could have clouded my ability to understand the experience from the participants' perspectives. The possible limitation of not reading my stories into the group is that participants could have viewed the discrepancy in self-disclosure as unequal. To protect against this, I used examples and stories from my own life as much as possible when responding to participants' stories so that they were able to get a sense of who I am and feel that I was also sharing myself in the group. As opposed to being a silent observer, I chose to reflect on the stories that were read aloud and tell participants how they had impacted me or how their experiences connected to my own, in order to create a sense of reciprocal sharing, equality, and safety. For participants to fully engage with the life review process, it was necessary they feel comfortable, safe, and understood by all members present, including the researcher. A silent observer runs the risk of decreasing safety in the group, limiting disclosure, and potentially interfering with participants' life review process. I chose to attend the workshop in order to become intimately familiar with the phenomenon I was researching and to develop a trusting and collaborative relationship between researcher and participants so that subsequent research interviews were more open, honest, and genuine, thereby enhancing the quality and validity of the findings.

Additionally, partaking in the workshop as a participant inquirer enhanced my ability to interpret and understand what participants told me in the research interviews because they made many references to experiences and events that had transpired in the group when answering my questions. From a constructivist narrative research paradigm, the control of knowledge generation in research interviews is shared by the interviewer and interviewee; thus my role during the research interviews was as a curious and "passionate participant" of a conversation

that aimed to facilitate the generation of multi-voice reconstructions of the phenomenon under study (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). To attain this goal, it was important to foster the development of rapport between participants and myself, and being present in the workshop was seen as a crucial aspect of developing that relationship.

A constructivist narrative perspective views interpretation of participants' experiences as unavoidable due to the co-constructed nature of reality and truth (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007); however, when conducting qualitative research it is imperative for the researcher to understand the lens through which she is viewing the phenomenon under study in order to be aware of how assumptions, biases, values, and cultural/societal influences may impact data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2009). The following section is provided with the rationale of clearly stating my own experience with and presuppositions about life review. By putting my perspective on paper, it lessened the likelihood that I would read my own experience into the narrative accounts of participants that were collected in the interviews. This reflexive exercise was done before collecting the data.

I have some personal experience with the guided autobiography method of life review. During the final class of a group counselling class in my masters degree program, a doctoral student facilitated a group of us through the process of covering the branching points theme. My experience was very positive. I found the writing of the story to be interesting, exciting, and peaceful as I engaged in a reflective process of describing the large or small events that had significantly directed the course of my life. I found that as I wrote, my own understanding of how events had shaped me became clearer. I felt that I was honouring what had transpired by taking the time to sit and write, and I was struck by how seldom I actually engage in this active reflection, given the busy nature of my life. I was nervous to read my story in front of my

classmates. As I read, I noticed that the intensity of the emotion I was feeling was heightened compared to the level of emotion I felt writing the story. I was curious about this. Hearing my classmates' comment on my story was affirming in that I felt seen as a whole person with a rich history behind me. As I listened to my classmates' stories, I was struck by how one-dimensionally I had known these people. Hearing their stories made me aware of the vastness and diversity of human life and experience that just does not get aired or expressed in day-to-day living. It made me feel sad that these stories are not shared and honoured more frequently. As I listened to the stories, these individuals became more real, interesting, and liked, as I heard about the many joys, tragedies, fortunes, and misfortune of their personal histories. This group occurred about two years ago, and yet when I meet these six classmates in the hall or elsewhere, there is still a remnant of that connection we shared. The level of intimacy and connection that was fostered in a group experience that lasted only approximately four hours struck me. However, as I write this personal account of my experience, I am aware that I must not expect other people to necessarily react the same way.

Given my personal experience with guided autobiography, I may be biased to view this method as therapeutic. I needed to be aware of this bias when collecting and analyzing data so that I did not interpret participants' experience as overly positive or therapeutic. To guard against this, I asked open-ended, non-directional questions, paid attention to any negative or unhelpful experiences participants may have had, and explored negative experiences as deeply as the positive ones. Additionally, I used member verification meetings and expert reviewers to enhance the validity of my findings. The details of these validity strategies are explained in a subsequent section.

Data Analysis

  Data Collection. Participants' spoken narratives about their experience in the life review workshop were used as the data in this study. The narratives were collected in research interviews with participants in which the researcher asked each participant a series of open-ended questions (see Appendix D for the interview guide) and audio-recorded their responses. All seven participants consented to engage in the research interview. Five interviews were held at a research office on the university campus, one was held in a participant's home, and one was held at a participant's workplace. The interviews commenced with participants providing a second signature on the consent form, which gave their consent to be audio-recorded throughout the interview. The length of the interviews ranged from seventy minutes to an hour and forty-five minutes, with the average length of an interview lasting approximately an hour and a half.

  The goal of the interview was to create an opportunity for participants to describe in-depth their experience of a life review and the meaning it had in their lives. The interviews were open-ended and collaborative, conceptualized as research conversations between two willing and curious individuals. The participants brought their journals to the interview in order to refer to what they had written when answering questions and describing their experiences. The journals were not read or collected by the researcher because their purpose was to act as a place of private reflection for participants.

  The interview protocol guided participants to share with the researcher any experiences from the workshop that were meaningful, significant, important, and salient, or any experiences that had stood out or stuck with them. Participants were invited to talk first about their general experience, then the researcher asked about each specific phase of the life review process, asking participants to describe what the experience of that phase was like and whether anything

meaningful had occurred for them. The life review process was conceptualized as being comprised of six phases: *the writing phase* where participants engaged in individual personal writing on life themes, *the delivery phase* where participants read their written stories aloud to the group, *the receiving feedback phase* where participants heard comments from their fellow group members about their story, *the witnessing phase* where participants listened to other stories being read aloud, *the providing feedback phase* where participants commented on how the stories of other group members had impacted them, and *the group dynamics phase* which involved all aspects of being part of the group, such as the experience of group interactions and group processes. The researcher followed a funneling down approach in the interview by asking participants to describe the specific experiences, to say what was happening for them in that moment and when it happened, to identify how they believed the salient experiences occurred, and to explain why certain experiences were meaningful. The focus was to answer the questions of what happened, how it happened, when it happened, and why it was meaningful.

Initial Data Analysis. The audio-recorded interviews were then transcribed by the researcher, resulting in approximately 250 pages of text. To ensure accuracy and to catch errors, the researcher listened to the interviews while reading the transcripts once more after completing the initial transcription. In accordance with Lieblich et al.'s (1998) methodology of narrative analysis, the researcher then read and re-read each transcript to allow patterns to emerge, to detect meaning in the text, and to gain an initial and global understanding of what each participant was saying. The researcher then marked and assembled all relevant text that pertained to the research question from each of the seven transcripts. This selected text is called the subtext and is defined as "the content universe of the area studied" (p. 112).

The researcher then formed seven individual narrative accounts of participants' experiences from the selected subtexts. A narrative account is a cohesive description of the experience, essentially a summary of everything each participant said in the interview about the research question. It is written in the first person and aims to use the language, style, and voice of each participant (Lieblich et al., 1998). The narrative account was organized into sections, so that all experiences in each specific phase of the life review were put together in the same section. For example, each time a participant talked about what was meaningful in the writing phase of the life review, the researcher assembled these experiences under one section in the narrative account. When participants mentioned meaningful experiences that were not attached to any specific phase, they were included in a section labeled *the general experience*. When forming the narrative accounts from the subtext, small changes were made to the text to make the accounts more understandable, readable, and cohesive. These changes included adding connecting phrases, conjugating verb tenses to match, replacing unclear pronouns with the subject of sentences, adding clarifying phrases, and removing names and all identifying information to ensure participants' confidentiality. Each narrative account is approximately ten pages long.

Member Verification. Member verification is a validity strategy often employed in qualitative research with the goal of enhancing the accuracy and credibility of research findings. This validity strategy involves taking specific descriptions, themes, or accounts that have been prepared by the researcher back to participants to determine whether they are representative of participants' experience (Creswell, 2009). In this step, individual transcripts and narrative accounts were emailed (see Appendix E for the member verification email) to participants in order to verify the truthfulness of the narrative accounts. Participants were asked to read their narrative account and ask themselves the following questions. Is this what I meant? Was this my

experience? Is there anything I would change? Do I want to add or delete anything? Was anything important that I said in the transcript missed and needs to be included in my narrative account? Participants were invited to make any changes they deemed necessary and then to email the changes back to the researcher.

In this same verification email, participants were asked to respond to an additional question: What was your experience of the research interview? What did you find valuable about the interview (if anything), and how was it meaningful for you? This question was inspired due to feedback the researcher and her supervisor had received from participants about their experience in the research interview. Participants stated that the research interview had helped them to further consolidate and integrate what was learned in their life review, had facilitated deeper reflection on the experience, and had provided new insights. Given the objective of the study which was to explore the therapeutic relevance and meaning of life review, it was important to follow up on these comments. Responses to the question were analyzed and are reported in the results section as an ancillary finding. Given the dynamic, exploratory, and emergent nature of qualitative research and narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Creswell, 2009; Lieblich et al., 1998; Polkinghorne, 1988), it was appropriate to explore this new facet of the research.

Cross Narrative Data Analysis. The verified narrative accounts acted as the unit of analysis in this study. Riessman (1993) explained that in narrative inquiry, the narrative is analyzed because researchers do not have direct access to participants' experiences; rather, they deal with ambiguous representations of experience, for instance talk, text, interaction, and interpretation. It is the stories people create about events, not the actual events themselves that are of interest. This is because the stories people create about events are infused with the

meaning these events had for them, so that narrativization tells not only about past events, but also how people understand them and what they meant. Narratives are not supposed to mirror a world out there, rather, "They are constructed, creatively authored, rhetorical, replete with assumptions, and interpretive" (Riessman, 1993, p. 5).

The verified narrative accounts were analyzed through a categorical-content and holistic-content reading using Lieblich et al.'s (1998) typology of narrative analysis. A categorical perspective dissects the original story, and sections of text belonging to a defined category are collected from the entire story. The categories are various themes or perspectives that cut across the narrative accounts and provide a means of classifying its units, whether words, sentences or groups of words. A content perspective concentrates on the explicit content of a story (what happened and why) and the implicit content of the story (what meaning the story conveys, what traits or motives the narrator displays, and what images are used by the narrator). A holistic perspective involves interpreting the meaning of sections of the text in the context of the whole story.

This process of thematic analysis was undertaken in the current study in the following manner. Each narrative account was broken down into principal sentences, which are "utterances expressing new and distinct ideas or experiences about the content universe" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 115). Each principal sentence in this study referred to one distinct meaningful experience in the life review, and could be as short as one phrase or as long as a paragraph. A total of 215 principal sentences were drawn from the narrative accounts for further analysis. The range was twenty-eight to forty-five principal sentences per participant, and the average number of principal sentences for each participant was thirty-four. Each principal sentence was identified according to what phase of the guided autobiography it occurred in and was then colour-coded

and categorized into a specific theme, so that all principal sentences coded with the same colour discussed a similar meaningful experience in the life review. The groupings of principal sentences that made up the themes were coded and labeled using the language of participants to adhere as close as possible to the original meanings.

In accordance with Lieblich et al.'s (1998) methodology of narrative analysis, when categorizing the principal utterances into themes, the researcher continually looked for the explicit and implicit content of the words and was conscious of how each utterance related back to the whole story. The narrative account was read as openly as possible so that themes emerged naturally from the text without being predefined during data analysis. This is in line with a qualitative approach to research and ensures that themes are developed only on the basis of the emerging information collected from participants (Creswell, 2009; Lieblich et al., 1998). In order to avoid a drift in the definition of categories or a shift in their meaning during the process of coding the principal sentences, the researcher used Creswell's (2009) reliability strategy of constantly comparing principal sentences with descriptions of the categories into which they were being placed. A legend was used to help with the coding process. The legend named each category and included a description of it, so that the researcher was reminded of the exact definition of the category before she decided if each principal sentence fit it. After all principal sentences had been initially coded, the researcher re-read each one and again assigned it to a category to ensure accuracy. During the second coding process, the researcher changed the code of eight principal utterances and placed them in the appropriate category. The categorized principal sentences were then compiled, condensed, and written up as themes, which are described in the results section.

Expert Review. Three expert reviewers were used in this study to enhance the validity of the results. Expert reviewers are individuals who have expertise in the topic area of the research study and are able to assess the findings in terms of their comprehensiveness, resonance, and pragmatism (Creswell, 2009; Lieblich et al., 1998). Two of the expert reviewers in this study are faculty in the Educational and Counselling Psychology department and research committee members, and the third expert reviewer is a counselling psychology doctoral student. Each expert reviewer was sent two or three narrative accounts, as well as a list and description of the themes that emerged from the narrative accounts. They were asked to read the materials and answer the following three questions: Are the themes comprehensive enough (do they cover what was in the narrative account)? Is there resonance (do the themes resonate with you)? Is there pragmatic value (do they have use for the field of counselling psychology)?

Criteria of Worth

The criteria used to evaluate the strength and worth of the study are defined below, along with the actions taken to ascertain they were upheld throughout the research process:

Verisimilitude. This criterion refers to the appearance of being true or real, and speaks to the aim of creating ample overlap between the researcher's interpretation of participants' experience and what they really did experience. Reissman (1993) explained that this criterion used in narrative research allows participants to decide whether the researcher's interpretation of the research interview was sufficiently accurate and is a faithful representation of the experiences that participants described. Verisimilitude was met in two ways in this study. First, the researcher kept a copy of her reflexive stance (outlined in the Role of the Researcher section on pg. 10) in front of her as she thematically analyzed the narrative accounts. This was done to remind the researcher of her own experience of life review so she could bracket it and decrease biasing the

results. Second, verisimilitude was met through the member verification step of the research

process in which participants were given complete ownership over their narrative accounts and

all requested changes were honoured. In the end, there were relatively few changes that were

made to the narrative accounts. Three participants did not change anything, one participant added

one word, one participant added one sentence, and two participants edited a number of sentences

by deleting specific words and adding other words. To provide examples of participants'

responses to the narrative accounts, one participant wrote, "I've reviewed the life review

document and it is accurate. Well done!" Another participant commented, "Attached is my

narrative account. It looks great! I made a few small changes highlighted in yellow." Another

response was, "I read the narrative account and it looks fantastic. I am glad to have a copy for

myself. There is nothing I would change except when I talk about my default setting being

destructive. What I meant was *self-destructive.*" The few small changes that were made after the

verification step did not alter the meaning of the accounts; rather they made the meaning more

clear. The verified narrative accounts are documents that participants have deemed to accurately

reflect and describe their experiences in the life review workshop and thus appear to have

verisimilitude. Polkinghorne (1988) endorsed the concept of verisimilitude as a validity criterion

for narrative research. He explained that,

> The results of narrative research cannot claim to correspond exactly
>
> with what has actually occurred – that is, they are not true, if truth is
>
> taken to mean exact correspondence of conformity to actuality.
>
> Research investigating the realm of meaning aims rather for
>
> verisimilitude, or results that have the appearance of truth or reality.
>
> (p. 179)

Polkinghorne went on to say that narrative research uses the ideal of a scholarly consensus as the test of verisimilitude. Scholarly consensus is related to the second criterion of worth employed in this study, namely, consensual validation.

Consensual Validation. This criterion of worth is supported by Lieblich et al. (1998) who described it as sharing one's research findings and making sense in the eyes of a community of interested and informed individuals. Lieblich et al. stated that consensual validation is considered to be of the highest significance in narrative research. This criterion was met in the current study in the following manner. Sending the narrative accounts back to participants ensured that the results made sense to the interested and informed community of counsellors-in-training. Additionally, sharing the emerging themes with expert reviewers for assessment of comprehensiveness, resonance, and pragmatism ensured the results made sense to a community of practicing psychotherapists, counselling psychology researchers, and adult educators. The following changes were made to the themes after the expert review process: two themes entitled "Acknowledging the Past and its Impact" and "Making Peace with the Past" were collapsed into a third theme labeled "Making Sense or New Meaning out of Past Experiences," due to the expert reviewer's comment that they appeared to all belong to the same general rubric; the label of the theme "Flow Experiences" was changed to "Sense of Spontaneity and Flow" to emphasize the spontaneous nature of the writing phase; and a number of small editing changes were made to a few themes to provide clarity. Examples of the reviewers' comments included "Congruence and comprehensiveness is high, but you need to collapse themes 11 and 13 into theme 3 as they all discuss similar ideas;" and "Fascinating work! I've re-attached the Validity Check Themes file with a few editorial notes but I think the themes are comprehensive and they certainly resonate with me and make sense. I also think the themes have pragmatic use for adult education

and counselling psychology." Through receiving this feedback and making the appropriate changes, the criterion of consensual validation was upheld.

Lieblich et al. (1998) offered four additional criteria that are helpful to evaluate the worth of a narrative study. These are width, coherence, insightfulness, and parsimony.

Width. This criterion is related to the comprehensiveness of the evidence and the quality of the interviews and the analysis. To enhance the width of this study, a number of actions were taken. The interview guide was reviewed and revised numerous times by the researcher and thesis supervisor, participants' language was used to label themes, thematic analysis was reviewed by expert reviewers, the department's leading narrative researcher was consulted in two separate meetings regarding the progress of analysis, numerous quotations were used in the reported findings, and suggestions of alternative explanations are provided in the results and discussion section for the reader's judgment of the evidence and interpretations.

Coherence. This criterion is the way different parts of the interpretation or analysis create a complete and meaningful picture, and it was met in this study by evaluating the findings both internally (how the parts fit together) and externally (how the findings fit with existing theories and previous research) and is addressed in depth in the discussion section of this study.

Insightfulness. This criterion is the sense of innovation or originality in the presentation of the narrative and its analysis, and it raises the question of whether reading the analysis of the life story of an "other" has resulted in greater understanding and insight into the reader's own life.

Parsimony. This criterion is the ability to provide an analysis based on a small number of concepts and the elegance or aesthetic appeal in which these concepts are presented. This

dimension relates to the literary merits of the written presentation of the narratives and their analysis.

      The current study was mindful of Libelich et al.'s (1998) four additional criteria at each stage of the research process in order to enhance the worth of its findings. Assessment of the latter two criteria is an ongoing process that must be evaluated by future readers of this research.

Chapter IV

Findings

Overview

Lieblich et al. (1998) declared that one of the greatest challenges in thematic analysis is to strike a balance between two opposing tendencies. One tendency is to define many categories that retain all the richness, subtleness, and variation of the narrative accounts but whose complexity make it difficult to grasp the take home point; whereas the other tendency is to define a few, broad categories that are easy to comprehend, but that do not do justice to the intricacy of the phenomenon. To navigate the tension between these two opposing tendencies, the current study presents the research findings in two different forms. First, the seven narrative accounts are presented which contain all the richness and intricacy of the experience of a life review. These accounts were composed from data collected in the research interviews and describe each participant's unique experience in the guided autobiography workshop. Participants have verified their own narrative accounts to ensure they are accurate representations of the experience of reviewing their life. The goal of the narrative accounts was to capture not only the meaning of what participants declared, but also to embody their voices by remaining as close as possible to the manner in which they expressed themselves.

Following this section, a description of the twelve themes that emerged from the narrative accounts is presented. This representation of the findings parses and collapses the rich data into discrete categories in order to provide concise descriptions of the study's findings. The themes represent clusters of experiences in the life review process that participants identified as meaningful and therapeutically relevant. Each theme is described in depth, including what

occurred for participants, why the experience was deemed to be meaningful, what phase of the guided autobiography process the experience occurred in, and by what mechanism it occurred.

The second part of this chapter includes a description and analysis of the ancillary finding. As was discussed in the methods chapter, participants informed the researchers that the research interviews had enhanced their life review experience in a number of ways. This unexpected phenomenon was investigated further by asking participants about the experience, value, and meaning of the research interview. Participants' responses to this additional question are presented in full, and the analysis of their responses is then presented as ancillary themes.

Grace's Narrative Account

Writing Phase. I was totally exhausted when I started the writing because my father had just died. So I went right to the death theme because I couldn't write about anything else. I put on a Russian Opera, sat down at my laptop and as I wrote I could feel different parts of myself disentangling and unwinding. As I wrote about the death of my father, a resolution and a sort of peace came to me. I contacted myself. I reintegrated, and regained a softer and more fluid access to myself and how I felt. And I cried. I hadn't been able to cry that much when I was taking care of my dad, so crying really good for me, it grounded everything. I think that writing on the death theme got rid of some of the noise for me. It let me get rid of whatever it was that was in the way. I got all my procrastination out in one whirl and I stopped avoiding the death of my father.

Then I got into my head for the rest of the writing on all the other themes. I got into my head because I honestly didn't want to be writing the story, I wanted to be telling it to somebody. I have a long relationship with writing and I had experienced how I could surprise and discover myself as I write. But it's a very lonely experience. Writing on the other themes, I was preoccupied with arranging the words to explain things so that people would have an adequate

background to understand what I was saying. But it felt like a writing assignment or an essay, and I wanted to just tell somebody about the branching points in my life. I wanted to be in relationship, I wanted whatever I said to be co-created with a person.

Delivery Phase. Reading my stories aloud was unsatisfying. I had written the stories for a preconceived internalized audience that was not real. When I was faced with the real audience, I realized there were certain things I would not have said. So when I actually read the stories aloud, I was thinking, oh my god this sounds so lonely, this sounds so inadequate.

Receiving Feedback Phase. A very meaningful incident stands out during this phase. After I had shared my story, a group member said he was concerned about me. I shied away from his comment and did not want to look at him, but the group leader forced me to look. I turned back and saw real concern in his face and I was really incredulous and moved. His expression said to me that somebody actually cares. And maybe this is what I don't believe. I felt in that moment that somebody saw that I actually existed, that I exist, and actually cares that I continue to exist. I felt contacted, and felt as though there was some possibility of two worlds joining, which I don't often believe. In that moment I felt understood in a way that goes beyond where I expect or even hope to be understood. My world felt blown. It was a pure contact that goes beyond words, beyond images, beyond all interpretive attempts at control. This experience of being contacted is maybe, is probably, the most deliriously blissful experience you could hope for. I am incredulous. I feel like I'm flying and I worry about falling. Mainly it's easier to deny that it ever happened because it is so unbearable that it should ever end.

In less ecstatic times during the feedback phase I was sitting there thinking, do you get me, do you get me, are you going to get me, are you the person who is going to get me? Sometimes people don't and sometimes people do it in a way that takes me weeks to process,

and that I keep coming back to learn from. Most of the time, hearing from others gave me this feeling of being held warmly in a cradle of other people's meaning-making networks. Their feedback let me see how they think of me and what they make of my experiences. In some ways this makes me feel like I am in their world and in their story. It is a lovely experience, like being parented or held in somebody else's joy and meaningfulness. They are doing all they can do to make sense of their own lives and for the lives of people that they love. This experience gave me life, nurturance, nutrients, and warmth. I got the feeling of being held, of terror being warded off, of a mother singing me a lullaby. This is interpretive, and not the raw contact I spoke of before, but it is the feeling of being loved, and that is quite tremendously enough.

Witnessing Phase. Hearing the stories was meaningful because it let me know each person and allowed me to love them. It was amazing to be given the honour and the opportunity to know several men in their lives so deeply. I don't think many people get this opportunity because often men don't have the necessary self-expressivity or communication skills. To hear the stories of the men in the group kind of filled in the gaps for me, and held me warmly in a way that my spotty relationships with men cannot yet do. In some ways, hearing the stories informed me in my relationships with the men in my life.

Providing Feedback Phase. During the experience of providing feedback there was a certain amount of panic. I sat there thinking, oh my god, I hope I can give good feedback this time, but things I wanted to say to the group members would just drop right out of my head. I think because of my father's recent death I was not doing well physically during the workshop. I kept getting these dizzy spells and these feelings of derealization. On top of this I was very aware that I am not currently a student in the program, although I have taken many counselling psychology classes. I felt pressure because whenever I am invited to participate in these things I

feel in a way I have to prove myself. I also feel that the group leader is not only there as a facilitator but he's also somebody in a position to judge whether I will be invited to future events and what my chances of further studies in this program will be. Another part of this pressure was that I really wanted others to feel supported by me, but I was feeling lost in my own body and psyche so it was difficult to provide the feedback. Finally I came across the fact that I should just take notes while people were reading their stories so that I could look back and reflect. This was helpful and allowed me to provide them with feedback.

A very meaningful aspect of this phase was the experience of so many people allowing me to love them. This is not normally the case in everyday life because our relationships are often so scripted by past disappointments. But in the LR group I was able to tell people that I love them and not have it flipped back at me or have it skitter off. This experience emboldened me to tell other people in my life that I love them. This is so healing because in the very act of telling somebody that I love them, I am also loving myself. There is so much stress associated with living in this false world. You hear about people having heart attacks if they don't have social support or social contact. I think we literally break our hearts when we don't have nude existential contact with other people, when we are forever forced to go around and round in our own labyrinths, to feel alone and like there is nobody to get us out, saying, "I do not believe that love is possible. Leave me alone to my despair. Let me die alone. Let us play this game and kill time until death comes. Here – here's your mask. Put it back on, and I will put mine back on, and let's waste more time together." Everyone is so desperate to give love and to have it received. It is a very true altruistic need. The other half of the equation is to have the love returned, but I don't think that is the original impulse.

Group Dynamics Phase. What stayed with me from the LR workshop was the experience of being surrounded by so many loving and communicative people. Being a part of that group was an experience of being loved. The structure, depth, and breadth of the LR allowed us to know each other's lives more globally without getting sucked into a more comfortable social interaction or convention than the therapeutic manner in which we were communicating. However, reviewing my life as whole narrative was less important for me than experiencing a norm of people communicating honestly, directly, effectively, and lovingly.

Being in this group gave me the experience of being valued.   To the extent that I have trouble thinking I am of value, the most honest thing that I can say is that I am of value when I am in a group that values me. Personal value has no meaning whatsoever outside of the social context. And when I am in despair, this means I can reach for the fact that in a particular circumstance, to a certain group of people, within a particular purpose and context, I meant something.

The General Experience. The entire LR experience surprised me. It surprised me in the way that I did not question once it happened, because it just felt so right, like falling in love. I was surprised because we dropped to our own awareness of ourselves and each other so deeply, so fast, so efficiently, and so noiselessly. I think we were able to go so deeply for a number of reasons. It was because the first member who read his story dropped right down and he was the initiation person, so he set the tone. It was also because of the care with which the group was chosen, because everybody had such advanced communication skills, because a large part of the group knew each other already, and cared for each other and loved each other. It was because a few of us group already had a norm of self-disclosure from previous therapeutic experiences we had shared together. It was because we knew the group leader had a certain expectation that we

would bring honesty, self-awareness and communication skills into the group. Also because the venue was quite a lovely one.

I am not sure if a major shift occurred for me due to the LR. But some things were different afterwards. I came to the workshop in a really disintegrated state because of the death of my father and a number of other things going on in my life. But I came out of the workshop amazingly quite grounded and whole. I was less dizzy, I could access more parts of myself, and I had more control over how I behaved in my relationships.

One experience that I did carry over into my life was the ability to communicate more openly with people. The honest, warm, and direct communication in the LR group made me feel that all the games that people cannot help playing, that I cannot help playing in my relationships, are not necessary. The LR group gives me an experience to come back to so that if I am having a particular interaction with somebody that isn't working, I can remember that I have had this much more honest and satisfying type of interaction that I can then try to recreate. For example, after the LR I emailed the person I am in love with and told him what I had found out about myself in the LR. I told him I have difficulty believing that I can be loved because of my experiences with my mom. He then wrote back about his relationship with his mother, and I was like, wow, because that is not something he usually does. Without the LR and me sharing so honestly with him, he would not have dropped without any hesitation into a revelation that was so honest and so direct. Encouraged by our honest interaction, I emailed again, speaking to him with as much honesty, as much clarity, and as much love as I would to somebody in the LR group. In some ways, that was the nicest interaction he and I have had.

But then two weeks after the LR, I was in a horrible state. Dealing with the death of my father and the stress of midterm exams, I got exhausted, I just collapsed, and I started isolating

myself. Communications between myself and the person I am in love with deteriorated. It's kind of bizarre, having gone through this experience where I was picked up and put back on my feet, but then one more thing happened and I just fell right back down on the floor. But I did remember that I had communicated with him in a direct and honest way, so I had this experience that I could return to. It's like Rogers' peak experiences, if something important shifts, like it did in the LR, even if I lose it, it will be there for me to come back to until I can fully integrate it. So the LR became this place that I can try and reach for when I am in despair. By just remembering what it was like to act in the midst of love, I can start a path back from places of hopelessness.

The image I would use to describe the LR experience is us all retreating inside the delicate shell of an egg. It reminds me of a "kiva" which is a spiritual retreat; or a "katabasis" which is a descent into the underworld. So it was like this otherworldly experience of returning to a place of protection, like inside a womb, or an egg of some kind. It was like a spiritual or shamanic experience. But the thing about kivas and shamanic experiences is that they have a culture, or a spiritual tradition, or a church where you can return to when you need guidance. But the LR group happens, then just sort of disappears. I think this kind of experience that we had in the LR is a necessary thing, but it needs to somehow be more permanent. If our culture would recognize it as an alternative to going to church, it could become a very effective preventative measure and change the culture radically. This kind of experience is something that needs to be given respect and recognition in our culture so that is can be given a more permanent place.

I also think LR is important for counsellors because it reconnects us to the source of therapy. We go forth and do therapy individually, alone with our clients, but we need to be connected to this therapeutic, spiritual source. It should constantly be evoked between us. Being a therapist is like being a member of a non-denominational sort of priesthood. There are such a

lot of similarities for we are both carers of the soul. And there's only so much you can do in your own conversation to god. Therapists, like priests, have to come together to draw and evoke a deeper source that is more powerful than the source that can be evoked alone by any one particular individual. It's when all the priests get together that we can summon up this divine thing to create a fountain from which every priest can become a conduit of those sacred waters to all people who need it. The fountain is not within the priests, it is between the priests. And this healing force only happens in isolation with great difficulty, but not with much effectiveness.

Daniel's Narrative Account

  Writing Phase. The writing phase felt a bit like a chore to me, partly because I had so many other school and work related responsibilities to attend to. I find that I am much more restrained when I write compared to when I speak, so I first just spoke my story into a voice recorder before I did the actually writing. Speaking into the voice recorder I was able to let my thoughts flow. My experience was that thoughts came to me, one thought led to another, and I became less restrained and more free-flowing, and many things were evoked, actually unexpected things came up for me during this phase.

  The act of writing on the five themes allowed me to touch on many different aspects of my life, but in a way that was structured and completely governed by me; whereas other therapeutic modalities can sometimes go in directions we don't expect. So this structure of writing down everything that I would later present in the group gave me a sense of safety and control. I felt that I was able to just hammer out the story I wanted to present. This was liberating for me because the structure and control actually allowed me to take more of a risk in the group and share some very intimate details of my life. I may not have chosen to share these things if I had not had the chance to first prepare them on my own terms in the writing phase.

Delivery Phase. I was surprised to find that during the delivery phase of my story I felt that I was taking part in a performance in a way. This sense of it being a performance has both negative and positive connotations for me. A performance to me meant I was somewhat removed from the experience because it was like a movie, it was rehearsed, so it was possibly less genuine than it could have been. And yet at the same time I felt a lot of excitement in giving the performance because it actually magnified some of the experiences that I have had in my life; and for a long time I have diminished a lot of these experiences; like I had a tendency to minimize the value or meaning of things that have happened to me. So to be able to magnify these experiences through a performance to an audience, to actually acknowledge the significance of these life experiences, rather than diminishing their impacts, was meaningful because it gave honour to what I have been through in my life. I was able to see how important these experiences were because they have contributed to who I am today. In the delivery phase I was given a way to honour my experiences and to reflect and acknowledge how they have affected me.

The experience of reading my stories to the group was uniquely different from writing the stories. I felt a sense of empowerment from the actual experience of reading aloud because I had a real sense of ownership of the story; similar to the way an author does when she or he conducts a reading out of a new book. An author can put words on a page for other people to read, but some of the author's meaning will be lost. It is that individual personal reading of that excerpt that really allows the author to convey to the audience all the emotion, all the drama, all the richness that the story is supposed to have. It's like saying to the audience, "This is how I intended it to be." For me it was the same. Through the delivery phase I was saying, "This is how it felt to me." It was tremendously empowering because I was able to bring the words to life, I

was able to bring my story to life and say yes, this is a part of me, this is *my* story, this is not just *a* story. This act of reading aloud and taking ownership helped me further honour the experiences I have had and become aware of how they inform my life today. Just putting the words down on paper would have kept the experiences forever distant, but through speaking the words to an audience, they became a part of my reality. Through the delivery phase, my story went from being a fiction to being an autobiography.

Another meaningful aspect of the delivery phase is that it gave me the opportunity to share and make public what has been private. I experienced how making the private public actually drew people closer to me, and gave me a way to connect more meaningfully with others. Making the private public through reading my story aloud helped me connect with others because it gave me an opportunity to show them who I am.

Receiving Feedback Phase. Right after I finished reading my stories aloud, I had this moment of anxiety, like oh my goodness here comes the feedback, what are people going to say? But then I was aware of the structure of the life review, knowing that people were only going to respond to what I had shared, and not open up new territory. This made me feel like I could take the risk of sharing my stories and gave me the courage to receive the feedback. During this phase, I found it immensely normalizing when people shared the fact that they could connect to my story, or that it was meaningful to them because of some experience they have had.

One incident stands out for me during this phase. A group member commented that she had appreciated hearing in my story about certain things I feel discontent about. She said that witnessing me express some dissatisfactions made her feel more trusting of me because she could see me as more real and not as a person who always presents just a positive image. This was meaningful to hear because I have a hard time expressing my dissatisfactions. I am aware

that I am hypervigilant when it comes to withholding thoughts that might cause discomfort in my relationships, but that is regrettably at the significant cost of losing my authenticity. Hearing her comment reaffirmed my commitment to taking those steps to feel more comfortable presenting a more authentic image of myself to the world.

Witnessing Phase. The experience of witnessing other group members' stories made me appreciate the different struggles and range of experiences that were present in the group. Listening to the struggles people had gone through to get to where they are today made me appreciate how resilient we are as human beings. This was meaningful because it gave me hope that people can rebound from difficult experiences and get to a better place.

Hearing people's stories made me reflect on my own life, and also allowed me to learn about different experiences I have not had. For example, listening to stories about significant family conflict that led to separations and fragmentations made me feel fortunate that my family has not been through this and allowed me to gain a richer understanding of what this must be like.

Providing Feedback Phase. This might be my personal projection into the process, but I felt there is an expectation to provide incredibly meaningful feedback. It was difficult to always have something insightful to say because there were definitely moments in which I just could not relate to certain experiences. But then there were those other moments in which stories absolutely resonated with me. It brought me satisfaction to be able to tell that person that I'm with you, or I feel connected to you. It is meaningful for me to tell someone else I'm connected to you as it provides this person with some degree of comfort or solace.

What was interesting was that giving feedback helped me realize that not only do I get this other person, but hey, they probably get me too. And therefore that makes me feel a little bit

less alone in this world and makes me believe that I have an ally or a person that I can count on or connect with whenever I need to in the future. So the process of providing each other with feedback not only created a sense of connection among us, but it also gave me permission to go to that deep level with group members in the future. The experience of providing feedback and having it acknowledged in a way that was not at all reactive or defensive gave me hope that we could reach that level of engagement again in the future. When I experience this level of engagement I feel very excited because it is as though I'm in the presence of something rare or unique. This sense of connection and engagement is something immensely sacred, and I felt as though I will be able to have this sacred connection again in the future.

Group Dynamics Phase. There was one interaction I observed in the group that was particularly meaningful to me. One member was providing feedback to another member. These two individuals know each other outside of the group and they come across to me as really good friends, like two bosom buddies. The feedback was about regrets this one member had in the friendship. He said he wished he had more of something in the relationship and was expressing some dissatisfaction he had with their friendship. That moment for me was so refreshing and encouraging because I was able to see two people being honest and genuine with one another, and having a strong bond that they felt comfortable enough to express their dissatisfactions in the friendship. I was encouraged to see that this type of interaction does not destroy friendships, but that it actually brings people closer together and deepens their respect for one another. Of course it makes sense, but it was meaningful to see it happen between two individuals that I admire because it models a way of being that provided me with the courage to share my own discontentment with the people in my life. Over the past few years I have been able to do this with my parents, and as a result our relationship has become more authentic and close. But

somehow friendships are a different can of worms for me and I find myself reluctant or afraid to take that next step of expressing my annoyances or dissatisfactions with my friends. So witnessing this interaction between two friends in the group was meaningful because it provided me with the permission to do this with my own friends as well.

The General Experience. An image I would use to describe my life review experience is that of a nervous performer walking onto a stage to sit down and play at a piano positioned under the bright beam of a single spotlight. The concert hall is dark and the audience is invisible. The performer begins to play and all his anxieties melt away. The music comes incredibly naturally and the performer realizes he wants to be there. When he finishes playing there is this moment of silence, filled with immense anxiety, anticipation, and uncertainty. Did the audience enjoy the piece? But then the house lights come on and the audience is finally visible and they're clapping. In this image, I am that performer and the group is the audience. When I read my story it was a performance and I felt relieved that the group not only received it, but enjoyed it and even felt a reciprocal connection to it. To hear that the group understood my story and even felt connected to it, that I wasn't speaking gibberish, that my recital was not way off the mark, was really meaningful because I felt a little less alone. The audience was visible and they were connected to what I was doing.

One of my continuing struggles in life is to become more genuine in my relationships and the life review provided me with a forum to practice and prove to myself that I can express emotion in a genuine manner. It was an opportunity to see that I can be comfortable going to an emotional place, that I am able to sit with my own emotions and other people's as well. To be given the opportunity to tell my story and to share some things that are very intimate and have

been very private for a long time was meaningful because I came away with a sense of courage and confidence that people will ultimately accept what I put out there.

So I felt more confident after this experience, and this is significant because confidence is something I have really struggled with in the past for a number of reasons. Coming from a different background and being raised in a family that was affectively and socially private, also making the transition from a hard sciences background to a counselling psychology program, I am always questioning whether I really belong here. Here in this program and here in this society. I question if I will be able to be genuine, congruent, and emotionally expressive. I think for a long time I felt discouraged thinking I was deficient, incapable or incompetent and not able to connect with people. I was frightened for a long time because I really struggled with making that connection with people. So this life review group was an acknowledgement of how far I have come over the last few years. The life review has been very empowering because it has made me see myself differently, I am able to reflect and say yeah, I am able to connect with people on a very intimate level. So I have come away with this lightness in my step, knowing that I have the confidence to do something I struggle with. It's been an immense confidence booster.

I realize how before coming into the counselling psychology program my life was partly empty, unfulfilled, and disconnected. So completing this life review was a reflection of where I am today, a concrete example that I am making progress. It reaffirmed for me that I am engaging in the process of self-actualization and become the person I want to be; which is a personally validating experience. The life review group was also meaningful in that it provided me with a valuable forum to make connections with colleagues that I hope to support and be supported by for a long time to come.

Something important happened after the life review group. I was able to put into practice my ability to be more genuine in my relationships. I actually took what I had written on the Family Theme and I shared it with my parents. I didn't have any expectations from them and I felt no pressure. It was just about me sharing my experience with them and I was surprised to find that I felt immensely comfortable to do so. Both of my parents took the time to read my story and it prompted a heartfelt discussion between us that was very meaningful because I felt a different and closer connection to my parents that I hadn't felt prior to sharing my story with them. And another result of sharing the story was a few days later my mom called me and shared something that she is personally struggling with in her life right now. This was meaningful because it showed me how sharing and connecting are often reciprocated.

James' Narrative Account

Writing Phase. I found the writing phase to be a frustrating and burdensome experience, but maybe that was therapeutic in and of itself. It forced me to think back and try to understand what was the block or the hurdle. I think I was struggling because emotionally I have been pretty exhausted and drained with things going on in my personal life. I felt like I didn't have the energy to delve into the writing. I think I was ripped off because I wasn't able to think freely and not worry about everything else going on in my life. I remember actually holding back during the writing phase, knowing that it was going to take me to a place that at the time I just didn't know if I could come out of. Having said that, there were a few beneficial things about the writing phase. It gave me an opportunity to gain a better sense of the chronology of my life and the people who were involved, just by virtue of me having to sit, think, and type it all out. Also having my stories prepared and written down on paper took away some of the apprehension of speaking into the group. Rather than not trusting myself to tell my story how I wanted to, I had a

safety net because what I was going to say was already written down. I also think it's easy to get caught up in our own minds and have things cycle and cycle around. But the process of writing those words out freed me from that single-thought track. For example, thinking about the death of my best friend where I would ruminate on why I couldn't tell him how much I loved him in the hospital at his bedside. But to get that story down on paper freed up space for some new thoughts, and allowed me to make new meaning out of this experience.

Delivery Phase. In terms of the delivery phase, I was able to tell my story in a fairly uninhibited fashion. When I read my story to the group, I didn't feel that I needed to take caution or protect myself, in the way that I would with a family member or a partner. This is because I knew there were not going to be any repercussions telling my story to the group, and that nothing would be thrown back at me that I would need to defend against or explain away. So removing that need to censor allowed me to experience the re-telling of my story in a more true, raw form. A more true telling than if I was telling, say my dad or my wife. It was meaningful to feel less inhibited in the group and less guarded because I was then able to receive and hear what others were telling me; I was more open and available. With family and partner it is hard to tell my true story because there's always this feeling of my attending to them, which gets in the way. I was also aware that as I was reading my story aloud and feeling less inhibited, things came to me that weren't necessarily there at the time of writing. These new thoughts and memories were probably activated through reading the story aloud.

Receiving Feedback Phase. I think what is most therapeutic about the life review process is that the feedback you receive is raw and fresh, things you are not expecting and haven't necessarily heard before. Hearing the feedback from group members, people who aren't invested in me, who aren't my partner or my family members, really made a difference. I think

that when I told these stories in the past to my wife or people in my family they probably didn't know what to do with them. They would make excuses for why things were the way they were, and they didn't have the skill to actually process with me the experience in the story. So without taking the time to process my stories with my family, I found the therapeutic effects of telling them were negligible. I could still feel alone in my story. With my family, its been this one-way narrative of me telling them these things about me, and it was always just this hope like hell I'm not judged or somebody doesn't try and solve me.

This feeling of aloneness went away in the life review group because I knew that their feedback wasn't going to be about trying to solve things or to judge me, so I felt safe. The feedback was more like wow, I heard your story, let me share what happened that was similar to me; or they would give feedback by reflecting what they thought my experience must have been like for me. And that, in and of itself, removed that feeling of aloneness. The aloneness was removed when I heard group members comment on my story, I felt they were actually connected to my story, and then through my story were also connected to me.

I think the experience of sharing our stories and connecting through them is overlooked with the people we are closest to. That's a hard one for me. The people that you assume by default you will have the most intimate connection and understanding with, by virtue of the relationship you have with them, doesn't always work out that way. Isn't it interesting that my sense of intimacy, understanding, and connection actually came from the life review group, people that I don't really know at all, and that don't know really anything about me?

The feedback I received was meaningful to me because it actually created more clarity for me in my story. I think this happened because I was able to be open and to receive group members' comments without worrying about protecting myself. I could place their feedback and

comments into my story as I was re-experiencing it again through the telling of it. So in a way I was replaying my story, this time with group members' feedback included. Their feedback may have opened up something else, another interpretation of the story. I've never experienced that before. How this happened in the group was that I knew I wouldn't be judged or that someone may try to fix my feelings of being uncomfortable or upset. This allowed me to not be guarded, as I would with my family. I was more open, available, and free to receive the feedback.

Another meaningful experience that occurred in this phase was when a group member commented on the relationship between myself and my grandfather. I appreciated this group member honoring and recognizing my grandfather that way, because my grandfather was, and still is, my role-model. I don't believe my grandfather got that recognition from my family; he gave so much and didn't get much back. And it's always been just me alone honoring him; so to hear this group member acknowledge my grandfather was reparative. Perhaps it's reparative because I didn't, in that moment, have to carry my grandfather all by myself. There was somebody with me, who, for that moment in time, took him in and carried him for a bit as well. Perhaps I was always searching for the acknowledgement from others that he was a good man or that he had such a great effect on me. And what was repaired by the feedback was that I finally received this acknowledgement.

The big one for me during the phase of receiving feedback was the validation I got from members when they shared their comments with me. The feeling was that I have been heard, in some cases for the first time in my life, and that's huge. And it was significant that I didn't have to defend the story, or explain it, or prove it. That was very validating and also created a sense of being included, like you have heard my story and I still feel accepted by you. This was

meaningful because validation and inclusiveness are key components to believing in my own self-worth and self-efficacy.

Another meaningful part of this was to hear through their feedback that group members were actually affected by my story. This created a sense of being recognized and noticed, and I think to a greater degree, being connected to other people. I have come to learn that feeling connected to others on an emotional level is the biggest thing I need in my life, or else I feel an emptiness. So there is something about hearing other members' feedback that allowed me to feel emotionally connected to them. What resonated the most for me during this phase was the level of comfort, safety, security, inclusion, and emotional resonance that I experienced. When I read my third story into the group and there was no time for feedback, it reminded me of what it feels like to tell these things to a partner or a relative. That was the closest thing I experienced to a feeling of aloneness throughout the whole workshop. That was painful. I had reached out to others through sharing my story, but I didn't know if I had reached them. I'd just tossed my story out there, and didn't get anything in return. So hearing the feedback is absolutely crucial to fostering that sense of emotional connection, so this phase was probably the most meaningful and important to me.

Witnessing Phase. I was feeling apprehensive at the beginning of the workshop, just walking into the room and seeing who was there. It was a feeling of anxiety and nervousness, and maybe a little fear of the unknown. I was wondering just how comfortable I was going to be talking about some things, knowing the stories that I wanted to tell. The apprehension was related to the question of whether I wanted to disclose to people that I didn't know. But as the group progressed and I heard other people's stories, I began to feel matched or mirrored by some of the others, so I began to feel better about disclosing my own stories. My feeling of anxiety and

apprehension went away right after I heard the first story read aloud by a group member. So the witnessing phase was important because it let me feel less anxious and I began to feel safe.

The witnessing phase was significant for me because hearing other people's stories contributed to me feeling less alone. Specifically I remember one group member talking about his dad, and the abuse he had endured. He told a story about a time where he took control and acted out physically towards his dad. This impacted me because when I was living with my mom and her husband, it was pretty difficult times for me. There were so many times I felt this rage inside of me that I didn't know what to do with. I just remember feeling this pent up energy and rage, but I could never hit anyone. I wanted to be able to do that; I wanted to be able to act out, because at the time I think that is really what was needed. I see this group member as a gentle giant if you will, a gentle guy. But I saw this rage inside of him; and that juxtaposition of gentleness and soft voice with hearing that he could act out when needed effected me because I'm a gentle person with a soft voice as well, and if he was able to act out, well maybe I could too. So I re-experienced this difficult memory with my mom and her husband through this group member's story. It allowed me to gain an insight into my own story and to feel that my anger was validated. It was important to me to be able to hear that he went through a similar situation, but that he was able to actually act out and come out of it okay. I think this allowed me to normalize my experience of a very dysfunctional situation.

Providing Feedback Phase. The providing feedback phase was meaningful to me because there was this sense of altruism for me, this sense of being there for others. Being there to support others removes a feeling of aloneness for me. I think this occurred because I got to share with my other group members how their story hit me personally. I got to tell them how I connected to their experience and how it related to my own story.

Group Dynamics Phase. My experience of the group was a tangible feeling of validation from the others; because there was this feeling for some of us, of having similar experiences. There was something about sitting amongst a closed group of people and sharing some very intimate and personal details of our lives that created a rich experience for me. What was meaningful for me was that the group provided this sense of an elimination of that feeling of isolation or aloneness that comes when I've experienced hardship or very emotionally difficult situations. The elimination of aloneness occurred through the process of having a group of people together sharing stories in a very private way which created a common thread between us. It was meaningful for me to be in a group and open up, and allow someone else inside, and to find out or locate where they were affecting me and how. I felt we were there for a reason; we were there to support one another. And it was meaningful for me to be there to support others. Intrinsically, I've always known that in the right group, you can move mountains, you really can. So it was quite meaningful to be a part of seeing people move forward. I find that to be very powerful.

The General Experience. The life review workshop allowed me to re-experience my life and the things that have happened to me. It helped me make sense of what has happened, to make meaning out of some traumatic events in my life, and to feel ok about it. It has allowed me to accept the fact that what has happened, for the most part, has been for a reason. These events have contributed to what I am doing today and why things are the way they are today. That is quite enlightening. My life review experience has also allowed me to both accept and make some greater meaning of what occurred in the past and perhaps why it occurred. The effect that it's had on me is that I'm less ruminating about certain events that occurred, and I now feel lighter in some respects. I think it's therapeutic to have this introspection.

Also, I'm less hard on myself. Knowing what occurred, knowing what went on and accepting it, I now feel a lot less self-critical. So that's created a bit more space within. I think this happened in the life review because I was given the time to reflect on the different life paths I have taken, and make meaning out of them. Things made sense, and I was able to see why things happened and to recognize that they were beyond my control. The life review actually unraveled some of the mystery of my life. It helped me understand how the different events, scenes, people, and relationships in my life are all connected to what I am doing today. So instead of these events and people existing in isolation, the life review removed this sense of a series of single-event movies and changed my understanding of my life into more of a production, the long version of where I came from. It answered the questions and solved the mystery of what is my life, and where is it going.

The life review has also allowed me to take a look at the first half of my life and recognize there are many feel good things that happened. Re-living and re-experiencing these good events actually reinforces them, and ensures that they are not lost. The life review allowed me to sit back and say oh yeah, here I am, wasn't that a great thing to do or to experience with someone. So it's allowed me to feel good about myself and to accept my decisions. It has allowed me to feel like what I am doing now and where I am headed has a sense of purpose and meaning. The flip side of it is that the life review has also created this sense of urgency and motivation in me, because it encouraged me to evaluate and re-evaluate what's most important to me in my life going forward. Having the insight I had that I want to surround myself with people who can connect with me on an emotional level gives me clarity and strength, because it gives me a greater sense of understanding of what I want from my life. Making the space to look back on my life and see what I have sacrificed or compromised on, allows me to look forward and say

ok, so what is the next half of my life going to include? And I have decided that my life is going to include some pretty profound things. So going through the life review process has actually helped me recognize and clarify what is important to me going forwards. So this was like a key, the process I believe was a key to personal insight and enlightenment. We are here for a short time, and the life review allowed me to actually see that, to see where I am, and what I need to do. It's like that Bob Marley lyric, if you know your history then you'll know where you're coming from.

Andrew's Narrative Account

  Writing Phase. What struck me most about the writing phase was the relative openness with which I approached the project. In the past, there would have been a lot more self-censorship, and feeling uncertain about which topics I would feel safe talking about in a group. But I didn't have this censorship or uncertainty while I was writing on the life review themes; instead I felt a sense of freedom because I was less afraid to go to that emotional place. I felt a degree of confidence after engaging in the writing phase because I didn't fall apart emotionally or mentally even though I was writing about emotional things in my life, things that came from my core. I knew that I could put myself back together again if I needed to and still be alright in the end. And that's nice to know.

  Delivery Phase. When I read my branching points story out loud I was surprised because another group member commented that it sounded as though I was sad in the reading, and on reflection, it sounded a bit sad to me too. I thought, why is that, because it didn't feel like a sad story when I wrote it. So there was an emotional discrepancy there, between the writing and reading phase. Whereas with the death story I was very emotional writing it and reading it out loud to the group. So there was a congruency there between how I felt writing it and reading it.

Receiving Feedback Phase. There are a number of incidents that impacted me when I was receiving feedback from others. I remember one group member said he had perceived a sadness in my branching points story. I tried to approach receiving feedback with an attitude of openness and possibility so when he said that I thought ok, is there a grain of sadness in my story? Reflecting on that, I suppose there is some sadness due to some sad things that happened along the way. But the story also included some really good things, and I just didn't feel sad reading it out loud. I don't think of my story as being a sad one, so this piece of feedback really surprised me. I think most people perceive me as a happy person, and I see my life as mostly happy with sad parts, but I have a fairly positive understanding of my history. So this piece of feedback left me with a few lingering questions, like is there something else there which I don't show very easily but which is an undercurrent? How do other people interpret me and is this a fair representation? Is there a sadness in me that I don't know about yet? Is there some sort of dark pit in my story that I don't see but other people pick up on? Is there something that other people perceive in me that I don't perceive in myself just yet? I don't know, maybe there is something there that remains unexplored or unearthed. So this makes me reflect on whether I need to be more authentic with people and to wonder what the cost is of not letting some of the sad stuff be expressed more freely.

Another piece of feedback that impacted me was when one group member reflected on my confidence that the universe will provide. This was meaningful because I felt pleased I had been perceived in this way because he was right, I do have confidence in the universe. When I heard his comment, I was like yeah, that is a pretty good philosophy to have of the universe. I guess I have an optimistic philosophy. But I was also left with this curiosity of where did I get

that worldview; where did it come from? I'm not sure where I picked it up, so I was left with some puzzlement over that.

Another incident that stands out was when a group member described me as having tenderness mixed with masculinity. This comment gave me pause for thought because I know myself as a fairly tender person, but I don't necessarily think of myself as a particularly masculine person. I know I am masculine in some ways, but if you asked me to describe myself, masculine would not make the list of top twenty words. So this piece of feedback made me say to myself, okay so who am I exactly because people are aware of things in me that I am not aware of in myself. I think I got a similar message from another group member who described me as being like a tree, because I am strong, but I'm also able to bend. I think I know what she means, but I am still puzzling over these pieces of feedback.

I also received a piece of feedback from the group leader during one of our breaks. He said something to me about how if I could harness my anger it would be such a powerful tool for me to have. I was puzzled and curious about that comment because I see myself as able to be assertive and I can express my displeasure if I need to. So this comment made me question myself and wonder if people see me as unable to express anger. I wondered am I someone who is really afraid of his anger or who hasn't found that side of his emotional expression yet? So that made me curious as well.

Witnessing Phase. My general experience of the witnessing phase was that I felt very honoured to be entrusted with really personal details of people's lives. It was also a humbling experience because I realized some of the hardships people have been through. Hearing people read their stories aloud gave me a greater appreciation of how difficult people's lives have been at various stages. So I was left with this sense of being honoured and humbled at the same time.

Witnessing the stories was also meaningful for me because I was heartened by the fact that there is such a richness to human beings' lives. I was heartened by the richness and also the simplicity of people's lives. I was aware that people have all kinds of different experiences, for example when one group member told a story about death in the Sudan and images of starving children that her words conjured. As I sat there, I thought about how each of us told a life story about death and I was aware of the differences between the stories. These differences are the richness or the complexity, whereas the simplicity is that people's stories boil down to similar themes. And I really like the duality that exists in that. There is meaning for me in the complexity that is simultaneously simple. Because it means that we are both rich in our diversity and yet unified by common needs and common themes. So that makes the world both a hugely unique and infinite place and yet there is something similar in each of us; it allows us both the opportunity to be individuals and also to belong to the collective of humanity, and that resonates with me.

Another experience that stands out during the witnessing phase was when a group member read the two roads in a wood poem. His story really killed me, and I found myself crying and I didn't really know why. It was partly the sadness in the poem because every time we make a choice, there is a road we never get to walk down. But I think it was also because I feel such a connection with this group member due to taking classes together in the past, and because it is so easy for me to relate to his story. The part of his story that really stuck home was his experience of being an outsider growing up because I connect to that experience of feeling like an outsider when I was young. So here we were, two boys growing up, him on the east coast and me in the north of B.C., both feeling like outsiders for very different reasons. I sat there thinking how nice it would have been for us to know each other at that particular junction in our

lives. Hearing his story and being able to talk about being an outsider is affirming and healing. Healing in the sense that I can accept it, like yeah, it's okay, it happened, it's okay to talk about it. This is meaningful because it gives us a connection to each other and the awareness that we've walked a mile in each other's shoes. That's very powerful for me.

Providing Feedback Phase. In this phase I remember feeling pressure to come up with something. There were two kinds of pressure for me. The first was to seem as though I had heard or understood the story in complete detail. This was tough because in some cases I hadn't understood everything, but it felt disrespectful to say this. The other pressure was to appear as though I had something insightful to say, but I don't always have something insightful to say, and I can feel this pressure from within to do so. There was also this competitive spirit for me, like wow, they said something really insightful, I better come up with something before it gets round to me. I realized that I had this need to appear knowledgeable and that I still worry at times what people think. It would be good to give myself permission to just take the day off from that. Through this experience of giving people feedback I recognized that I still need to work on this. I would like to free myself from this pressure, and I want to give people feedback that's as authentic as possible. If there's something I don't understand or that I missed in their story, is it really honest not to say so?

Group Dynamics Phase. One thing I was conscious of being a part of the group was there were people who I felt closer to, and others who I did not know as well. Typically what happens with me is it takes quite some time to feel comfortable with people and to trust them. But I left the weekend trusting everybody and having a better sense of who everybody is. There was one group member in particular that I felt I got to know quite well and I really liked him. I felt very connected to him, in part because I thought so much of his feedback was really

thoughtful, insightful and interesting and I respected that in him, but also because I could really relate to elements in his story. And I perceived him responding really positively to my feedback as well. So there was a sense of a connection and that we understood each other, or that we were connecting on the same level.

Being in the group I felt quite close with a few members and comfortable with the others. It was enough to feel really close to a few people. This was meaningful because I reflected on the fact that I have gone through this M.A. and now that I am towards the end of the process I recognize that there are people in this program who I really like and have gotten close to. These connections are significant because it allows me to look back and see the whole experience of being a graduate student as more memorable and meaningful.

The General Experience. The image from space of the shadow of daylight moving across the earth, where part of the world is still in darkness and part of it is in light, is how I would describe the life review. I felt like the earth spinning, turning on my axis with new parts of me being illuminated, and parts of me still in darkness. As new things were coming into the light, other things were receding into the dark. So even as I gained new awareness of myself through the life review, I was aware that there are still parts that are unexplored, that are still totally in shadow for me. The moments of brightness and darkness are always shifting, moving, and evolving, but I am comfortable with this. It would get boring to have myself totally figured out, and doing my life review, I was aware that there is a good chunk of me left to uncover, and its nice to know I have this unexplored part of me.

The life review was also like the opposite bookend to my experience of starting the counselling psychology program because when I came into the program the first class I had was group therapy and I remember thinking holy shit, what is going on here? I just came from

England and no one talks about their emotions there (laughs). In that first group class I felt really unsure about what the parameters were, what was acceptable to share and just how much I wanted to say about myself. But it really struck me that as I embarked on the life review weekend I didn't feel unsure at all. I felt more anticipation for what was to come than anything else. This awareness was meaningful because it tells me I have gained an element of confidence. I don't care as much about doing what's right, even if this is an evolving process; now I am able to be more authentic and do more of what fits for me. I felt open, unencumbered, and free going through the life review process; I felt free to say what I needed and free to express my emotions. This was meaningful because in the past I have questioned whether or not I am able to be expressive. I've had relationships where people have accused me of being inexpressive or unreadable, and they were definitely right in certain circumstances. But I have always known that I am an emotional person and that I can be expressive. So the life review experience affirmed that not only could I be emotional, but that I don't need to be afraid of expressing my emotions. So there is a greater sense of confidence and freedom that comes with that.

There was this sense that I had been sort of emotionally primed for the experience so that by the time I got to the group I was really able to be expressive. I had poured myself into the writing and felt quite emotional in the process. So in the group I was sitting there ready for this emotional avalanche, emotionally primed to cry and just let it all out. So when I heard a few of the stories that really impacted me, I just went for it. And this was good for me, I felt affirmed that I could be expressive in this way.

Something important happened for me after the life review workshop ended. I came home from the weekend emotionally and physically spent, and my partner wanted to know all about my experience. I have this expectation that it is exhausting to talk emotionally with a

person and sometimes for the sake of brevity or the sake of saving energy I hold things back from my partner. Its like, please don't make me talk about this right now, I have a zillion other things to do and I don't have time to feel close to you right now. But when I got home from the life review weekend, rather than resist, I just let it go and told her all about it. I mean I had just spent the entire weekend sharing really personal stuff with the group and being as transparent as possible, so why would I hold anything back from her? So in the first few days after the workshop I was aware of a greater emotional connection with my partner. I carried forth with her what I had been doing in the life review group, feeling like I have nothing to hide and just letting it all hang out. So I guess there was this real sense of congruence for me. And I was surprised to find that after sharing with my partner, I didn't feel more exhausted, I actually felt energized. I had this awareness that I might spend a lot of energy holding back or not being fully congruent. This was meaningful because the experience was a bit of a learning for me; a shift happened for me. I felt energized by the life review weekend and this carried forth into my relationship in the few days afterwards. After the workshop I was also aware that I'm really happy where my life is at the moment, I am really happy with my partner and with finishing my degree. I was aware that I am in a really good place right now.

The life review was also meaningful to me because I think it helps me be a better counsellor when I have to take the client role at times. So being in a position where I don't have the expertise or authority reminds me of just how intimidating, scary and thought-provoking counselling can be. Clients come to see us and they're not sure about what to say, they're scared about how they feel, they don't know where to start, then they come out of a session and they're not quite sure how it all fits together or what exactly it was that they learned. And those feelings are all normal, and doing the life review group reminded me of that. It's good to be humbled

consistently and regularly in this way. It lets me go back into the world with a fresh set of eyeballs and reminds me to feel empathy for my clients.

Barbara's Narrative Account

Writing Phase. I approached the writing phase by deciding that I would write about whatever was going to come up, so I just let my consciousness take over. I didn't want to do a lot of editing or censoring, I was just going to write the story and that would be that, and then I would read it to the group. Because I allowed my writing to flow in this manner I found it very interesting to see what I actually did end up writing about. I could have gone in so many different directions with each theme, but ended up choosing in that time and place a specific subject. I had the experience of writing about things I haven't thought about for a while, and noticed that certain things kept coming up. This made me wonder why and so the writing phase really started the thinking and reflection process for me.

Delivery Phase. Reading my stories out loud was an interesting experience because certain stories that I had imagined would be difficult to share were actually very easy, and others that I had not anticipated being emotional, moved me very much as I read them to the group. For example, I wrote about the time when I had first arrived in Canada, which was a really difficult depressing period for me. But when sharing this story with the group, I was totally fine talking about it and actually felt truly peaceful reading the story. The realization I had was that I needed to go through this difficult time so that I could grow, learn, gain wisdom, and move on with my life. This experience was meaningful because my ability to talk about this in front of a group of people and be okay really solidified the fact for me that I have healed from these difficult times.

Then when I read the story about my family I was really surprised how moved I was.

Of course I have always known how valuable they are to me, but the intensity of my emotions provided me the insight of their importance to me. I was like, what's going on? I should be crying in the first story, not in this one. It's not what I expected. I expected the dark story to affect me more. But no, it was reading about my family. So that was interesting, and good. It was good because it brought up the awareness of how much I love them, this feeling was overflowing, and that they are the centre of my universe.

Receiving Feedback Phase. It was meaningful to hear people's feedback because they reflected back to me what they had heard me say in my story. The way they reflected my story back was sometimes different than how I thought about it. I viewed my story in a certain light, but when I heard it reflected back to me with a slightly different perspective, how I perceived certain events in my life were shifted. So that was very interesting.

 I did have a few uncomfortable experiences when receiving feedback. When the group leader or any of the members provided me with feedback that included a compliment, I immediately felt my defenses going up and was aware of feeling threatened and uncomfortable. I felt being complimented or pointed out as a model of good behaviour, separated me from the group. I know the group leader was using me as a model to help group members learn, but I have to work hard to be like everybody else, like anybody else, and I didn't want that taken away from me. But the intensity of my defenses was not proportional to the situation. So this made me stop and reflect on what was going on for me. I felt this experience was valuable because it gave me more understanding of what I am comfortable with, and it let me be more aware of my reactions. It also made me think about implementing modeling with my clients and how it's a tool I am not necessarily comfortable with, but that I think can be very useful. Since the life review group I even tried modeling self-care to a client. This experience was meaningful because the self-

awareness I gained of my discomfort with modeling, and my attempt to use it, have made me feel more competent as a counsellor.

Another incident that stands out in this phase occurred after I had finished reading my story about death. As soon as I stopped talking, I closed my laptop that I was reading off of, and put it beside me. I did this because I was trying to contain my emotions. The group leader then commented that this movement made me look so decisive and done, and that he liked that. But the comment felt incongruent. I thought he looked moved by my story about death, and I wanted to hear what he had to say. So I felt sorry that my action of closing my computer had distracted him, I didn't mean to shut him down in any way, I didn't want to shut him out. My movement of closing the laptop was not meant to shut anyone out, it was meant to contain my emotions. After I finished reading about death, I don't think there was anything in the way I presented myself that was open. This self-awareness that the leader's comment brought up was meaningful because it made me ask myself, do I shut people out or give the impression of being closed off? It made me reflect on whether this is something I need to careful of.

Witnessing Phase. This experience of life review has reinforced the way that I connect with people and how I make sense of both my own and other people's experiences. What helped me understand and feel deeply connected with group members were my own experiences in the past. I could go back to those times, connect with those emotions and compare them to what was being expressed in the stories I was witnessing. My past experiences, my connections, my connection to the complexity of the emotions that were being shared formed a filter through which I heard peoples' stories. I compared and contrasted, drew parallels, clarified, felt and then I let my intuition lead me. Here I let go of the words, let go of the cultures, let go of the context and was able to truly connect with people.

The importance of hearing people's stories was that they helped inform me of who I am. As I sat there and listened to each speaker, a similar process took place for me. The more I listened, the more I could relate, the more I could feel, the more I could empathize, and interestingly the clearer my own random experiences became to me. I began to see my experiences in a different light. I think our tendency is to just move through events, go through the feelings, and then just move on without further consideration. But listening to other people's stories made me ask myself about the significance of similar events in my life and how they have impacted me. Over the two-day workshop, many memories came back to me and allowed me to crystallize how I make sense of my life.

What was really meaningful about this phase was that while listening to group members tell their stories my own experiences came back to me, and these were things I have not thought about for a long time. It was interesting because some members told stories that were very similar to mine, but only similar in a shared context, because their experience of that context was very different from mine. So by hearing their perspective on a specific context that we shared, I was getting a different vantage point, a different way of looking at it. This was valuable because it allowed me to reflect on why I may have reacted in a certain way, or how I dealt with situations in the past, or how I feel about them. So this helped me know myself better because I was able to identify certain patterns in my life and clarify my understanding of how I deal with different experiences.

Hearing other people's experiences made me aware that I have an ability to move through the difficult things in life. Hearing their struggles with certain experiences that I have also shared made me aware of my strength and my ability to deal with things and keep going. One example is witnessing a story in which stubborn determination, anger, and vengeance came out. I was

swept by the familiar intensity of those feelings, especially the poison of vengeance. Hearing this story, I recognized I had gone through a similar period in my life of feeling vengeful, and it poisoned my being until I made the choice to let it go. Only then was I able to regain my power, my strength, and my autonomy. Listening to this member's story I was brought to the awareness that I have no need for vengeance and that it just is not an option for me anymore because it is not a useful or constructive choice. This awareness was meaningful because it brought a sense of peace to me.

Another incident that stands out as meaningful in the witnessing phase was when one group member talked about his experiences with the Chinese culture. I felt curiously surprised because I drew many parallels between his culture and mine. I had always thought I had little knowledge, skill, and understanding of Asian cultures. To discover that I understood implicitly the cultural undertones in his story increased my confidence that I can be an effective multicultural counsellor with Chinese clients.

Providing Feedback Phase. When I was asked to provide feedback after each story had been read, I was aware of several feelings. I felt angry because I did not enjoy the format of having to provide feedback right away. I felt pressured and I felt like it was an imposed rule, and I also felt sorry and bit insecure because I didn't feel ready. At the same time, I really value giving feedback to people, so this reaction made me realize that I need time to formulate feedback. By the second day of the workshop the answers I had for each person formed on their own. It was like I had something to say to each person, but I needed time before I could provide the feedback I wanted to give.

Group Dynamics Phase. I felt like a bit of an outsider in the group because I thought I was the only one who wasn't connected to the group leader in some way. And I definitely had

fewer contexts, less knowledge, and less connection with the individuals in the group as opposed to the individuals with each other. But it ended up not being a problem because by the second day I felt like I was more a part of the group and that there was more safety. This shift occurred because the group leader worked on creating cohesiveness and he's very good at it. He gave us a lot of time in the first day of the workshop to get to know each other. This provided me with a context for everybody, so all of a sudden we had shared all this information together, we'd given each other the feedback, we'd gotten to know each other, and we could move on. So I felt respected by the group members, I was open to sharing my feedback and to sharing my stories, and I was open to hearing other people's feedback. I was able to trust that they were giving me honest feedback that came from their heart. This made my connections with group members feel more genuine and valuable, and that was a powerful experience for me.

A specific interaction between two group members impacted me. As they gave each other feedback, I could sense a deep friendship, mutual respect, and admiration. I felt both moved and saddened by this. Moved because friendship is a beautiful thing and something that I deeply value. And saddened because I am aware I don't have those close friendships in Vancouver. As we continue to move as a family and find ourselves in new cities and new countries, I am acutely aware that it's those close friendships that I miss the most. And as we get older it gets harder to just jump into people's lives, well formed and crowded over the years. It's harder to make those deep connections. Also, as we ourselves get swept by the fast currents of daily details and responsibilities, the space for fostering and nurturing those deep friendships becomes narrower. Reflecting on this took me to the awareness that I don't want to move again. I don't want to move because of the children and their friendships, and I don't want to destabilize them.

Witnessing this interaction in the group made me realize, that in addition to the children, I don't want to move because I want to experience that level of friendship here.

The General Experience. The big motivational piece for me to join the life review group was because I am really interested in continuing to develop self-awareness and expand the blind spots that I have. The life review increased my self-awareness and made certain things clearer. I was given the opportunity to look more closely at how I react to things in my life or how I do things and this gave me a lot of confidence. So I would say this life review process has given me more confidence, allowed me to feel stronger, and made me feel more competent as a counsellor. This change occurred because the life review allowed me to increase my self-awareness. As I talked about my life, I became more aware of how I have managed to successfully deal with difficult situations; this makes me feel stronger and more confident.

Reflecting back on my life experiences through the life review process brought many things into my awareness. The life review made me aware that I have been through a lot of very difficult things and have been in dark places in my life, reviewing my life also made it clear that I'm now more at peace with these things, that they are now just a part of my path. I don't think that before the life review I was aware that I had made peace with these things. I realized that I get through the difficult periods in my life because I always look for a choice even in the most constricting situation, even if it is only a choice of how I am going to suffer. I am always searching for where do I have some choice, where do I have some control, and where do I have some responsibility. This is meaningful because telling my story affirmed that my worldview fits with the theoretical framework of existential analysis, which informs my counselling practice.

It became clearer to me through the life review that I'm very optimistic about things, and maybe even pragmatic. This is demonstrated by my acceptance of difficult situations in my life. I

became aware that even when I have to go through these difficult experiences, I just consider them chapters in my life, they happen, they are tough, I get through them, that's just life. This knowledge that I always will be able to look for a way to deal with things gives me strength and confidence that I can get through similar situations in the future. I realize that I have a profound trust in myself and in the universe.

This experience was also important to me as a counselling student and I think it is something that should be a part of our counselling psychology program. In our theory classes we talk about how we as counsellors are really the vehicles for delivering the change process, and who we are as people is a huge part of the therapeutic process, so we need to know ourselves. I think just as important as theory classes, if not more important, is developing our own self-awareness and finding out our blind spots. I have felt frustrated in the past because I do not think there are enough opportunities in our program for students to develop their self-awareness in this way. Also, many students can't afford to do expensive activities outside of class; they simply do not have the time or the resources to explore their self-awareness in the way that is necessary. So I think including a life review experience for graduate counselling students is crucial.

Pablo's Narrative Account

Writing Phase. During the writing phase I had two really big insights about my father. The first occurred when I was writing a paragraph about how my dad shuts me down and I used the word "withering" to describe his effect on me. I started thinking about how I feel around my dad. It's like Bandura's concept of self-efficacy and how if you encounter a person who is so much more efficacious than yourself, your own sense of self-efficacy drops. This is what I feel like around my dad. Then in the next paragraph I started writing about how other people tell me that I shut them down. I was searching for a good word to describe the effect that I have on

people and I realized the best word was "withering." I thought, wait I already used that word, then suddenly this huge awareness came that, wow, I am my father's son. Then I thought about how everyone around me tells me that they feel less efficacious around me. So I have the same effect on others that my dad has on me. The revelation of how similar I am to my dad was a surprise, it was something new and a great insight.

What this gave me was a way to understand why people seem to have a hard time working with me. I had been struggling and struggling over and over and over again to try and understand this. A big theme in my life is feeling misunderstood by others, I don't understand people and they don't understand me. Before I would try and dim my light or my efficacy to fit in with others, but then I would resent them for it, or I would try to carry others along with me, but that just drove everybody nuts. This dynamic with people was so pervasive in everything I did, that I couldn't see what was happening. But now I understand what people are feeling because it is the same way I feel when I am around my dad. This is profound because it's causing me to lighten up on being so efficacious around people. The shift is that I am now refocusing my bright light, I am just focusing on going hard in my own domain, and if others want to come along that's great, but if not I will just leave them behind. This insight is so powerful because it is starting to change my relationship with others and with my dad. I am starting to back off on the behaviours that push people away from me, and push me away from my dad, and I am starting to understand my dad better. Shining brightly and being really energetic can take on many forms and I don't think it's the fact that I've got brightness and energy that is being criticized. It's the way I am bringing it out. So this insight is changing my relating with everybody. The change that was created is that I can see how to be myself in a way that doesn't whither others. That's a big learning.

The second big thing that occurred during the writing phase was that I recognized some of the strengths in my father. This was very valuable because it re-stories my upbringing, letting me see it wasn't all negative. It gives me something actually positive to point to in my childhood, and allows me to begin to forgive my father and free myself from the negativity I have gotten from him. I needed to go through that process of expressing anger and acknowledging that my upbringing was not what it should have been. But I also needed to recognize the other side, which makes me feel like I'm closer to being able to cancel the debt. Because at the end of the day if you just bitch about your parents all the time you don't go anywhere. So being aware of my father's strengths was healing because it heals me to forgive him.

Delivery Phase. The biggest thing that happened to me in the delivery phase was when I was able to express my emotion. The group members before me had read stories on death, so when I read my story, it was in the context of death. So what I was reading was coming out differently than what I had written, because I had not written it in the context of death. So reading it aloud in the group my words took on a totally different meaning, so I was able to feel the story in a different way than when I had written it. The letter to my son was about grieving the inevitable death of our relationship. Expressing and experiencing this emotion while I read felt great because I struggle with inexpression. By expressing, I felt a sense of agency, like I had gotten to the other side. Because there is this fear that holds me back from feeling my feelings, which keeps my feelings a stranger to me. I continually push them down. I want to get more exposure experiencing and expressing emotion, and this incident in the delivery phase was another exposure so it was good for me. This expression was different from all the ones that have come before. In a way, it was a little cleaner and I was a little more congruent. I felt it and bam, I went there. I mean it took a lot to get me there, but I did it.

Receiving Feedback Phase. Nothing really meaningful happened for me in this phase. I was actually fairly disappointed with the feedback I got. I found it was not very concrete and I remember no feedback I got. The feedback I got was sort of like people just commenting on the weather.

Witnessing Phase. A number of meaningful and powerful things occurred to me while hearing other people's stories. In one story, this idea came up that if you hold onto a hockey stick too tight, you can't score and you can't enjoy the play. This made me think how I hold on too tight and this comes up in a lot of different ways in my life. I hold on too tight in the way I want my children to get to bed on time, or eat when it's time to eat, or develop good habits. But this holding on too tight becomes a fight for control, and none of us are enjoying things in those moments. I can be very controlling and I have a good intention, but it's not actually helpful. If I could let go a little it wouldn't ruin my children's lives, it would actually improve them. This idea made me think I should let go of the stick a little and let my kids have more fun, let myself have more fun. This idea of the hockey stick was really valuable for me and actually came up this morning. My son didn't want to go to school and it became a big fight, so I decided to let go of the stick a little and told him he could have a little bite of chocolate. This really helped the situation. I think I let go of the stick a little, which let my kid have more fun. This is meaningful to me because I'm starting to get this awareness that I want to let go a little and enjoy the play more.

The concept of an abundance of joy came up in another person's story. The story was about arriving in Canada for the first time and playing on a playground with no other children and he described this experience as a joyful abundance, a whole playground all to himself. This struck me because I would not look at an empty playground in this way. There is no abundance

in that image for me. It made me think that I can't often see abundance in playful things. It's more like I feel there is this lack of playful things or not enough to go around. So by learning that this person can see joyful abundance makes me feel hopeful that maybe I can get this attitude too. Hearing this concept was meaningful to me because it tells me about something that I want more of and that I don't have enough of. So when he talked about getting this experience of a joyful abundance I was all ears because I was getting this attitude modeled to me, and that is something I haven't had modeled to me very often.

Another important awareness came when I heard a group member talk about not wanting to burden the guy who had dumped her with her fear of abandonment. This reminded me of something I struggle with in my relationship with my father. To me, her story was talking about this idea that before you can abandon me, because I know it's coming, I'm going to take myself out, or abandon myself first. It's kind of like I'm going to hurt myself before you can hurt me. Until I heard this story, I hadn't thought about it like that before, but it fit for me. It was poignant because it helped me understand why I never wanted to burden my father by asking for what I needed. Asking for anything from my father who never gives, who never gives in, who never gave me what I really wanted, is something I struggle with. So her story was pretty applicable to me.

Another story that was meaningful to me was the story one member told of herself as a child asking her mother to hold her as she attempted to commit suicide. I saw this as the group member's final attempt to reach out and join with her mother. She finally had the right to ask for what she wanted and to be vulnerable as she was making this final grand gesture. It was powerful for me to hear that this group member had the agency as a child to go for what she wanted most, saying to her mother, you don't listen to all the little things so you better listen to this final

request. This act was tragic and sad, but it made sense to me. It's something I could have seen myself doing as a kid, but I didn't do it because I didn't have the imagination to say, now it's time to die. If I had known that story when I was a child I might have tried it because the desperation to try and link with my parents was so strong that I would have tried anything. To me, asking your mother to finally hold you as you die is a brilliant solution to a problem. The sadness of death is not as sad as the sadness of being rejected and abandoned by your parents. That sadness is a worse sadness, there is no sadness worse than that for me. To hear this story as an adult is meaningful because it allows me to make sense of just how desperate I was to get my parents' attention. I could never find the words to say how big my need was, and this member's story finally gave me the words to express my desperation in a way that people can understand. She gave me a powerful and stark image that captures how negating is it to be rejected by your parents, her story shows that it is more negating than death. So that was really valuable for me.

I also gained something from the story one member told about fighting back physically against his dad and actually winning his fight. That was poignant for me because my story was about losing the fight with my dad. I see both these stories, one about fighting the dad and the other about asking the mom to hold you as you die, as stories about kids having agency in the world. This is something I never felt I had because I followed my dad, it was a stalemate between us, so I really always lost. I never felt like I had any impact on my parents and this makes me question whether I have any impact on people in my life today. Being agentic in the world is the greatest feeling, it is the thing that I most want. What I mean by agentic is having the self-efficacy to be congruent. So to hear other people's stories about being agentic is inspiring because it helps me be agentic through vicarious modeling.

Witnessing the story of another group member, I was aware of an incongruence in her as she talked about her family and upholding the family name. She made it sound so good, but I could hear the dysfunction in the story. Hearing this incongruency made me reflect on my family and brought up the idea that being responsible to the family name sometimes requires you to criticize the family. I'm in a process of criticizing my family a lot right now, but I think I am actually being true to the family name by doing it. This was a new thought for me, that maybe I am honouring my family by criticizing them. Being truly honest with somebody is paying them the highest respect even if they don't want to hear it. So by criticizing my family, boundarying them, and forcing them to engage with me in respectful ways under my rules, I am actually doing it for their benefit too. I am showing them respect even if they don't see it. This awareness shifted things for me because when I say it like that, I suddenly don't need their approval anymore for this new way of interacting with them. It makes me think that sometimes the family needs to be criticized so it can be helped to see its blind spots.

Another important thing that came up during this phase was hearing one member tell about the fall of her father in her eyes when she was a young girl. The story was about the loss of the connection with her dad. Her story started this idea for me that fathers will inevitably fall or fail in their children's eyes. And that every child experiences the loss of the pristine relationship with the parent. This made me think about the fact that the relationship with my own children will change as they grow older. And although I don't want to lose the connection between me and my children, I know that it must change and grow. Not letting it change would actually kill the relationship, so it was good to think about this.

Providing Feedback Phase. It was fun to give feedback. I enjoyed it. I found I could really get a feeling for what people were saying and it's just wonderful to really understand

someone's story and to pull something out of it. During this phase, I was allowed to tell somebody how I really saw them without censoring myself. I was able to tell them what I really saw in them because they were sharing stories that I could reflect on. By really seeing somebody I felt as though I could join with them more. Providing feedback gives me a sense of being connected to people. And it also gives me this sense of competency within my field that I actually know how to really hear somebody else's story. I was aware that I can provide this service, yet I can also enjoy it as I provide it. Giving feedback is a joyful service for me.

Group Dynamics Phase. Being a part of the group was really important because the experience would not have been the same if I was reviewing my life just one-on-one with a counsellor. There is something very valuable about having a group of people around you, something meaningful about having a group in which a lot of intimacy existed that allowed me to process more. It gives me hope that people can do this for one another. You can read about how groups are good and therapeutic, but that's just knowledge. To experience that groups are good is a different thing. To really experience it for myself and to be able to say I got something out of it. It's reaffirming that the group has this intrinsic therapeutic benefit that goes beyond whatever the intervention is.

I remember witnessing one interaction between two group members that stands out for me. One member told another that he loved her and she could not let this in. I found myself in that moment unable to let the feelings in as well. But then she started to let the feeling in that she was loved, and I could tell it was getting through. The process of her letting down her guard slowly brought mine down as well; seeing her be congruent allowed me to be congruent. This was meaningful because I felt emotionally frozen in the group until this moment, but then as she started to feel and I witnessed this, I felt myself thawing and I became more real as well.

The life review process felt like a spiraling-in process because I felt greater intimacy in the group with each theme. As we moved through the themes and eventually touched on the death theme very briefly, I could sense us going ever deeper into the process. I feel the process brought me to a deeper and deeper awareness as I took on, or told stories about, more and more vulnerable or threatening experiences. There was a deepening of intimacy in the group as the weekend progressed, which enabled greater disclosure, which meant greater awareness for group members, and greater disclosure is very healthy for us.

Although I did get new awarenesses from being a part of the group and reading my themes aloud, I was really disappointed that we did not have the time to go through all the themes. I think the group leader made a mistake by spending too much time on the first theme and going so deep with it. We should have started lighter and punched out the first few themes, then gone deeper on the heavier themes. I felt a lot of frustration as I sat there, thinking we were going too deep too fast. I also felt angry and disrespected that we didn't get to read all the themes we had written on. It makes me wonder what happens to those themes that never got expressed? It's not the end of the world, but it makes me wonder if I am ever going to want to talk about those themes in the future, because they have been rejected. I don't want to dwell too much on this because there were a lot of positives that I experienced from the weekend. Even as frustrating as this was, I perceived there to also be a benefit. I was able to see the group leader really mess up a group. I didn't think he was capable of that. But I think it was good for me to see him do that because it gives me permission to make a mistake and makes me lighten up a bit on other group leaders.

The General Experience. I would use the image of a pilgrimage to describe my life review experience. A pilgrimage is a journey that has a clear end goal, but you are not sure how

you are going to get there. A pilgrimage could last your whole lifetime or just a few days. And a pilgrimage is something you don't do alone, you do it in a caravan with other people. And you become quite intimate with these people, even if you don't want to. There are people you could actually not like, but come to appreciate better. So for me, my pilgrimage was with people in the life review group but it was also with my father or my construct of him because when I talked about my father in the life review, it was an intimate journey he and I are taking even though he wasn't present in the room. I see him differently now because we took this intimate journey together. The life review allowed me to take a very close look at the people I brought into the room through my stories, and I think the people I brought into my life review are closer to me now.

I would call the life review workshop a marathon group. I remember somebody saying they couldn't remember the last thing they said because they were so exhausted. I think a lot of us felt exhausted because there was so much processing going on in a short period of time. The problem with this is sometimes when we are right in the midst of experiencing something really powerful we are so tired that we can't take it in. It's similar to the experience that I've read about of those who stand on the top of Everest, they have worked so hard and gone so far to reach the summit, but when they finally arrive, they just look around in a stupor and they are aware they should be taking it all in, but they can't because they are so tired. I think a similar thing might have occurred in our life review group.

The general experience was helpful for me in my professional development and I think it is an important experience for graduate students in a counselling psychology program because it enables us to do our own therapeutic work. I think there is this misconception that counselling students are already healed, that we don't have any work left to do. But we are no different from

the clients we see. By and large counsellors don't do their own work, they don't invest in the areas that scare them, and they don't go for it, so they don't serve their clients because people who have not done their work generally cannot help others. If counsellors think that their clients need treatment that they are above, it is an affront to the very idea of therapy. Therapy is something that if you don't live it, than you can't do it. It's not just something that happens in a counselling office, it's something that happens in every moment or could happen in any moment. So life review is a great way to hold counselling students' feet to the flame. And it is painful? Yes, but is it about consuming and ruining them? No, it's about making them better. I just think if you don't do your own process work how can you possibly ethically ask your clients to do it?

Sara's Narrative Account

Writing Phase. The writing phase was a pleasurable experience and a very enjoyable process for me. It was very absorbing and very much a flow experience. During the process, I went with my intuition and wrote whatever came to mind. And I really worked to make my stories engaging, ones that people would enjoy listening to. I have already done a lot of writing about my life so it wasn't like I was breaking new ground, but it was a valuable experience to write and feel in the flow. Specifically, writing on the death theme was healing for me because I had a lot of existential angst about my own death, and it was beneficial to just get some of it out on paper.

I also think the writing phase got me prepared for the work I was going to do in the actual life review group. It was helpful to be able to contain the emotion in the story. I was able to carefully choose the words that I was going to present in the group. This was important because if I had just started talking about these past experiences in the group it was possible I could have gone off on a tangent or started to get emotionally overwrought and gone to places I hadn't

planned. And because writing for me is a calm process of solitude and reflection, the emotion that I brought into the story was coming from that place. So having the story act as a container for emotion was really helpful for me because it gave me a sense of control over what emotions I wanted to express in the group.

Delivery Phase. Overall the delivery phase was enjoyable and I was really excited to share what I had written with people. I felt gratified when people seemed to be listening in close attention and really connecting to my words. It was like being a performer and that felt great. It was not hard for me to share my stories.

While reading aloud my branching points story I had the personal awareness that I am in poor health right now. As I spoke about my past manic episode I realized that right now I'm at risk, and that I don't want that to happen again. While telling my story I had this personal insight that my default setting is a self-destructive mode, and unless I'm living consciously and doing proper self-care, I will slip into unhealthy patterns under extreme stress. So this insight was a bit of a wakeup call for me. At one point while I was reading my story about my breakdown, I decided that I did not want to share a certain section that was just too painful for me to talk about. So in the moment I just axed it. This was meaningful because it allowed me to feel like I had control. I felt safe because I knew I wouldn't get carried away in the moment telling my story.

Something that surprised me about the delivery phase was how emotional I got when reading one of my stories. At the time of writing my childhood story about my father, it seemed really quite light to me. I didn't deliberately try to keep the story light because I wanted to be honest but when I read it aloud, it didn't really seem all that light anymore. There were funny bits, but as I read it aloud, I found myself choking up and I noticed that other people were getting

emotional as well. And that really moved me. I think the reason I experienced more intense emotion as I read the story is because I was faced with people's reactions to it. Because I'm familiar with my story, I have gotten used to it and I can make light of it. But the group really heard the pain of the story and I saw that reflected in their faces. Seeing their emotional reaction made me feel supported, and it also made me go wow, maybe this really is sad.

It was meaningful to see that other people were impacted by my story because it brought me closer to my child self. Through the group members' expressed sadness I was brought in closer contact with my younger self because I felt compassion for how hard it really was growing up with a dad like that. Seeing other people react emotionally to my story as I read it allowed me to have more compassion for my child self, and I think this in turn might have a positive impact in terms of how I treat myself now. I was able to see that there is this part of me that needs care and that as an adult I need to step up to the plate to do that. So I suddenly felt more like a parent to my child self, rather than an individual who is just lost and confused. I was able to separate the two parts of myself a little bit to see that I am able to actually do a better job of taking care of myself.

Receiving Feedback Phase. I felt stronger after my life review experience and I believe that happened because of the group cohesion that formed. The cohesion gave me a sense of being valued by the group, and the sense that people really had seen me. I knew that I had been seen and was being valued from the responses I got to my stories. While I was reading the stories, I was aware that people were either laughing at times, or being pensive or emotional; and then they reflected back to me how my story was linked to their own stories. So I was aware there was a connection between my story and their story, and this created a common ground between us.

There were two particularly meaningful incidents where I received feedback. The first was when I told the story about my boyfriend leaving me. At this point in my life I have moved on from that painful experience, but I don't think it was ever really resolved. The breakup was so painful and it precipitated one of the most painful periods of my life, so I think I just pushed the memory down, or blamed myself for what had happened. But then to hear positive feedback from these wonderful people in the group that I care about, and the men in particular, to hear that it saddened them to think of me being hurt like that, and that it was a shitty thing for this guy to do to me, and that I was wonderful person; well, that was really validating and it really helped me process what had happened to me. In a way, hearing their feedback changed my perception of the event; it actually helped me let it go.

I think another way hearing this feedback was healing was because it normalized the experience of being left by someone. Of course I know many other people have gone through this, but to actually hear that group members have had a similar experience was really helpful. I think it was healing to have my experience normalized because the breakup really hurt my self-esteem. At the time of the breakup I was not doing well emotionally or mentally, then he left me and I had this breakdown. He was going great, but I wasn't for a long, long time. My drinking worsened, I got in this abusive relationship, and I just struggled and struggled. This low self-esteem stayed with me for years and I felt really alienated. So sitting in the life review group, talking about this painful experience that is now in my past, I was like wow, I've come such a long way. Here I am with this group of wonderful people and I am so loved and valued by them. It was like, I've finally made good. I had this sense of gratitude that here I am in this group, and this realization that oh my god, I am finally out the other side.

The second meaningful thing that happened in this phase of receiving feedback was when I read the story about my childhood and the relationship I had with my father. I remember getting emotional because it hit me that he was a weird dad, he was always there, but he wasn't able to be nurturing and supportive like I needed him to be. So having this weird dad was like a cross I had to bear growing up. But after I finished reading the story and heard group members' really positive comments about how difficult my experience must have been, and how they liked how I had written my story, I was able to connect to my child self and feel more compassion for the difficulties I had experienced. The group leader especially impacted me at this point when he said it was painful for him to hear what I had been through. It was meaningful to hear him say that.

Witnessing Phase. Some of my best insights happened during the witnessing phase. As I sat there listening to the stories, I was aware there was this deep level of connection and intimacy. I felt that in those moments we were all really connecting. And a lot of my processing happened in response to their stories, because I was linking their stories to my own experience; their words triggered memories or thoughts from my own life. This process was meaningful because it allowed me to gain insight into my own experiences. A specific incident that stands out was when one group member spoke about her grandmother and I started crying and feeling grief about my own grandmother who is not well and not long for this world. It was like hearing this other person talk about her grandmother brought up my own grandmother. Hearing this other story pulled out my emotions surrounding my own grandmother, and the emotion came so easily, like it was just bubbling under the surface. I had this emotional release, and this was significant because it was an emotional catharsis that was subtle and gentle.

I think witnessing other people's stories also allowed me to better understand the person who was telling the story and to see the complexity of their lives. This was meaningful because it allowed me to know them better and appreciate them more. I also linked their experiences to other people in my life, and this actually helped me understand those other people better too. Hearing the stories, for example the two stories about the alienation of being an immigrant, also raised my awareness and consciousness of complex human experiences. I now feel I understand the experience of immigration better and that's really helpful.

Another important thing that happened during the witnessing phase was seeing other people go for it emotionally. For example, when one group member, who I didn't see as a soft and fuzzy guy, bared himself emotionally I thought wow, that's awesome. It was meaningful because his self-disclosure helped me feel freer in my own emotional expression.

Providing Feedback Phase. I think it was a bit of learning curve of how to properly give feedback in the context of life review. I felt quite a bit of anxiety at first, like if I went on for too long, or said the wrong thing, or maybe got a bad reaction from one of the members. When I got tired in the group and started to feel worn out as the day progressed, I struggled to come up with something insightful to say, so I also felt anxious about that.

But then I became aware of how safe the group felt, and my anxiety around giving feedback decreased. I realized it was okay, that even if I did say something wrong and a member had a real problem with something I had said, I trusted that it would be brought up so we could discuss it and repair it. That felt really safe to me and let me feel better about sharing my comments. This idea of repairing conflicts is still new to me because when I was growing up, if things got screwed up, you would just walk away. But I have learned in this counselling

psychology program that I can meet things head on with people and deal with them. That is big for me.

Overall, I think it was important to give the feedback because that's where a lot of the insight and awareness happens for people. I really enjoyed sharing my insights with people, whether it was validating them or just linking their experience to mine. Giving the feedback was also an important part for me of staying engaged in the whole process.

Group Dynamics Phase. The first day of the workshop I was consumed by fear thinking about my health issues, how I have let my health go, and the stress I have been under. This awareness of having to get my health back on track has been bubbling under the surface, but sitting in the life review really brought it to the forefront for me. I had this insight that I needed to pay more attention to my health. I think this insight occurred because I was in an environment in the life review that was a sort of forced meditation and reflection. Suddenly everything came into sharp relief. I experienced an emotional release and I really felt the positive support of the group. Their support showed me that, even if I can't see it for myself, I'm a valued person that deserves to be taken care of. I think being in the group and sensing the validation from others really affirmed my commitment to get back on track with my health.

What was important to me about being a part of the group was the openness, the expressiveness of people, and the good communication that happened. I felt really safe to be with people who were all at the same level of psychological maturity. Seeing that the group had this ability to communicate and be mature was meaningful because it made the group safer for me. It was a sense of safety that I could do what I needed to do; if that was be irritable, if that was cry, or anything else I might need to do, I felt able to.

The group cohesion was so high and I felt so linked to the group that even if I was witnessing one member saying I really love you and I really value you to another group member, not even directed at me, I personally still felt this sense of being valued and being loved due to how connected we all were. Since the weekend I have done quite a bit better with my attachment issues in terms of my relationship, which were causing me a lot of anxiety. I think what caused me to feel more secure in my current relationship is the sense of validation the group gave me. It lets me approach my relationship with a stronger sense of self and less anxiety.

The General Experience. In my life I've struggled with depression that manifests as sort of a self-loathing or self-destructiveness. But I am working towards being more centered and having a better relationship with myself. The positive feedback, the warmth, and the sense of value that I took away from the life review group contributed to the continued improvement of the relationship I have with myself. The life review experience bolstered my sense of liking myself and really solidified my resolve to take better care of myself. I think the main thing I took away from the experience was not so much processing my life experiences, but rather the cohesiveness and the sense of being valued by the group. I think the benefits I experienced from the workshop had more to do with the group dynamics than the actual life review. It was meaningful for me to come away with this sense of being supported and valued and seen and loved by the people in the group. This was important because it lets me feel stronger, like I am more able to withstand the challenges that life presents to me. I look at it like I was released from the workshop into the world as a stronger person; and I think an increased sense of strength is something I really need right now. I needed a boost and it gave me that boost. I came away with the realization that wow, I'm really valued and really loved. I just felt I'm lucky.

It was also healing to connect with other counsellors. I came away with a sense of being valued and supported by other counsellors, which makes me feel stronger in my profession. It was relieving and professionally rejuvenating to be in a group of people who are all able to communicate so well. Also, coming from a perspective of getting training in group leading, it was a good learning experience to be a participant in a group, where you are listening and responding and aware of the group process. I would describe the whole experience like an oasis of peace and connection. It rejuvenated my sense of being in the counselling psychology program, my feeling of being connected to others, and my sense of self. So the whole thing was just like a little holiday where I was safe to let everything go for a while.

Cross Narrative Themes

The following pages include a description of the themes that emerged across participants' narrative accounts and represent clusters of experience that participants considered therapeutically meaningful during their life review. The themes aim to describe what the experience was, why it was meaningful, when it happened, and how it occurred. Additionally, information is provided in a frequency table (see Table 1, pg. 127) that indicates the number of participants that endorsed each theme, the total references to each theme across all narrative accounts, and the frequency in which the theme was mentioned in each respective phase of the guided autobiography process.

Table 1 Frequency of Cross Narrative Themes

Theme	Participant Endorsement	Total References	Writing Phase Frequency	Delivery Phase Frequency	Receiving Feedback Phase Frequency	Witnessing Phase Frequency	Providing Feedback Phase Frequency	Group Dynamics Phase Frequency	The General Experience Frequency
1	7/7	44	0	3	11	5	9	*12	4
2	7/7	33	3	4	9	7	3	2	5
3	7/7	32	6	5	7	6	0	1	7
4	5/7	18	6	2	4	1	1	3	1
5	5/7	16	2	0	0	2	1	3	8
6	5/7	15	1	2	2	1	0	0	9
7	6/7	14	4	6	0	2	0	2	0
8	7/7	12	0	1	1	2	1	3	4
9	7/7	9	0	0	1	2	0	1	5
10	5/7	8	0	0	0	4	1	2	1
11	4/7	8	0	0	0	5	0	3	0
12	4/7	6	5	1	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL		215	27	24	35	37	16	32	44

* Highlighted numbers indicate the phase in which each theme is referred to most frequently

Theme 1 – A Sense of Connection

Theme 2 - New Awareness and Insight

Theme 3 - Making Sense or New Meaning out of Past Experiences

Theme 4 – A Sense of Safety and Control

Theme 5 - Improved Personal Relationships

Theme 6 – A Sense of Empowerment

Theme 7 – Expressing Emotions

Theme 8 – Professional Development

Theme 9 – Moving Forward with Clarity

Theme 10 – A Sense of Hope

Theme 11 – Modeling New Ways of Being

Theme 12 – A Sense of Spontaneity and Flow

A Sense of Connection. Participants spoke of experiencing a sense of profound connection throughout the guided autobiography workshop. Experiences were described in which connections were fostered between fellow group members so that a sense of closeness, cohesion, intimacy, and love was felt in the group. Most significant for participants was a sense of connection on an emotional level, which participants described as sustaining and rejuvenating. A sense of connection also included instances in the workshop of feeling engaged with others, cared for by others, validated and affirmed by others, and protected, held and nurtured by others. Three participants remarked that although going back to review their life was beneficial, it was less important than the experience of connecting so deeply with each other. Participants described the sense of connection as bi-directional, so that they were aware of being able to provide their fellow group members with the support they themselves had received. Being able to provide this support was reported to be important because participants were able to fill an altruistic need by giving love, compassion, and solace to others. Also noteworthy in this category was the idea that the life review fostered a closer connection to the self as participants explored past thoughts, behaviours, emotions, and reactions, which allowed them to know and understand themselves better.

A sense of connection was declared to be highly meaningful because it gave participants a sense of being understood, included, and accepted by others. A sense of connection was reported to be therapeutic because it decreased a feeling of isolation, loneliness, and emptiness, and increased self-esteem and self-efficacy. Being affirmed by others enhanced participants' own personal sense of worth and value. The connection was reported to be healing because it fulfilled the need for human contact and provided participants with the experience of being able to let down their guard and open themselves to the feeling of being loved and cared for.

Participants reported that a sense of connection was generated most frequently in the receiving feedback phase and the group dynamics phase of the life review. In the receiving feedback phase participants felt a sense of connection through observing others react emotionally to the story that was told, through hearing others say they had experienced similar past events, and through hearing how others linked the story that was told to their own personal stories. One participant stated that the receiving feedback phase was the most meaningful for him because it was "crucial" to the development of connecting with others on an emotional level. In the group dynamics phase of the life review participants reported feeling connected to others through being able to communicate with each other honestly, openly, and lovingly. Grace described how meaningful this sense of connection was when she said:

> After I had shared my story, a group member said he was concerned about
>
> me. I shied away from his comment and did not want to look at him, but
>
> the group leader forced me to look. I turned back and saw real concern in
>
> his face and I was really incredulous and moved. His expression said to me
>
> that somebody actually cares, that somebody actually values me. And
>
> maybe this is what I don't believe. I felt in that moment that somebody
>
> saw that I actually existed, that I exist, and actually cares that I continue to
>
> exist. This was meaningful because I felt contacted, and felt as though
>
> there was some possibility of two worlds joining, which I don't often
>
> believe. In that moment I felt understood in a way that goes beyond where
>
> I expect or even hope to be understood. My world felt blown. It was a pure
>
> contact that goes beyond words, beyond images, beyond all interpretive

attempts at control. This experience of being contacted is maybe, is

probably, the most deliriously blissful experience you could hope for.

New Awareness and Insight. Participants identified experiencing new awareness and

insight during the life review process. These experiences created new awareness, new learning,

and new insights about the self so that participants were able to know and understand themselves

better, expressed as a feeling of finally "getting themselves." This new information provided

insight into why they had thought, felt, or behaved in a certain way in the past, which allowed

participants to accept past actions and judge themselves less critically. In addition to insights

about the self, this category also includes the experience of gaining new awareness about the self

in relation to others. Participants described numerous incidents in the life review in which they

became aware of how their behaviours impact other people and gained insight into how others

perceive them.

Participants stated that gaining new awareness and insight was meaningful because the

new information allowed internal shifts to occur. The new information encouraged participants

to explore themselves further, allowed them to become more aware of their way of being in the

world, diminished their "blind spots"- things they didn't know or avoided knowing, and gave

them information that aided in self-actualization as they move towards a more desired way of

being. Participants explained that the new self-awareness let them see how they want to do

things differently in their lives, and many reported already putting these changes into action.

Participants said the new awareness or insights improved the way in which they interact with

others, as well as created more compassion for the self, also improving how they treat

themselves.

New awareness and insights were experienced most frequently in the witnessing phase and the receiving feedback phase. As participants listened to and reflected on each other's stories and feedback, many new awarenesses and insights surfaced. One participant stated that the witnessing phase was where all of her "best" insights occurred. New insights were gained as participants compared their own experiences to other people's stories, as they drew parallels between stories and linked other's experiences to their own, as they noted differences in how they had reacted to similar situations in the stories they heard, and as participants borrowed metaphors they heard in the stories and applied them to their own lives. In hearing group members' feedback to their stories, participants gained new awareness and insight by learning how they appear to others, by learning how their story was interpreted by others, and by hearing others describe their characteristics in a way that was counter to how participants saw themselves. Andrew described an incident in which new things about himself were brought to his awareness and how this gave him insight into how he may present himself to others. He said:

> I remember one group member said he had perceived a sadness in my
> branching points story…so when he said that I thought ok, is there a grain
> of sadness in my story? Reflecting on that, I suppose there is some sadness
> due to some sad things that happened along the way. But the story also
> included some really good things, and I just didn't feel sad reading it out
> loud. I don't think of my story as being a sad one, so this piece of feedback
> really surprised me. I think most people perceive me as a happy person,
> and I see my life as mostly happy with sad parts, but I have a fairly
> positive understanding of my history. So this piece of feedback left me
> with a few lingering questions, like is there something else there which I

don't show very easily but which is an undercurrent? How do other people

interpret me and is this a fair representation? Is there a sadness in me that I

don't know about yet? Is there some sort of dark pit in my story that I

don't see but other people pick up on? Is there something that other people

perceive in me that I don't perceive in myself just yet? I don't know,

maybe there is something there that remains unexplored or unearthed. So

this makes me reflect on whether I need to be more authentic with people

and to wonder what the cost is of not letting some of the sad stuff be

expressed more freely.

Making Sense or New Meaning out of Past Experiences. Participants talked about

making sense or new meaning out of past experiences during the life review process. In this

category, participants were provided with greater understanding of the past, more clarity was

created in participants' memories, perceptions of the past were shifted, past events were re-

played and re-experienced so that new meanings emerged, the importance of past experiences

were magnified so that they were not lost or forgotten, the importance of past events and past

relationships were honoured, and old wounds were revisited and resolved.

Participants reported that making sense or new meaning out of past experiences was

meaningful and therapeutic because it enabled them to become aware of positive aspects of past

events that had previously been overlooked, it gave participants a way to make sense of their

own past behaviours and feelings which allowed these reactions to be normalized, it decreased

ruminations about the past because participants gained a new way to view certain episodes in

their lives, troubling past events were re-storied so that participants could forgive and move on, it

lessened the randomness of past events and created a more cohesive storyline, it allowed

participants to view their past differently so they became more appreciative, it helped participants make meaning out of past traumatic events, it allowed participants to accept past actions and be less critical of themselves, and it gave participants a more positive way of looking at their history. Making sense and new meaning out of past experiences was also beneficial because it allowed participants to come to terms with past events, gave them a sense of resolution, enabled them to let go and move on, and created a sense of peace. Additionally, participants reported the new meanings gave honour to what they had endured, helped them acknowledge how the past had impacted their identities and current life path, allowed them to re-live the good things that had happened, and recognize and reinforce the positive aspects of their past.

Making sense and new meaning out of past experiences was reported to occur most frequently in the receiving feedback phase of the life review. Participants reported this happening as group members' comments reflected their story back to them in a new way so that participants were able to see past events from a different vantage point and through a new lens, which created a shift in how certain events were perceived. Participants were able to acknowledge the impact of past events and make new meaning of them by hearing group members comment on the importance, pain, or enormity of what they had been through. James described the therapeutic effects of making sense and new meaning out of his past experiences:

> The life review workshop allowed me to re-experience my life and the
>
> things that have happened to me. It helped me make sense of what has
>
> happened, to make meaning out of some traumatic events in my life, and
>
> to feel ok about it. It has allowed me to accept the fact that what has
>
> happened, for the most part, has been for a reason. These events have

contributed to what I am doing today and why things are the way they are today. That is quite enlightening. My life review experience has also allowed me to both accept and make some greater meaning of what occurred in the past and perhaps why it occurred. The effect that it's had on me is that I'm less ruminating about certain events that occurred, and I now feel lighter in some respects. I think it's therapeutic to have this introspection. Also, I'm less hard on myself. Knowing what occurred, knowing what went on and accepting it, I now feel a lot less self-critical. So that's created a bit more space within. I think this happened in the life review because I was given the time to reflect on the different life paths I have taken, and make meaning out of them. Things made sense, and I was able to see why things happened and to recognize that they were beyond my control.

A Sense of Safety and Control. Participants described the experience of safety and control as integral to their ability to benefit from the life review process. This category included any experience that lessened participants' anxiety, nervousness, apprehension, or fear of the unknown in the workshop; allowed participants to feel they had control over what emotions they expressed in the group; enabled participants to feel less inhibited and guarded; and increased participants' sense of trust in the group. Participants remarked that a sense of safety and control was meaningful because it allowed participants to risk sharing intimate details of their lives; it provided a sense of freedom or liberation to bare their true selves to the group; it allowed participants to censor themselves less and express emotions without being afraid of getting

carried away in the moment; it increased participants' ability to be open, present, and available; and it increased the frequency and depth of self-disclosures.

Participants reported that a sense of safety and control occurred most frequently in the writing phase. Two aspects of the set structure of the guided autobiography process were found to be particularly important in fostering a sense of safety and control, so that participants' ability to disclose and risk being emotionally expressive were enhanced. First, because the written stories were prepared beforehand, they acted as a "container for emotion" so that participants felt able to talk about very deep, intimate, and potentially painful material without worrying that the emotion would overwhelm them or they would disclose more than they felt comfortable with. Second, participants reported being more open to feedback because they knew group members were only going to comment on the story that was shared, and not open up new territory that participants may be uncomfortable with. Sara explained the importance of feeling in control when she said:

> It was helpful to be able to contain the emotion in the story. I was able to
> carefully choose the words that I was going to present in the group. This
> was important because if I had just started talking about these past
> experiences in the group it was possible I could have gone off on a tangent
> or started to get emotionally overwrought and gone to places I hadn't
> planned.

Daniel commented on how the structure enabled him to take greater risks:

> So this structure of writing down everything that I would later present in
> the group gave me a sense of safety and control. I felt that I was able to
> just hammer out the story I wanted to present. This was liberating for me

because the structure and control actually allowed me to take more of a

risk in the group and share some very intimate details of my life. I may not

have chosen to share these things if I had not had the chance to first

prepare them on my own terms in the writing phase.

Improved Personal Relationships. Participants reported that certain meaningful experiences in the life review directly impacted their personal relationships and improved the way they relate to the important people in their lives. Participants talked about experiences in the life review that improved their relationships such as gaining a deeper understanding of how they want their personal relationships to be; enabling them to feel closer to and understand better the people in their lives; encouraging them to appreciate their relationships more; providing participants with a forum in which they could practice being genuine, open, and available which transferred to their personal relationships; and encouraging participants to share more openly with the people in their lives.

These experiences were described as highly meaningful because participants gained a sense of confidence in their ability to communicate and interact in a healthy manner with the people in their lives. Participants explained that they carried this new way of interacting that was learned in the group to their personal relationships so that their relationships became more open, honest, and loving. They said that when communication was not working well, they felt they had a model of healthy interaction to return to and employ in the current situation. Participants also mentioned that they felt more secure in their relationships, felt they had more personal control in how they behaved in their relationships, and they experienced a greater emotional connection with the important people in their lives after the life review.

Participants identified meaningful experiences that improved their relationships most frequently when talking about the general experience of the life review so this theme was not linked to any specific phase of the life review. The majority of these incidents were said to be experienced after the life review. Improvements were thought to occur in a few ways. Pablo talked about gaining a greater understanding of his father as the father-son relationship was explored in the life review. Pablo described it this way:

> My pilgrimage was with people in the life review group but it was also
>
> with my father, or my construct of him, because when I talked about my
>
> father in the life review, it was an intimate journey he and I were taking
>
> even though he wasn't present in the room. I see him differently now
>
> because we took this intimate journey together.

Participants also attributed the improvements in their relationships to knowledge that was gained about how people operate. Specifically, the importance of getting a glimpse into the world of men was identified as helpful. Grace elaborated on the gender aspect of this theme:

> It was particularly helpful to be given the opportunity to know several men
>
> in their lives so deeply. I don't think many people get this opportunity
>
> because often men don't have the necessary self-expressivity or
>
> communication skills. To hear the stories of the men in the group kind of
>
> filled in the gaps for me, and held me warmly in a way that my spotty
>
> relationships with men cannot yet do. In some ways, hearing the stories
>
> informed me in my relationships with the men in my life.

Another way improvements were thought to develop was through getting the opportunity to practice being close to others in the group which was then transferred to personal relationships. Andrew explained what happened for him:

> I came home from the weekend emotionally and physically spent, and my
> partner wanted to know all about my experience. I have this expectation
> that it is exhausting to talk emotionally with a person and sometimes for
> the sake of brevity or the sake of saving energy I hold things back from my
> partner. Its like, please don't make me talk about this right now, I have a
> zillion other things to do and I don't have time to feel close to you right
> now. But when I got home from the life review weekend, rather than resist,
> I just let it go and told her all about it. I mean I had just spent the entire
> weekend sharing really personal stuff with the group and being as
> transparent as possible, so why would I hold anything back from her? So
> in the first few days after the workshop I was aware of a greater emotional
> connection with my partner.

A Sense of Empowerment. A variety of experiences in the life review were reported that increased participants' sense of empowerment, strength, and confidence. Participants noted gaining confidence in their ability to be emotionally expressive and in their ability to successfully navigate challenges in their current and future lives. Participants talked about feeling empowered, courageous, and strong as they progressed through the life review, and remarked that they were able to see themselves in a more positive light as they took ownership of their stories and past histories. A sense of empowerment, confidence, and strength was reported to be meaningful because it bolstered participants' liking of themselves, rejuvenated their belief

in their ability to persevere through difficult life situations, and gave participants a sense of

progression and of coming a long way since past difficult times.

Feeling empowered, confident, and strong was brought up most frequently as participants

talked about the general experience of life review and was not attributed to a specific phase of the

guided autobiography process. Some of the ways in which a sense of confidence was increased for

participants was through feeling accepted by others in the group despite certain painful or

shameful events that were revealed, through talking about painful past events and realizing that

they had not only survived the event but had managed it well, through hearing others identify

courage or strength that had gone unnoticed in participants' own stories, and through giving

participants the experience of sharing emotions which affirmed participants' ability to be

expressive. Daniel elaborated on experiencing both a sense of empowerment and confidence

following his life review when he said:

> So I felt more confident after this experience, and this is significant
>
> because confidence is something I have really struggled with in the past
>
> for a number of reasons. Coming from a different background and being
>
> raised in a family that was affectively and socially private, also making the
>
> transition from a hard sciences background to a counselling psychology
>
> program, I was always questioning whether I really belong here. Here in
>
> this program and here in this society. I questioned if I am be able to be
>
> genuine, congruent, and emotionally expressive. I think for a long time I
>
> felt discouraged thinking I was deficient, incapable or incompetent and not
>
> able to connect with people. I was frightened for a long time because I
>
> really struggled with making that connection with people. So this life

review group was an acknowledgement of how far I have come over the last few years. The life review has been very empowering because it has made me see myself differently, I am able to reflect and say, yeah, I am able to connect with people on a very intimate level. So I have come away with this lightness in my step, knowing that I have the confidence to do something I struggle with. It's been an immense confidence booster.

Expressing Emotions. Participants spoke of numerous experiences during the life review in which they were able to express emotion. These experiences included feeling an enhanced intensity of emotion, unexpected and unanticipated emotions, or emotions that had long been suppressed or bottled up. Expressing emotions in the life review was regarded as meaningful because participants were able to release pent up or unexpressed emotions, which gave them greater access to their true emotional selves. Participants were enabled to feel their emotions in a real and congruent manner, which allowed them to stop avoiding the expression of deep and painful emotions. Participants reported a cathartic experience in which they gained a sense of relief, freedom, peace, and "emotional thawing" as they truly experienced and expressed their emotions in the life review group.

Participants reported that expressing emotions was facilitated most frequently in the delivery phase. As participants read their stories aloud to the group, many reported experiencing intense emotions that were related to the content of their stories. This enhanced emotional experiencing was thought to occur for a number of reasons. Participants noted that they felt emotionally primed coming into the group due to already engaging with emotional material in the writing phase, they said that observing others express emotion allowed them to get in touch

with their own emotions, and they described feeling more intense emotion as they observed the impact of their stories on other group members. Sara described how this occurred for her:

> Something that surprised me about the delivery phase was how emotional I got when reading one of my stories. At the time of writing my childhood story about my father, it seemed really quite light to me. I didn't deliberately try to keep the story light because I wanted to be honest but when I read it aloud, it didn't really seem all that light anymore. There were funny bits, but as I read it aloud, I found myself choking up and I noticed that other people were getting emotional as well. And that really moved me. I think the reason I experienced more intense emotion as I read the story is because I was faced with people's reactions to it. Because I'm familiar with my story, I have gotten used to it and I can make light of it.

Pablo elaborated on what being able to express his emotions in the group meant to him:

> Expressing and experiencing this emotion while I read felt great because I struggle with in-expression. By expressing, I felt a sense of agency, like I had gotten to the other side. Because there is this fear that holds me back from feeling my feelings, which keeps my feelings a stranger to me. I continually push them down. I want to get more exposure experiencing and expressing emotion, and this incident in the delivery phase was another exposure so it was good for me.

Professional Development. Participants described experiences in the life review that enhanced their sense of competence and effectiveness as counsellors. An increase in a sense of competence was reported to occur in a number of ways. For instance, by hearing stories from

their fellow group members about complex human experiences, such as divorce or immigration, participants gained a deeper understanding of these issues, thereby gaining competence in working with clients who also may experience such concerns. Participants also felt their competence as counsellors was enhanced because the life review provided them with a forum to work through their own personal issues. Participants remarked on the necessity of counsellors doing their own therapeutic work and becoming more self-aware in order to be more effective with their clients. Participants also noted their sense of competence as group therapists increasing due to being able to learn and observe the group leader's skills and the manner in which he guided the group through the life review process.

There was no particular phase of the life review that was associated with enhancing professional development, rather participants talked most about this theme as they were describing the general experience of the life review. Experiences that fostered professional development in the life review were noted to be highly meaningful because participants reported feeling more confident in their ability to be empathic and effective with their clients, their sense of being supported professionally was increased through the professional connections which formed throughout the workshop weekend, and the connections that were created decreased a sense of professional isolation and combated burnout. Participants also reported that the life review workshop gave them a sense of progress in their training as they reviewed their career paths, allowed them to feel less self-critical of their counselling abilities, and reaffirmed their theoretical approaches to counselling psychology as they gained a deeper awareness of their beliefs about human nature through reflecting on their own past experiences. Barbara elaborated on why she believes life review is an important part of her counsellor education training:

This experience was also important to me as a counselling student and I

think it is something that should be a part of our counselling psychology

program. In our theory classes we talk about how we as counsellors are

really the vehicles for delivering the change process, and who we are as

people is a huge part of the therapeutic process, so we need to know

ourselves. I think just as important as theory classes, if not more important,

is developing our own self-awareness and finding out our blind spots. I

have felt frustrated in the past because I do not think there are enough

opportunities in our program for students to develop their self-awareness

in this way. Also, many students can't afford to do expensive activities

outside of class; they simply do not have the time or the resources to

explore their self-awareness in the way that is necessary. So I think

including a life review experience for graduate counselling students is

crucial

Moving Forward with Clarity. Participants remarked on the ability of the life review to provide clarity in what they want from life and a greater understanding of how they want to move forward. They discussed experiences in the life review which enabled them to re-evaluate the direction their lives were taking, so that they were able to make choices to move forward with greater intention. Moving forward with clarity was not associated with a specific phase of the life review, and participants talked about this experience as they described the life review in general. Moving forward was identified as meaningful because it enabled participants to proceed with direction and purpose, it created a sense of urgency and motivation to make the most of the

time that is left, and it inspired participants to live the lives they want. James talked about how the life review allowed him to move forward with clarity:

> The life review has created this sense of urgency and motivation in me, because it encouraged me to evaluate and re-evaluate what's most important to me in my life going forward. Having the insight I had that I want to surround myself with people who can connect with me on an emotional level gives me clarity and strength, because it gives me a greater sense of understanding of what I want from my life. Making the space to look back on my life and see what I have sacrificed or compromised on, allows me to look forward and say ok, so what is the next half of my life going to include? And I have decided that my life is going to include some pretty profound things. So going through the life review process has actually helped me recognize and clarify what is important to me going forward. So this was like a key, the process I believe was a key to personal insight and enlightenment. We are here for a short time, and the life review allowed me to actually see that, to see where I am, and what I need to do.

A Sense of Hope. Participants reported that a number of experiences in the life review provided them with a sense of hope. Participants said reviewing their life allowed them to feel more hopeful for the future, hopeful that they may be able to lead the lives they desire, and hopeful that they may be able to heal from past wounds and live the lives they always wanted. Participants also described being filled with hope as they witnessed their fellow group members make progress over the weekend and work through difficult emotional material. The sense of hope that came from observing change in each other was related to believing in the therapeutic

power of groups and the ability of people to help each other heal. Many references were also made about gaining a sense of hope or faith in the resilience of human beings and our ability to thrive. Participants identified experiencing hope most frequently in the witnessing phase, as they heard their fellow group members tell stories of perseverance despite challenging and traumatic life circumstances.

The sense of hope that was fostered in the life review was meaningful for participants because they reported feeling heartened to hear stories of human resilience. Listening to stories of difficult life events from people who are now successful and functioning individuals gave participants hope that they too are resilient and will be able to persevere and thrive. Participants talked about how this sense of hope stayed with them after the life review, and even provided them with a memory of an experience they could return to when in despair. Daniel described how he was instilled with a sense of hope:

> The experience of witnessing other group members' stories made me
> appreciate the different struggles and range of experiences that were
> present in the group. Listening to the struggles people had gone through to
> get to where they are today made me appreciate how resilient we are as
> human beings. This was meaningful because it gave me hope that people
> can rebound from difficult experiences and get to a better place.

Modeling New Ways of Being. Participants reported many instances of learning due to observing their fellow group members interact with each other and tell stories over the course of the life review workshop. New ways of doing things or thinking about things were modeled in the group as participants behaved or reacted in certain ways, or demonstrated certain attitudes, philosophies, or worldviews. These learning opportunities inspired participants to try out in their

own lives new behaviours or attitudes that they perceived as healthier. Modeling occurred most frequently in the witnessing phase as participants learned how others had dealt with situations or relationships in the past through the stories they told. Hearing about different ways of addressing life circumstances gave participants new ways and ideas of dealing with things in their own lives. Seeing new ways being modeled was meaningful for participants because it provided them with options for how to navigate their own lives and encouraged them to implement healthier and more functional tactics in both their personal and professional lives. Specific examples included participants expressing their own emotions, being more congruent, and communicating more openly after emotional expressiveness, congruency, and openness were modeled in the group. Pablo talked about how he was able to feel his emotions and be more congruent after witnessing one group member model these abilities:

I remember witnessing one interaction between two group members that stands out for me. One member told another that he loved her and she could not let this in. I found myself in that moment unable to let the feelings in as well. But then she started to let the feeling in that she was loved, and I could tell it was getting through. The process of her letting down her guard slowly brought mine down as well, seeing her be congruent allowed me to be congruent. This was meaningful because I felt emotionally frozen in the group until this moment, but then as she started to feel and I witnessed this, I felt myself thawing and I became more real as well.

A Sense of Spontaneity and Flow. Participants described spontaneously responding to thoughts, feelings, and memories as they emerged during the writing phase of the life review. As participants started writing, they reported a feeling of accessing the preconscious, so that new, unanticipated, unplanned, and unexpected thoughts or emotions surfaced. This experience was reported to be relaxing, enjoyable, and pleasurable, and was described as "getting into the flow" where participants limited editing or self-censorship. Spontaneity and flow was reported to be a meaningful experience because it allowed participants' intuition and creativity to guide the writing process, and it enabled participants to let go of expectations and self-imposed rules so that emotions, thoughts, and memories were experienced more naturally and genuinely as they wrote about the past and the story of their lives. Barbara described how this experience occurred for her:

> I approached the writing phase by deciding that I would write about
> whatever was going to come up, so I just let my consciousness take over. I
> didn't want to do a lot of editing or censoring, I was just going to write the
> story and that would be that, and then I would read it to the group. Because
> I allowed my writing to flow in this manner I found it very interesting to
> see what I actually did end up writing about.

Sara talked about how she approached the writing process:

> The writing phase was a pleasurable experience and a very enjoyable
> process for me. It was very absorbing and very much a flow experience.
> During the process, I went with my intuition and wrote whatever came to
> mind.

In addition to describing therapeutically meaningful experiences, participants also reported a number of challenging experiences that arose, caused by factors both internal and external to the group. These challenging experience were not included as one of the twelve cross narrative themes because they did not address the research question; however it is important to describe them here so that the findings provide a clear and unbiased account of how participants experienced the guided autobiography workshop.

The majority of the challenging experiences were said to occur in the providing feedback phase. Participants described feeling anxious, inadequate, or insecure about providing feedback because they felt they did not always have something helpful or insightful to say; they worried that the leader or other group members would judge their feedback as ineffectual; they felt pressured to provide feedback because they considered it to be an imposed rule; and they felt that their anxiety detracted from their ability to be congruent and genuine when providing feedback to their peers. In addition to challenges with providing feedback, participants also identified feeling out of control due to being triggered by another member's story; frustrated due to not receiving helpful feedback; restrained due to not being able to access their emotions, disappointed and angry due to not having enough time to read all five themes to the group; distracted from the process due to other things going on in their lives, and tired and worn out due to the intensive nature of the workshop and the long days.

Including these challenging experiences in the findings is important because it provides a more representative account of this particular guided autobiography group. However, it is important to note that meaningful experiences were reported at a much higher frequency (215 references) than challenging experiences (18 references), so that ninety-two percent of the experiences identified were considered therapeutically meaningful rather than challenging.

Ancillary Finding

The following section presents participants' responses to the additional question that was asked in the verification meeting, and the analysis of their responses (refer to pg. 153 for Table 2, a frequency table of the themes that denotes the number of participants that endorsed each theme, and the number of times participants referred to each theme in their responses). This was the specific question asked in the verification meeting: what was your experience of the research interview? What did you find valuable about the interview (if anything) and how was it meaningful?

Grace's Response. It also matters to be able to talk to you (the researcher) about my life review experience. It matters because if you don't have a chance to talk about what happened, you forget. In some ways, I was actually remembering what happened in our life review group and was able to reach for it when I was in a state of despair, precisely because I knew I had an appointment scheduled with you. Otherwise, I would just go okay, done, lost, mourning, goodbye, it's not going to happen again, better not pine after it, moving on. But because I knew I would be seeing you for this follow-up, I kept engaged with the experience. I feel happy that we are here talking about what happened for me. I think there could be so many resonating benefits for group members if there were follow-up meetings after the life review where you can talk about what you learned. Because as it stands now, not being able to talk about the experience, how are we supposed to consolidate it? I know that talking to you now is very good and helps me process, consolidate and reestablish a link back to what I learned. This is very, very, very important. I think in order for the life review to have maximal effect, it needs to be something you can return to, something that doesn't just end.

Daniel's Response. Having the expectation that I had to meet with you two weeks after the life review provided me with a reminder and active encouragement to think about and magnify my experiences. This follow-up interview is not something I would dismiss readily. The interview is a meaningful process because it is a chance to further reflect. Taking the time to reflect and talk about it adds value and honours what I experienced in my life review. Given the fast pace of life, I seldom create space to reflect and consolidate my experiences and so what are otherwise very valuable experiences become lost. This follow-up interview was very meaningful as it pressed me to take the time to consolidate my experiences and insights from the life review. Moreover, to do so with the researcher was valuable as it helped me arrive at a deeper level of insight than I would have reached through journaling or self-reflection alone. Now that I think about it, the follow up was itself a mini life review session in allowing me to express, or perhaps declare, to an audience what truly happened for me.

James' Response. My insight about the research interview was that my therapeutic processing of each phase of the life review occurred during the interview session. I believe the interview process created an additional layer of emotional experiencing, and this certainly was most valuable to me as a fundamental and critical integration of my life review experience. I also believe there were factors inherent in the interview that helped to effectively achieve the therapeutic value, such as the skill of the interviewer, the questions asked, and the alliance formation between the interviewer/interviewee. These factors that were present in the interview enabled more accessibility of emotions and insights, the integration of my life review experience, and more meaning making of critical events. I believe the research interview or follow-up stage provides an added layer to the life review process. I feel this is where much of my life review

experience was integrated, as I was able to be introspective on the experience and make meaning out of what occurred.

Andrew's Response. The research interview was valuable because it created more time for reflection in two ways. First, because I knew the interview was coming I took time to think about my experience because I was conscious of wanting to have something to say in the interview. Second, I was able to reflect even more in the actual interview as you (the researcher) asked me questions and explored with me how the life review had been meaningful. Building in reflection time allowed me to have more awarenesses. It also gave me a chance to solidify what I had learned in my life review. As a teacher and educator, I am aware that one aspect of learning is that you need to reflect on the learning experience. For example, if I go to a three-hour class and take notes, then go home and put the notes away, I will not remember what I have learned. However, if I get home and spend some time going over the notes, what I learned will remain with me. It was the same thing in the research interview, it allowed me to reflect on what I had learned about myself. I also appreciate having a permanent document (the narrative account) to go back to. This lets me read what I said, and allows me to expand on it, to ask myself more questions about my experience, and to learn more from it. So I do think the research interview was a valuable adjunct to the whole life review process.

Barbara's Response. I came across a great quote that pretty much sums up the answer to this question: "We do not learn from our experience, we learn from standing back and reflecting on our experience." Knowing that I would be discussing my experience in an interview forced me to sit back and reflect, and it is from that process of taking the time to reflect that I learned from my experience and started consolidating what I've learned. The interview itself helped further consolidate and crystallize my learning.

Pablo's Response. The interview was integrating for me for several reasons. First, the person interviewing me was present during the weekend and intimately understood the examples I gave. This would not have happened with a third party to the experience. Her presence in the weekend enabled me to make joined meaning of the experience and gain a new awareness of the meanings I was making of it. Second, the interviewer was an excellent listener, which enabled me to engage more deeply with my experience of the life review. I made new connections in the silences, clarifications, paraphrasing and reflections that I received from her. Specifically, I didn't put together the spiraling effect, the pilgrimage of the process, and many of the insights in the witnessing phase before this interview. I'm grateful to the interviewer for these gifts.

Sara's Response. I think it was an important follow-up to the weekend, because the life review was such a powerful experience and the connections were so profound. Then we just went back to our lives, and that sense of safety and intensity was suddenly gone. The interview was an opportunity to re-connect and review the weekend, which made me feel good. It was also important to really integrate what I learned. I don't know if I would have done that much conscious integration on my own, but the questions really forced me to think in detail about my experience. So I definitely think the interview was a very important part of closing off the process, and also of integrating the insights of the life review.

Table 2 Frequency of Ancillary Themes

Theme	Participant Endorsement	Total Number of References
1	7/7	12
2	4/7	8
3	4/7	8
4	3/7	5
5	2/7	4
6	1/7	2

Ancillary Theme 1 - Increased Consolidation and Integration

Ancillary Theme 2 - New Insights

Ancillary Theme 3 - Increased Time Spent in Reflection

Ancillary Theme 4 - Opportunity to Re-connect with the Experience

Ancillary Theme 5 - Inherent Factors in the Interview/Interviewer

Ancillary Theme 6 - Honouring and Valuing the Experience

Ancillary Themes

Increased Integration and Consolidation. The research interview was reported to be valuable because it enabled participants to consolidate, crystallize, and solidify what they had learned in the life review; it enabled them to further integrate new learnings from the life review into their present lives; it furthered the therapeutic processing of material that was brought up in the life review; it enabled participants to further experience and process emotions that were elicited in the life review; and it helped participants remember valuable experience that transpired in the life review and decreased the likelihood of forgetting.

New Insights. Participants reported that the research interview was valuable because it gave them an opportunity to have new insights and arrive at a deeper level of insight about topics discussed in the life review. Participants said they thought more deeply about their life review experience due to the questions that were asked in the research interview so that new insights that were not made in the actual workshop were brought to participants' awareness. Participants said new insights were fostered in the interview through being able to explore themselves further, through making meaning out of what had occurred in the life review, through gaining further accessibility to their emotions, and through making new connections among events, thoughts, and emotions that were elicited throughout the life review process.

Increased Reflection Time. Participants said the research interview increased the time they spent reflecting on the life review experience in two ways. First, they spent more time reflecting in the two to three weeks between the workshop and the interview because they were aware that they were going to have to talk about their experience and wanted to have something to say. Second, they spent more time reflecting in the actual interview when engaged in answering the researcher's questions. Increased time spent in reflection was considered to be

valuable because it encouraged participants to be more introspective, to take time out of their busy lives to really think about what had happened for them during their life review, and it helped participants' significant learnings stick with them so that valuable experiences were not lost or forgotten.

Re-Connecting with the Experience. Participants described the research interview as an opportunity to re-connect with the experience of the life review workshop. Re-connecting in the interview was reported to be valuable because it gave participants another taste of the intimacy and connection the group had provided, which took away the feeling of an abrupt ending to the profound closeness that was experienced in the group. The interview was also said to provide participants with a sense of continuity or sustainability of the benefits that were experienced in the life review, so that they felt they had a resource to reach for in times of despair. Participants also noted that the interview gave them a sense of closure, so that they were able to feel more comfortable with the termination of the group.

Factors Inherent to the Interview/Interviewer. Participants identified factors that were inherent in the interview process or in the interviewer herself that made the experience valuable. For instance, participants noted that the quality of the questions that were asked, the skill of the interviewer, and the rapport that formed between the interviewer and interviewee were all influential in fostering consolidation and new insight during the research interview.

Honouring the Experience. Participants reported that the interview was valuable because it allowed them to further honour what was experienced in the life review by taking the time to talk about it and declare what had happened for them during the workshop.

Summary of the Findings

In conclusion, the research findings were articulated in terms of twelve major themes that described what was meaningful, therapeutic, healing, or beneficial about the experience of a life review workshop for counselling psychology graduate students. Participants reported life review to foster the experiences of a sense of connection, new awareness or insight, making sense or new meaning out of past experiences, a sense of safety and control, improved personal relationship, a sense of empowerment, expressing emotions, professional development, moving forward with clarity, a sense of hope, modeling new ways of being, and a sense of spontaneity and flow. Additionally, this chapter included a description of experiences that participants found challenging rather than therapeutic.

The findings also identified during what phase of the life review process the meaningful experiences were fostered and occurred most frequently. A sense of connection was fostered most readily in the group dynamics phase where participants experienced the processes, dynamics, and interactions that comprise a therapeutic group setting. New awareness or insight and making new sense or meaning out of past experiences were fostered most frequently in the receiving feedback phase where participants heard their fellow group members comment on the story that was just shared, and learned how their stories had impacted others. A sense of safety and control and a sense of spontaneity and flow were fostered most frequently in the writing phase as participants engaged in individual reflective writing on the five life themes as they prepared for the workshop. Being able to express emotions was fostered most readily in the delivery phase as participants read their story aloud to the group and were able to share intimate details of their lives out loud to an audience. A sense of hope and modeling new ways of being were fostered most frequently in the witnessing phase as participants were able to hear about rich

and varied life experiences as they listened to each other read their stories aloud. Improved personal relationships and a sense of empowerment were fostered by the entire experience of the life review and were not attributed to a specific phase. Participants reported becoming aware of an improvement in their relationships and feeling empowered in the days and weeks following the life review workshop. Professional development and moving forwards with clarity were fostered by the general experience of the life review and were also not attributed to a specific phase of the process. The specific phases in which meaningful experiences were reported to be most frequent were the group dynamics phase, the receiving feedback phase, and the witnessing phase.

This study also found that participants viewed the research interview as an important follow-up to their life review experience. This ancillary finding was articulated in terms of six themes that identified how the research interview was valuable. Participants reported that the interview increased consolidation and integration of what was learned in the life review, provided new insights, increased time spent in reflection, enabled a re-connection to the experience, and enabled further honouring of the experience. Participants also identified specific factors inherent to the interview and interviewer that fostered these valuable experiences.

Chapter V

Discussion

The intent of this research was to explore the experience of a guided autobiography group from the perspective of individuals in young to mid-adulthood. The findings suggest novel contributions to the literature and exciting implications for the application of life review as a therapeutic modality. This chapter delineates the most notable findings and highlights the significance of this study for the field of counselling psychology and graduate education programs for counsellors-in-training.

Contributions to the Literature

This research contributes to the literature in a number of exciting and novel ways. The first notable contribution is that young adults and adults in midlife experienced guided autobiography as an effective and viable means to promote personal change, suggesting that group-based life review, with a therapeutic focus, can be considered group therapy. This finding provides clarity to the contention in the literature of whether life review can be considered a therapeutic modality or not (Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Thornton, 2008). This study was the first of its kind to specifically explore therapeutic change processes in the context of a guided autobiography group. This inquiry resulted in the emergence of twelve therapeutically meaningful experiences that participants identified as having healing, therapeutic, and beneficial effects. Therapy can be broadly defined as any activity that promotes wellness or changes in thinking, feeling, or behaving (Hackney & Cormier, 2009); therefore, the twelve identified meaningful experiences appear to qualify as therapeutic change processes based on participants' reports that the meaningful experiences fostered improvements and changes in their thinking, feeling, and behaving.

For instance, participants reported changes in their concept of self, describing liking themselves more, and feeling stronger, more confident, and more accepting of themselves after the life review. They reported changes in their ability to communicate more openly, to be more genuine and congruent, and to express their emotions more freely with others, which improved (changed) their personal relationships. They reported changes in the way they viewed past experiences, which provided normalization, relief, forgiveness, a way to let go and move on, and a more positive assessment of the past. They reported changes in their appraisal of their counselling skills, describing numerous experiences in which they felt an improvement in their professional competence as counsellors throughout the life review. They described changes in how they perceive the future, reporting setting life goals, becoming more clear about how they want to live their lives and what they want to focus their time and energy on. They described changing behaviours, changing ways of reacting and interacting, and changing worldviews and attitudes after observing new ways being modeled in the group. They even described changes in physical states, such as changing from "dizzy" to grounded, and a loosening and opening up of the chest and shoulders as emotions were expressed and released.

These reported changes are striking in their number, meaningfulness, and ability to improve participants' lives; and they encompass the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural realms. This is a crucial contribution to the literature because it expands the application of life review from people who want an educational experience to clients who are actively seeking group therapy that will promote personal change. Birren and Deutchman (1991) said guided autobiography should not be considered therapy because it does not actively seek to promote change or ameliorate a social or emotional problem. In light of participants' reports of the numerous benefits, changes, and improvements they experienced in the workshop, Birren and

Deutchman's statement appears to limit the potential of guided autobiography. What if this method was conducted in a manner that had a therapeutic focus and did seek to promote change? The current study's findings indicate that guided autobiography can be applied with a therapeutic focus to create a setting in which change can occur and thereby challenges the general claim of the above mentioned authors.

The second novel contribution to the literature is the current study's specific focus on exploring key therapeutic processes that occur in each distinct phase of the guided autobiography process. By asking participants about meaningful experiences in the writing, delivery, receiving feedback, witnessing, providing feedback, and group dynamics phases, novel information was generated about the therapeutic impact of each phase. To date, no other study has investigated distinct therapeutic processes that are fostered by different phases within a guided autobiography group. This information is valuable because it informs practitioners about the therapeutic potential of each phase. For example, the three most frequently reported meaningful experiences (a sense of connection, gaining new awareness and insight, and making sense or new meaning out of past experiences) were reported to occur most often in the receiving feedback phase and the group dynamics phase of the guided autobiography process. This indicates that key therapeutic processes are occurring in two specific phases, implying that practitioners may be able to increase the therapeutic effectiveness of guided autobiography by focusing more time and attention on facilitating feedback and fostering group dynamics. This information is valuable because it suggests that by encouraging more feedback, interactions, self-disclosures, and processing between group members, the potential for change-promoting experiences may be increased. Therefore, this study implies that one way to actively seek to promote change in a

guided autobiography group is to focus more time and attention on the receiving feedback and group dynamics phases.

Moreover, the frequency chart presented in the findings chapter (Table 1, pg. 127) provides a wealth of information that has to date not yet been identified in the literature. The frequency chart describes what therapeutically meaningful and change-promoting experiences participants attributed to each phase of the guided autobiography process. Knowing what therapeutic processes are occurring in each phase is significant because it allows practitioners to tailor how they conduct the life review based on the group's particular clients or goals. For example, a men's life review group that has a particular goal of increasing group members' ability to express emotions could focus extra time and attention on the delivery phase based on the current study's findings that expressing emotion was fostered most readily as participants read their stories aloud to the group.

By identifying that different therapeutic processes are at work in distinct phases of guided autobiography, this study also allows inferences to be made about what level of learning each phase is impacting most directly. An adult learning paradigm asserts that there are different levels of learning, including learning that occurs at the cognitive, emotional, and experiential levels, and previous researchers have suggested that life review's therapeutic power lies in its ability to promote transformative learning experiences (Brown-Shaw, Westwood, & de Vries, 1999; Thornton, 2008). This study provides preliminary information that each distinct phase is activating a different level of learning. For example, given participants' reports of accessing the preconscious so that unexpected memories, thoughts, and feelings surfaced spontaneously, the writing phase may be impacting the experiential level of learning. Additionally, given participants' reports that the most therapeutic experience in the delivery phase was the ability to

experience and express emotions, this phase may impact learning at the emotional level. Furthermore, given participants' reports of a cognitive shift occurring in the receiving feedback phase in which new awareness and insights were gained, this phase may impact learning at the cognitive level. Further research would need to be conducted to explore these inferences.

A third notable contribution this study makes to the literature is the ancillary finding that participants considered the follow-up interview to be highly valuable. Although the interview was employed as a *research* tool, participants reported that they experienced it as a *therapeutic* interview that enhanced the therapeutic effectiveness of the life review. The degree to which participants described the interview as valuable was remarkable. All seven participants indicated that the follow-up interview was beneficial in numerous ways, most notably because it increased integration and consolidation of what had been learned in the life review, and it provided participants with new insights. To date, no research has identified a follow-up interview as a therapeutic adjunct to a life review group. The implications of this exciting ancillary finding are that offering a follow-up interview as an additional phase of the guided autobiography process may be another way in which to increase the therapeutic effectiveness of life review and its ability to promote change.

Logistically, adding this final phase would include making appointments to meet individually with each group member after the end of the life review group. The goal of the follow-up interview would be to help clients further explore what meaningful experiences had transpired during the life review so that insight, consolidation, integration, reflection, and transfer of important learnings could be facilitated. The therapist could guide this process by using skills such as paraphrasing and reflecting, offering empathic statements, and asking open-ended questions. Offering more than one individual follow-up session after the life review is also

a possibility. Perhaps a number of individual sessions to process what was experienced in the guided autobiography group could increase the transfer of the benefits gained into clients' daily lives. Many participants noted that the life review brought up new topics for self-exploration; and the follow-up sessions could be a useful place to begin addressing these issues. In sum, based on the study's ancillary finding, we recommend adding a follow-up interview as a final phase to the guided autobiography process to enhance the therapeutic value of this method of life review.

In addition to the above mentioned contributions, this study both confirms and expands the theoretical explanations of life review in the literature. The fact that life review was experienced as meaningful, relevant, helpful, and therapeutic for individuals in young to mid-adulthood diverges from the traditional theoretical reasoning that life review is most pertinent for older adults because it provides a way to attain ego-integrity and ward off despair as people near the end of life (Butler, 1963; Erikson, 1956). Other theorists postulated that life review was most helpful at midlife (Jung, as cited in Staudinger, 2001; Neugarten, as cited in Staudinger, 2001), during times of loss and suffering (Melia, as cited in Haber, 2006), or during times of transition (Levinson, as cited in Staudinger, 2001). This study found that participants made no references to their current life stage when discussing the benefits of reviewing their life. This fact lends support to Haber's (2006) contention that engaging in a life review can be beneficial at any point in life. The theoretical implications are that perhaps life review should not be relegated to a specific stage of psychosocial development; rather it should be seen as pertinent during any stage of life, as long as people engaged in the life review are developmentally mature enough to complete the necessary activities.

This research also contributes to the literature on therapeutic writing. Pennebaker's (1997) assertion that people tend to disclose remarkably personal material when asked to write about their lives was corroborated in the current study. The autobiographical stories that participants read aloud in the group were deeply intimate and emotional. Participants shared stories of suicide attempts, psychotic episodes, mental illness, abuse, neglect, fear of death, loneliness, isolation, and the deterioration of important relationships. The life themes that guided the autobiographical stories did not demand this level of disclosure, and it is interesting to note that participants wrote about deeply personal events despite being aware they were going to share the stories aloud with a group of their colleagues. It warrants acknowledging the risk that participants took in presenting themselves so transparently, and it raises the question of whether or not participants would have shared such intimate details if they had not written about them beforehand. A few participants indicated that they would not have taken the risk if they had not prepared the stories in advance. This finding implies that perhaps therapeutic writing is a viable way of fostering the intimacy and depth of clients' disclosures in therapy group settings.

The current study also provides support for Wright and Chung's (2001) assertion that therapeutic writing empowers clients because it gives so much control over the rate, depth, and intensity of their therapeutic work. The theme of safety and control, which was fostered most frequently in the writing phase of the guided autobiography process, parallels Wright and Chung's theory. Participants in the current study not only remarked on the high levels of safety and control they experienced, but also on the fact that the safety and control in the writing phase allowed them to take greater risks in the group and disclose more personal and intimate details of their lives then they would otherwise have shared.

The current study's theme of spontaneity and flow expands the theoretical understanding of why therapeutic writing is beneficial. Participants reported a feeling of accessing their preconscious in the writing phase so that new and unexpected thoughts, emotions, and memories spontaneously surfaced. This experience was identified as therapeutic and meaningful because it allowed participants to stop self-censoring and use their intuition and creativity.

Implications

This study has important implications for the therapeutic application of life review, the use of life review in graduate education programs, and future research in the area of life review.

Therapeutic Applications of Life Review. A number of interesting items surfaced throughout the research process that merit discussion because of their importance to the therapeutic use of life review. Most notably, evidence was found that warrants the recommendation of two design changes to the guided autobiography process. Participants reported experiencing various challenges in the providing feedback phase. A number of participants mentioned feeling anxious, nervous, and pressured when providing feedback. They also reported experiencing an inability to be genuine when providing feedback due to their anxiety. These challenges were said to arise because participants felt their feedback was not always helpful, insightful, or adequate. They reported that at times they were grasping for something to say, because they felt an expectation to always give some comment after each story was shared aloud. This suggests that a norm was somehow established in the group in which providing feedback was understood to be an imposed rule. Such a norm may be detrimental to the safety of the group and the resulting anxiety may decrease the benefits that providing feedback could offer. It is interesting to note that the providing feedback phase fostered the least number of therapeutically meaningful experiences in the guided autobiography group (see Table

1, pg. 127), highlighting the fact that participants struggled with this particular phase and did not find it as beneficial as the other phases.

Based on this important critical information, a change in design regarding the feedback phase is recommended. To avoid negative experiences in this phase, practitioners may want to offer group members three options when providing feedback: they may pass and say nothing, they may simply say what they heard in the other person's story, or they may provide feedback if something comes to them naturally. This design change may decrease the anxiety and pressures associated with providing feedback, and it may increase the genuineness and congruent nature of the feedback that is provided, benefiting both the giver and receiver of the feedback.

A second design change that is recommended is to give group members the choice of whether they want to receive feedback or not on their stories. This recommendation is based on one participant's comments that she found it relieving to just have her story witnessed and not commented on when the group ran out of time so that she did not receive feedback. She explained that it was "enough" to have her story heard because she could see people were listening and engaged as she read. Implementing this design change would give group members even more safety and control and may be especially relevant when facilitating life review groups in which stories of trauma or abuse are being shared.

Several additional interesting items emerged out of the research that do not necessarily warrant design changes, but still have implications for the therapeutic application of life review. For instance, it was discovered that when participants were asked to describe their life review experience using imagery and metaphors, they were readily able to so. The researcher noted the apparent ease and speed with which participants created these images and metaphors, and was struck by their level of sophistication and their poetic quality. For instance, one participant used

the image of a lone concert pianist performing for an invisible audience under a single spotlight to describe the anxiety he experienced at the beginning of the workshop. He then described the pianist undergoing a transformation as he played, so that on the final note the pianist felt enjoyment in the performance and was at ease on centre stage. This part of the image represented the changes in confidence this particular participant experienced as the life review workshop progressed. He then described how the house lights came on and the audience roared with approval to represent the experience of feeling witnessed and accepted by fellow group members in the life review group. Other examples of metaphors participants created included a retreat inside the delicate shell of an egg, a pool of warm and healing water, a pilgrimage, and the cycle of darkness and light on the earth's surface as it rotates around the sun. No other research was located in the literature that combined the use of imagery and metaphor with life review.

The implications of this discovery are that it may be beneficial for practitioners to invite group members to create images or metaphors to describe their life review experiences. It appears as though bringing imagery and metaphor into the life review process provides participants with a way to encapsulate all the richness, subtlety, and uniqueness of their experience in one concise and descriptive unit. Participants appeared to genuinely enjoy and relish this activity, and it could be included in the follow-up interviews and final phase of the guided autobiography group.

Another interesting item is the discovery that participants considered the profound sense of connection that was fostered between group members to be the most healing, meaningful, and beneficial experience in the life review workshop. It was surprising to find that the actual reviewing of past life events was not considered to be the most therapeutic experience. Participants said that although it was important to review their lives by reflecting on past events

and memories, this was less valuable than connecting with others in an honest, loving, and direct manner. These comments may raise the question of why life review is an important group therapy modality when other less structured groups are also able to provide a sense of connection. However, participants indicated that they believed it was the very structure of guided autobiography that allowed such a deep level of connection to form. They said they were able to take greater risks and self-disclose in a more intimate and vulnerable fashion precisely because of the safety and control offered by the structure of the process. It appears as though the structure of guided autobiography allowed for a deeper and more intense level of connection than may otherwise have been achieved in a more generic therapy group in which group members talked about themselves and their lives, but in a less structured manner. This finding has implications for group therapy because it highlights the profound therapeutic power of connecting with fellow human beings in a group context, and encourages counselling psychologists to not underestimate the potential of groups to provide healing and reparative experiences for clients.

A third interesting item that has implications for the therapeutic application of life review is the discovery that participants considered the life review to be a spiritual experience. Participants talked about the "sacredness" of the work that was done in the workshop, they likened the life review to a shamanic experience, indicated that it felt like a two-day meditation, and discussed its potential to serve as a nondenominational alternative to going to church. One participant noted that the life review inspired her to draw parallels between the profession of counselling psychology and a priesthood. The implication of this finding is that life review may be beneficial not only as an educational or therapeutic experience, but as a spiritual one as well. This expands the application of life review from adult educators and counselling psychologists to ministers, pastors, and spiritual directors.

Life Review in Graduate Education Programs for Counsellors-In-Training.

Participants reported that the life review workshop increased their competence as counsellors and contributed to their professional development. They stated that the life review group provided the opportunity to do their own therapeutic work, which allows them to be more effective with their clients. Participants indicated that graduate students are hungry for experiences that diverge from lecture and theory-based classes. They said they want to learn about therapy by participating in it at an emotional and experiential level. Participants also pointed out that a life review group promotes a sense of collegiality thereby decreasing professional isolation and burnout, very real dangers for many mental health professionals (Harrison, 2007). These statements are incredibly important because they provide university administrators with information about how to improve the skill, ability, competence, and mental health of their counselling psychology graduates. Given these findings, we strongly support the use of life review in graduate education programs, and suggest that a life review course is a practical and efficacious way to enhance the level of personal and professional development of counselling psychologists in training. Participants' unanimous endorsement of including life review in counselling psychology graduate programs implies that life review need not solely be applied in less formal settings, but should be introduced into academic settings as well.

Implications for Future Research. The current study implies topics for future research in the area of life review. First, therapeutic processes were explored in each phase of the guided autobiography process; however little is known about what learning processes are taking place in each phase. A recommendation for future research is to build on Thornton's (2008) research, which asked participants what they had learned in a guided autobiography group. To add to our understanding of the role of learning in promoting therapeutic change, it would be exciting to ask

participants to describe what they had learned in each distinct phase of the guided autobiography process. Knowing what learning processes occur in addition to what therapeutic processes occur during each phase would deepen our understanding of guided autobiography and allow us to make more inferences about how to increase its ability to promote personal change and transformative learning experiences for clients.

Another area for future research is to run a guided autobiography group with life themes and sensitizing questions that are purposefully designed to explore a specific presenting problem. The life themes and sensitizing questions typically used in guided autobiography are purposefully general in order to make them applicable to most people. However, if the topics used to guide group members' autobiographical writing were more oriented on a specific emotional or social issue, such as trauma, eating disorders, or divorce to name a few, perhaps the ability to promote change surrounding the issue would be enhanced. Research in this area would expand our understanding of life review's relevance for people struggling with specific concerns.

A third area of research is to further explore the potential of life review to be a method for promoting the personal and professional development of counsellors-in-training. McLean's (2001) research suggested that life review is a viable means to attain this goal; however additional research is needed so that universities may take action and include life review in their counsellor training graduate programs.

A fourth area of research is to explore how culture and gender influence an individual's experience of life review. Although the current study's sample was diverse in terms of culture and gender, which suggests guided autobiography is beneficial for adults from a variety of cultural backgrounds and genders, it did not explore the cultural and gender component to participants' experiences.

Delimitations

The guided autobiography workshop in the current study did not include all nine life themes that usually comprise the full process; however it did not set out to do so. Rather, it was conducted in a therapeutically focused manner in which the group leader spent more time exploring and processing group members' stories and feedback. Breadth of material was sacrificed for depth. It is important to note that reviewing the themes in more depth may have increased the therapeutic power of the process.

We have suggested that the twelve meaningful experiences that emerged from the data appear to qualify as therapeutic change processes based on participants' reports of undergoing personal changes in the life review group. However, we are aware that causation cannot be implied due to the research design and methodology. Rather, we are stating that participants experienced personal changes in the context of a guided autobiography group, and these changes appear to be related to the twelve meaningful experiences that were identified by participants.

It is assumed that participants volunteered for the research study, in part, because they wanted to experience a therapy group facilitated by an expert group therapist. This suggests that motivation may have been a contributing factor in the success of the group, highlighting the possibility that participants' desire to experience life review may have influenced their reports of the highly therapeutic and meaningful nature of the workshop. Future research could address this situation by exploring motivational variables and their influence on experiencing guided autobiography as therapeutic.

Conclusion

Life review has traditionally been applied as an educational activity for older adults nearing the end of life. The current research expands these former applications to include offering life review with a therapeutic focus and intent to promote personal change in adults of

all stages of life. The study does not intend to take an "either-or" stance, setting up an educational process and a therapeutic process as dichotomous experiences. Rather, we suggest that guided autobiography has the potential to be a valuable educational experience when offered in the fashion designed by Birren and Deutchman (1991), or a highly therapeutic experience when conducted in the fashion employed in the current study. Drawing on this study's conclusions, it appears as though guided autobiography is a method that has enough flexibility and depth to be conducted in different ways, allowing practitioners to provide guided autobiography as an educational or therapeutic experience, or as an experience that encompasses both educational and therapeutic outcomes.

Based on the current study's findings, this research presents two new strategies to enhance the therapeutic potential of life review. Specifically, practitioners are encouraged to focus more time and attention on the feedback and group dynamics phases of the guided autobiography process, and to include a one-to-one follow-up interview with each group member as the final phase of a guided autobiography group. This study also highlights the importance of including a life review course in graduate education programs so that counsellors-in-training are provided with an opportunity to do their own therapeutic work, increase their professional competence, and create a network of collegial support.

In closing, this study revealed the richness, sacredness, and meaningfulness of sharing our personal stories with others. It was inspiring and moving to witness seven individuals rejoice, grieve, and find meaning as they recounted a lifetime of memories and experiences. Salman Rushdie (1991) cautioned, "Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts" (p. 430). Over the two-day life

review workshop, group members reclaimed power over their life stories, as they began to think new thoughts and feel new emotions about themselves, their lives, and their histories. As they reached back in time to courageously explore how past events had shaped who they are today, they freed themselves from the tyranny of the past by changing their perceptions of it.

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Appendix A – Recruitment Email

Dear Colleagues,

My name is Julia Gerlitz and I am a graduate student in the counselling psychology program at UBC. The purpose of this email is to invite you to take part in my master's thesis research study as a participant.

My research is interested in exploring the process of life review with a group of counselling students and how the experience is meaningful in their life. Life review is a group-based activity that guides participants through a process of reviewing major life themes. Research has shown this method can contribute significantly to an enhanced sense of meaning and well being in one's life, and generate acceptance of past memories and events.

To participate in my research you would be involved in the following activities:

1) Writing approximately 10 pages of personal stories based on five life themes before attending the workshop (approximately 2 page narratives for each life theme). These themes include: (1) the major branching points in my life, (2) my family history, (3) my major life's work or career, (4) my experiences with and ideas about death and dying and other losses, and (5) my goals and aspirations. Sensitizing questions for the life themes will be emailed to you in advance of the workshop.

2) Partaking in a 2-day life review workshop where you will be given the opportunity to read your stories aloud and hear other group members' reflections on what you have shared. The workshop will be held on the UBC campus, **Saturday Oct. 16, 8am – 6pm; and Sunday, Oct. 17, 8am – 6pm**. I will be present during the workshop to witness the process.

3) Partaking in a research interview with myself to share what the experience of a life review workshop was like for you. The interviews will be scheduled 2-4 weeks after the end of the workshop and are expected to take between 1-2 hours.

4) A follow-up meeting with myself held approximately 4 weeks after the research interview so that the information recorded in the interview can be verified for accuracy and personal meaningfulness.

Including the time to write personal stories, participate in the workshop, and attend the research interview and verification meeting, it is estimated your time commitment will be approximately 26 hours over a time period of 10 weeks.

In order to be eligible to participate, there are three criteria: participants are currently enrolled as students in the Counselling Psychology program at UBC; participants are younger than 40 years of age; and participants are interested in experiencing and learning about life review for both personal and professional reasons. Please note there is only room for 7 participants in the life review workshop. **We will be selecting the first 7 eligible people who respond to this email.**

If you are interested in participating in this study please contact me so I can provide you with more information about the study and workshop. Please note that participation in this study is entirely voluntary and there will be no negative consequences should you choose to decline or discontinue with the study!

Thank you kindly. Looking forward to hearing back from you.

 Sincerely,
Julia Gerlitz

Appendix B - Life Themes and Sensitizing Questions (Birren & Deutchman, 1991)

Theme 1: The Major Branching Points in Your Life

Branching points are the turning points in our lives – the events, experience, or insights that significantly affected the direction or flow of our life journey. Branching points are the experiences that shape our lives in some important way. They may be big events, such as marriage, travel, a move to a new city, or retirement. Or they may be small events, such as reading a book or going on a hike. Big outcomes may have small beginnings.

Think of your life as a branching tree. Your life has many points of juncture – branches that sprout after pruning, others that atrophy for lack of nourishment. Or think of your life as a river. Where is the source? Where did the branches add volume, strength, or speed? What were the impacts of storms, flood, or drought? What dams or logjams caused you to change course? What are the events that caused the turning points?

Sensitizing Questions

These questions are designed to prime or stimulate your memories and thoughts about your life. The questions are not meant to be answered in a literal manner. Read through them and react to the ones that open windows in your past. Each life is unique, and the priming questions do not have the same value to all persons.

1. What was the earliest branching point in your life? What happened, and why was it important? How old were you at the time?
2. Who influenced the direction of your life in a major way? Which people were involved with you at the branching point? (e.g., family, friends, teachers, doctors, lawyers, a political or religious leader, or others)?
3. Tornados, fires, floors, and automobile accidents leave changed lives behind them. Were there any important happenings in your environment, either natural or societal crises, that changed the direction of your life?
4. Were there any lucky events in your life, such as winning the lottery, getting a new job, or falling in love with the right person, that had a positive influence on the direction your life took?
5. Were there any bad events, such as divorce, death, or illness, that influenced your life or caused it to branch?
6. Did your ethnic, religious, or cultural background or your social or financial status have an influence on the branching points of your life? Has your background been an advantage or a disadvantage to you?
7. Did a family change of residence or a change of school have an important impact on your life?
8. Did changing a job have lasting positive or negative effects on the flow of your life?
9. What branching points in your life were you responsible for, in contrast to branching points caused by outside events or other people?
10. Have there been any branching points in your life about which you have changed your views over time? For example, events you were angry about then and feel contented about now?
11. Do you think the flow of your life is typical of most people's lives, or is it unusual? In what ways is it unusual?

Theme 2: Your Family

Our family histories include both our families of origin (parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins) and the family or families of our adult lives (spouses, children [including adopted children], grandchildren, and in-laws). Perhaps a friend or another person has been close to you and your family and has been important in your life.
What were the origins of the branches of your family? Did your family history have any impact on the directions your life took? Which family members were important in shaping your life? Some may been important to you in positive ways and some in negative ways. Why did these family members have more impact on your life than did others?

Sensitizing Questions

These questions are designed to prime or stimulate your memories and thoughts about your life. The questions are not meant to be answered in a literal manner. Read through them and react to the ones that open windows in your past. Each life is unique, and the priming questions do not have the same value to all persons.

1. Who held the power in your family and made major decisions? How do you know?
2. Which family members have you felt closest to, and which ones felt most distant? Why? Were or are any family members models in your life?
3. Did you like your family and feel supported and loved?
4. Were there any family members you were afraid of?
5. What were the rules in your family about eating, cleaning up, dressing, and so forth? When you sat down to dinner, where did you sit?
6. Did your family have any hero figures who had stories told about them?
7. Did your family have any odd figures who were ridiculed, such as a miser or a spendthrift, a noisy or talkative person or a silent one?
8. What were the strengths and weaknesses in your family? How did they affect you?
9. Were there any events that made your family stronger or tore it apart?
10. What is the history of your family? What were its origins, and who were its major figures?
11. Did your family have a philosophy about life that was discussed and that you were expected to adopt? What were the "shoulds" and "oughts" in your family? What favourite sayings illustrate your family's philosophy of life?
12. Is there anything about your family that seems unusual to you?

Theme 3: Your Major Life's Work or Career

Our life work includes the activities that have occupied most of our time, energy, or concerns. It can take many forms. The history of our life work may include work as a parent, spouse, or homemaker. It can be the history of a career or lifetime job. Also, it can be a lifetime of service in religion, community work, or politics. Some people devote their lives to art or literature. We may have several careers or life work activities in sequence or at the same time. What has been the pattern or the sequence of your life work?

Sensitizing Questions

These questions are designed to prime or stimulate your memories and thoughts about your life. The questions are not meant to be answered in a literal manner. Read through them and react to the ones that open windows in your past. Each life is unique, and the priming questions do not have the same value to all persons.

1. How did you get into your major life work? Did you seem destined to follow it, or did you stumble into it? Did other persons urge you to pursue this work, or was chance a factor? Did any childhood interests or experiences influence your path?
2. When did you develop the goals of your life? How much choice did you have?
3. What events or persons influenced your path?
4. Were family models important in the life work you chose? Who influenced you the most?
5. What role did being a man or woman play in your choices about your life work?
6. Has your life been one continuous path, or have there been changes and discontinuities? Have there been peaks and valleys?
7. Were you provided many options, or did you have only one or two prospects?
8. Are you satisfied with your life work? Is there anything you would like to change? What personal strengths and weaknesses have you brought to your life work?
9. If you have had more than one life work, which has been most important to you?
10. What have you liked most and least about your life work?
11. How did the place where you grew up and the times in which you lived influence your choices and the way in which you think about your life work?
12. If you were to live your life again, would you choose the same or a different life work?
13. On the basis of your experience, what would you say about work to a young person just starting out in adult life?

Theme 4: Your Experiences with and Ideas about Death

Death can affect our lives in many ways. As children, we may have experienced the loss of a pet. Later, we may have lost parents, grandparents, a spouse, child, brother, sister, or a close friend. The death of a national hero may have affected us profoundly. The circumstances of deaths and our age at the time they occurred can have long-lasting influences. How have your experiences with death affected your life and your personal history?

Sensitizing Questions

These questions are designed to prime or stimulate your memories and thoughts about your life. The questions are not meant to be answered in a literal manner. Read through them and react to the ones that open windows in your past. Each life is unique, and the priming questions do not have the same value to all persons.

1. What did you feel about death as a child? Did you lose an animal that was like a member of the family? What did you think when your pet died?
2. How was death talked about and treated in your family? Did it frighten you?
3. How were family funerals and memorial services held? When did you go to your first funeral? What did you think about it, and how did you react?
4. Did any wartime deaths affect you? If so, what were their circumstances?
5. Have you ever been responsible for anyone's death? How did you feel about it then and now?
6. Have you had any close calls with death, such as an illness or accident?
7. Do any deceased persons, such as a parent, spouse, or friend, continue to have an effect on your life?
8. Have you been closely involved with anyone's death? How have you grieved? How do you feel about it – guilty, resentful, angry, or peaceful? Were some deaths welcomed?
9. What was the most significant death you experienced? How did it change your life?
10. Did the death of some well-known person (e.g., Ghandi, John or Robert Kennedy, or Martin Luther King, Jr.) have an effect on you?
11. How have your ideas about death evolved? What kind of death would you like to have? Is death a friend for you, or is it to be fought, dreaded, or accepted?
12. If you could talk with someone who has died, what would you say or ask?

Theme 5: Your Goals and Aspirations

Our goals and aspirations are an important part of our life stories. An account of how we grew up and lived our life includes the goals we have had and the things we have been striving for. Our goals and aspirations form an integral part of the fabric of our lives. For some persons, goals may remain the same throughout life, but this is not necessarily true for everyone. Experience may have taught us that we should change our goals or trade in our aspirations for new ones that better fit with the realities of our lives or our changing values. What have you been working to attain or achieve in your life, and what kind of person have you tried to be?

Sensitizing Questions

These questions are designed to prime or stimulate your memories and thoughts about your life. The questions are not meant to be answered in a literal manner. Read through them and react to the ones that open windows in your past. Each life is unique, and the priming questions do not have the same value to all persons.

1. When you were a child, whom did you want to be like, or what kind of person did you want to become when you grew up? Did your role models change during adolescence? In what way?
2. Where did you find your models – in the family, movies, or other sources?
3. Which characteristics of your ideal self or ideal model were most important to you – accomplishments, athletic ability, appearance, money, reputation, creativity, philosophy, religion, or something else?
4. In your school years, what were your goals? What did you want to accomplish?
5. How important were your teachers and education in shaping your goals? Did they lead to changes in your goals and your ideas about what you wanted to achieve in your life?
6. Have you changed your goals during your life? How? What experiences or major events influenced the changes?
7. What do you think have been the most important achievements of your life? Is there anything you feel so strongly about that you would sacrifice almost everything for it?
8. Which persons have had the most influence on what you wanted to achieve?
9. Did you ever have a period when you felt your life was meaningless?
10. Looking back over your life, would you now pursue different goals? What would they be?
11. What aspirations do you have now, and what goals do you have for your future?
12. What legacy would you like to create that would be a symbol of how you led your life? If you wrote a book about your life, what would its title be?

Appendix C – Consent Form

Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education

Exploring the Meaning of Life Review through Guided Autobiography with Student Counsellors

Consent Form

Principal Investigator: Dr. Marv Westwood, Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, the University of British Columbia.

Co-Investigator: Julia Gerlitz, Masters student in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, the University of British Columbia.

Purpose: The purpose of this project is to conduct a guided autobiography workshop so that counselling psychology graduate students can experience the life review method. The intent of the research is to explore the meaning you attribute to the experience of reviewing your life and the impact it had on you. A research interview with you will seek to explore your thoughts, feelings, and ideas about the experience of life review after having completed the guided autobiography workshop.

Study procedures: If you agree to participate in this project, you will be invited to take part in a two-day guided autobiography workshop, which will take place on the campus of UBC. The workshop will include two 9-hour days, from 8am until approximately 5pm. The workshop requires your involvement in three components: preparing 2-page written stories on pre-selected life themes, reading the autobiographical stories aloud in the group, and receiving and offering comments and reflections about the stories that are read aloud by fellow group members. You always will have the option to choose to not read your written work for a particular theme or to pass on giving comments to other participants about their shared stories. The themes or topics covered in the workshop include: (1) the major branching points in my life, (2) my family, (3) my major life's work or career, (4) my experiences with and ideas about death, and (5) my goals and aspirations. You will have complete control and discretion over what material you decide to read aloud and share with the group. Your written work will **not** be collected or analyzed for research purposes. Your written stories are for you to keep. In addition, you may withdraw from the workshop at any point if you feel uncomfortable with other members' autobiographical stories. The co-investigator will be present for the guided autobiography workshop. She will be commenting and reflecting on stories participants have shared, but will not be writing and reading her own life stories based on the five themes into the group.

Once the workshop has concluded, you will be invited to take part in an audio-recorded research interview approximately 2 weeks after completing the workshop. You will have the opportunity to reaffirm your consent for the research interview, prior to its commencement. The research interview is entirely voluntary and you may decline to be interviewed after you have experienced the guided autobiography workshop. The research interview is anticipated to take between 1-2 hours. During the interview you will be asked open-ended questions that relate to your

experience in the guided autobiography workshop and the meaning you ascribed to the process of reviewing your life. The research interview will be audio-recorded. The purpose of this is to enable the researcher to capture and record your words so that the research questions can be answered.

You will also be invited to a verification meeting where you will be asked to verify the accuracy of a summary of the research interview approximately 4-weeks after the research interview has been conducted. The summary of the research interview will be prepared by the co-investigator and presented to you in the form of a letter that will be emailed to you approximately one week before the verification meeting. The verification meeting is anticipated to take 30 minutes. Both meetings will be conducted in a research office on the campus of UBC, at your home, or the home of the researcher, depending on what is most convenient or comfortable for you.

The total time commitment to participate in this study is approximately 26 hours over a 10 week period. If you choose to participate, we anticipate it will take 5 hours to prepare written stories on life themes (1 hour for each theme), 18 hours over two days for the workshop, 1.5 hours over one day for the research interview, 1 hour to read and reflect upon the summary letter, and 30 minutes for the verification meeting.

Potential Risks: There is the possibility of:

    a) Some level of anxiety at sharing personal stories in a group context;
    b) Some negative emotions while revisiting potentially painful experiences or memories;
    c) Discomfort due to new insights or understandings about past events while engaged in life review;
    d) Breach of confidentiality;
    e) Anxiety during the research interview due to sharing your experience.

To minimize these risks, we will ensure that you have complete control and discretion over what material you share in the context of the group. If at any point you start to feel uncomfortable, you may pass. The group leader will ensure the safety of the group by paying attention to levels of intimacy, inclusion, and control. Your comfort and safety as a participant is our primary concern. Should any intense emotions arise during the workshop the group leader will be available to debrief with you, or should you want to continue to explore issues that arose from reviewing your life we will provide you with a handout at the beginning of the workshop that includes information about campus counselling services. Your confidentiality will be protected with the utmost care. Only the principal investigator and co-investigator will have access to audio-recorded interviews and transcripts and this data will be password protected and kept in a locked filing cabinet in the principal investigator's office in the Neville Scarfe Education building on the UBC campus. You will choose a pseudonym to be used to identify the transcripts and to be used in the written report of findings and no identifying information will included in the written report.

Potential Benefits: Potential benefits include:
    a) Gaining a sense of acceptance and understanding of your past;
    b) Gaining a sense of knowing yourself better;
    c) Gaining a personal and professional understanding of life review and guided autobiography;

d) Benefiting from peer support and collegial learning;
e) Benefiting from close relationships that develop with other group members.

Confidentiality: As this study involves group work, we can only offer limited confidentiality. We encourage all participants to refrain from disclosing the contents of the discussions outside of the group; however, we cannot control what other participants do with the information discussed.

Your participation in the research interview will be recorded and retained by us, and participants will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. You are welcome to view your own digital audio-file or interview transcript and may request this of the co-investigator who will give you access to only your own data.

Consent: Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study or workshop at any time without jeopardy to your standing with the Counselling Psychology program at UBC.

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services (604.822.8598) or if long distance (RSIL@ors.ubc.ca).

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this project. Your signature below also indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records

If you would like a copy of a report on the findings, please fill out the contact information below, particularly an e-mail or mailing address.

_____
Participant Signature   Date

_____
Printed Name of the Participant

_____
Telephone

_____
E-Mail &/or Mailing Address

……………………………………………………………………………………………

Re-Affirmation of Consent to Participate in Research Interview

Before the research interview, we will be asking you to reaffirm your consent to take part in the interview and give permission to audio-record the interview.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in the research interview and be audio-recorded.

_____

Participant Signature   Date

Appendix D – Interview Guide

1) "I am interested in the experience you had reviewing your life. Now that some time has passed since the life review workshop, I would like to know what the experience was like for you. Please share with me your reflections on the experience, focusing on any experience that was meaningful, important, or significant."

2) "To clarify how this experience was meaningful for you, I want to ask you about each phase of reviewing your life."

   • "I want to know about your experience of the writing phase. What was that like for you and did anything meaningful occur in this phase?"

   • "I want to know about your experience of the delivery phase where you read your life themes aloud to the group. What was that like for you and did anything meaningful occur in this phase?"

   • "I want to know about the receiving feedback phase where you heard other group members comment on your story. What was that like for you and did anything meaningful occur in this phase?"

   • "I want to know about the witnessing phase where you listened to group members read aloud their stories. What was that like for you and did anything meaningful occur in this phase?"

   • "I want to know about the providing feedback phase where you commented on other group members' stories. What was that like for you and did anything meaningful occur in this phase?"

   • "I want to know about your experience of being a part of the group, with all the group dynamics, interactions, and processes going on. What was that like for you and did anything meaningful occur in this phase?"

3) "Did anything surprise you about the experience?"

4) "If you could describe your life review experience using an image or metaphor, what would it be?"

5) "In your opinion, is a life review process helpful for graduate students in a counselling psychology program? How do you feel it is helpful?"

Appendix E – Member Verification Email

Hi,

I hope this email finds you well. Below are directions for your last and final step as a research participant in my project.

Please find attached two documents:

1) The **transcription** of your research interview: I attached the transcript for your own interest. Also it will help you verify the accuracy of the narrative account if you need to revisit what you said.

2) The **narrative account** of your research interview: The narrative account is a summary of the interview. All subject matter that relates to the research question is pulled from the transcription document and then organized into a narrative. Essentially the narrative account is what I think you said about the research question. The narrative account uses a 1st person voice and my goal was to keep it in your words as much as possible. To make the narrative accounts cohesive, I am obligated to make small changes. These include:
- adding connecting phrases
- verb conjugation so that verb tenses match
- replacing pronouns (it, this, these, him, her) with the subject of the sentence
- adding clarifying phrases
- assuring confidentiality by taking out group member's names

Your next step is to verify the accuracy of the narrative accounts. As you read the narrative account ask yourself these questions:
a) is this what I meant?
b) was this my experience?
c) do I want to change anything?
e) do I want to add anything?
f) do I want to delete anything?
g) did Julia miss anything important I said in the transcript that directly relates to the research question?

This step is about creating a collaborative research process and ensuring the validity of the results, but please know there is no expectation for you to have to make changes. This process should take you no more than **1 hour.**
Once you have decided if you want to make changes, you and I must be in contact. We can do this in a few ways, whatever is most convenient for you:

1) You can make changes to the narrative account (using microsoft word edit, or using a coloured text) and email it back to me
2) We can meet in person (on campus, at your place, or at my place)
3) We can talk over the phone

Due to my ambitious timeline, I would like to meet with you in some capacity or receive your edited narrative account via email before **Nov. 30th.**

Please note: **The verified narrative account will be included in full in my thesis.** This is why it is important for you to feel good about how your experience is being represented.

A final request (thank you!) is for you to answer one more question. Due to some exciting preliminary findings we want to know more about your experience of the research interview as a follow-up to the Life Review. Specifically: **What was your experience of the research interview? What did you find valuable about the interview (if anything) and how was it meaningful?** You can answer this question via email in a written paragraph, or in person, or on the phone.

Please confirm that you received this email and how you would like to conduct the verification meeting.

I want to thank you for being so generous with your time. It has been an absolute honor to connect with you in this capacity and I am very grateful for the experience.

Regards,
Julia